

THE AIR AGE COMES TO NEW ALBANY

The year was about 1910. An unfamiliar roar echoing over the Ohio River attracted numerous New Albany residents to the shore. They had to look upward to see what was causing the racket. A Curtiss pusher plane with propellers in the rear and the pilot exposed to the breeze, was winging up the river. At Silver Hills the plane banked, turned and flew back to the old Kentucky State Fairground in Louisville. New Albany residents had received its first introduction to the dawning air age.

Though New Albany had received a glimpse of the air age in 1910, a decade was to pass before the new mode of transport was to take root in the city. Some excitement occurred during World War I when an Army corps training plane from Fort Knox made a forced landing on Charlestown Road about where veterinarian H. G. Hollis today has his clinic, but it was not until 1920 that the air age actually arrived in New Albany.

In that year Henry Fawcett, a New Albany World War I veteran of the Air Corps, began operating sight-seeing trips in a two-seat open cockpit plane, using a field on his father's farm near Captain Frank Road as a landing strip. Extra revenue came from the Dowagiac, Michigan, Fishing Tackle Company which utilized the side of the plane as a flying billboard advertising its products.

Then, about 1921, came the Mason-Dixon Air Line, an ill-fated venture which established an airport and built a hangar on Charlestown Road on land now occupied by the United States Steel Homes plant. Promoter of this air venture was Ernest Mason, another Air Corps veteran of World War I who came to New Albany from Indianapolis. In a play on words, he added Dixon after his

own name to the company's title. Probably the fact that the Ohio River is regarded as a boundary between north and south, just as the Mason-Dixon line is, helped inspire the company name. The Mason-Dixon Air Line provided private charter service and sightseeing flights, but the operation was never the success its promoters hoped it would be.

A series of accidents marred its record, including a crash near Pekin, Indiana, and a crash at the field on Charlestown Road in which Mason was severely injured. That proved to be the end of the Mason-Dixon Air Line after some two years of precarious existence.

Meanwhile developments in Clark County were to shift the focus of air development in this area away from New Albany. In the early 1920s the Curtiss-Wright Aircraft Corporation, optimistically viewing the future of air transport, purchased a large tract of land north of Clarksville with the hope that it might some day become a major airport serving the entire metropolitan Louisville area. Curtiss-Wright had purchased other tracts at other major cities across the nation, but its high hopes never materialized.

A small airport had been set up in the Greenacres area of Clarksville just south of the Curtiss-Wright tract by Russell Beeler of New Albany and others. Beeler had become interested in aviation during World War I and later served as a cadet in the Army Air Corps. Then in 1928 Beeler leased the unused Curtiss-Wright land and set up an airport and flying school. Beeler's Field was the first successful airport operation in the New Albany- Jeffersonville area.

It was from this field about 1935 that the first and only airmail flight from this area was operated. To publicize airmail, flights were operated simultaneously from many points over Indiana to Indianapolis. Beeler piloted the local plane and was the first to arrive in the Hoosier capital. The Curtiss Condor plane in which Admiral Richard Byrd flew over the South Pole on his first Antarctic

expedition also visited Beeler's Field, taking passengers aloft on sightseeing flights. It was brought here by owner Clarence Chamberlain, a pioneer trans-Atlantic flyer.

Beeler operated the field until December 7, 1941, the day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Government security restrictions made it almost impossible to keep small airports open. In addition, Beeler was away serving in the Army Air Corps.

At the close of the war there was much discussion in New Albany and Jeffersonville of making the field into a municipal airport serving the two towns and utilizing Federal aid which was available for such projects. Though the plan came near to reality, the field was purchased from Curtiss-Wright by Charles Bush of Ramsey, Indiana before the project could be carried through. It was operated as the Bush Airport for several years, then was closed in 1954 to make way for an announced subdivision development.

Today Hap's Airport on Potter Lane in Clark County provides facilities for private planes and flying instruction in this area. But a large new airport serving large aircraft may be in the offing for the New Albany-Jeffersonville area if the recommendation of the Indiana State Aeronautics Commission is carried out. The Commission recommended recently that a new airport be built in the area. The air age may be dawning in New Albany in earnest.