

ON TO CLEVELAND" RACE

By LESLEY N. FORDEN

When our Portland, Oregon newspapers announced, in the summer of 1929, that a Portland to Cleveland air derby was scheduled for August 23, it was exciting news for a small boy who lived on a nearby farm.

Like so many youngsters in that long ago time, I built models, read every page of the magazines, from *Aero Digest* to *War Birds*, ran from the house to stare at every plane that went overhead—whether a Mohawk Pinto or Curtiss Condor—and wished that there were more airplanes in Oregon to look at.

Portland, to be sure, had some activity. Pacific Air Transport and Varney flew the air mail, Mamer Air Transport carried passengers to Spokane and Seattle, and West Coast flew Bachs and F-10s to San Francisco. Vance Breese built his handsome red monoplanes in Portland for a while, and the Air Corps Reserve had two or three PT-1s across the Columbia River at Pearson Field, Vancouver Barracks. A boys prep school called Hill Military Academy set up flight training with OX-5 Travel Airls on their field near Guilds Lake, and Tex Rankin had a school cut on Union Avenue where he sold Wacos, Great Lakes and the Ryan "Sistership to the Spirit of St. Louis." Tex was one of our few local heroes: he did outside loops, won races and made "speed dashes" from one city to another.

The "On To Cleveland" race would begin at Portland's new municipal airport, Swan Island. This airport had a wide cinder runway, broad concrete aprons, floodlights, three big hangars, and an administration building with a rooftop walkway where you could watch the airplanes for free--no dime-in-the-turnstile-admission. The parking lot was also free, and the lunchroom prices were the same as other places. There were flower beds and soacious green lawns, and it was about fifteen minutes from downtown in your Willys Knight, or slightly longer on the St. Johns streetcar, which cost ten cents. The only thing wrong with Swan Island was its location - close to the hills and fog of the Willamette River. By 1942 it was abandoned and became a shipyard.

But in 1929, the Cleveland racers said it was a fine new airport, as they roared in from around the country to make ready for the takeoff. They were young men in their twenties and early thirties, dashing and devil-may-care, in helmet and goggles and cavalry boots, or "plus four" golf knickers and suede jackets. They were the sportsmen of the Roaring Twenties, a glorious era soon to be a memory as the Big Bull Market crashed in ruins just two months later.

There were nine planes in the race, all more or less stock model biplanes, four Taper Wing Wacos, four Travel Airls and one Laird. They were brightly painted in yellow and blue, orange and white, red, silver, black and gold. Most had big prop spinners and the new "NACA" cowling over their 220 hp Wright engines--two J-4s, one J-6 and six J-5s. Front cockpits were covered over, and rear cockpit openings were slimmed down until they were just large enough for the pilot to squirm in and out. Struts and wires were smoothed and streamlined, and lower wing butts were faired into the fuselage with fillets of wood and doped fabric--the average mechanic knew little of sheet metal and had never heard of fiber glass.

W. H. Emory of Bradford, Pennsylvania flew a Speedwing TravelAir, G. H. Eckerson of Springfield, Oregon a Waco. Tex Rankin's brother Dick, flew a Waco, and another Portland flyer named Bev Clark, a Travel Air 4000 its "elephant ear" ailerons looking clumsy in contrast to the newer planes. A quiet fellow from Wichita, Ted Wells, had a sleek, fast-looking D-4000 TravelAir, and Sydnor Hall of St. Louis flew a beautiful white Speedwing. Tex Rankin brought a new Taper Wing from the factory stripped down with tiny "Airwheels", a straight-axle landing gear, and short stacks on the J-6 "Seven" engine. Clarence Bates, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, flew a Waco that had won the 1928 National Air Tour, flown by John Wood with "straight wings". This year Wood was in Los Angeles preparing a Lockheed Vega for the "Non Stop



Typical of the two Speedwing Travel Airls in the "On To Cleveland" Race is -6239, Pilot, Paul R. Braniff. (Beech)

Derby", in which he would lose his life.

Charles W. Holman's Laird LCR "40", was smaller than the other planes, and looked the fastest of them all. Its gold colored wings were slim and graceful, with "I" struts and ailerons on the lower panels only. A deep NACA cowl enclosed the J-4, and every inch of the spectacular little plane was waxed and polished and streamlined. Even the shock cord had been removed from the Straight-axle gear to cut weight and resistance. "Speed" Holman was an old pro at racing, and just a few weeks before he had won the Gardner Trophy Race, from Indianapolis to St. Louis, at 157 miles an hour. In a pylon race at St. Louis, he had made one lap at 164 mph! Emory, Hall and Tex Rankin had all raced against him, but he was the consistent winner.

He carried a passenger, a friend and financial angel named Charles Dickinson. "Old Man Dickinson" was 73, had made a fortune in the seed business, and had spent it on the serious business of airline development and the not so serious sport of air racing. He had a beard, a sense of humor and a Strong voice. On arrival at Portland, as he huffed and puffed his way from the front cockpit of the Laird where he sat low down under a flush fitting plexiglass hatch, he made caustic comments on the comforts of air travel and his wonderful view of the scenery enroute from St. Paul—mostly the under side of the center section as seen looking up through his cockpit hatch. The crowd loved his good-natured grumbling, and Holman grinned appreciatively. Speed was tall and broad-shouldered, with a strong face and square jaw. He seemed modest and easy to talk to, and those of us who followed air racing and knew our pilots were quite sure he would win this one.

Finally it was Friday morning. August 23, and Portland lived up to its reputation. It rained! Low clouds blocked the gorge of the Columbia River east through the Cascade Mountains and there was nothing to do but wait. The flyers ran up their engines and Clarence Bates seemed to take a long time checking his mags. Bev Clark's mechanic stared sadly at the jerry-built wheel pants he had tried in vain to fit on Clark's 4000. Syd Hall

helped the gas crew add some mysterious red fluid to his gasoline, while Tex Rankin told Dick the delay gave him time to "get a wrench and rip all that junk off the front of your motor" — referring to the "Air Maze" filter and carburetor heater that presumably cut down the wide-open RPM's of Dick's J-5.

By eleven o'clock two "huge transport" planes had come in through the rain and landed, a Hamer Ford flown by Al Davis and a west coast Fokker flown by Ralph Daniels. They had come down the Columbia from The Dalles, 75 miles to the east, and said the low stuff in the river gorge was thinning out so that only a few spots persisted where the scud was down to 100 feet off the water. Tex Rankin grinned and said a hundred feet was plenty and that he had been through many times at fifty. Then the pilots began shaking hands all around and climbing into their planes, while mechanics pulled the prop and shouted "Contact!"

At 11:30 they began taking off. And in 26 minutes they were gone, streaking away in low flat turns across the trees and housetops at full throttle for the 310 miles to Spokane. Swan Island was quiet again, and even the regular tenants waited a while before warming up their Eaglerocks and Fleets, as though awed by the nine dazzling racers. As the crowd broke up the last word-of-mouth "spot news" came through. Clarence Bates was out of the race ten minutes after takeoff, down with engine trouble on a sand bar in the Columbia River near the lumber town of Bridal Veil.

After that we followed the race through news stories—all too brief—on the inside pages of the paper. Television wasn't even a word yet, and although your big new cabinet model Majestic "Superhet" might pick up KOA Denver on a clear, cold, winter night, it did not bring in much news coverage at any time.

However, the newspapers confirmed what some of the knowing spectators had guessed. Ted Wells' beautiful red-winged Travel Air was the dark horse, roaring into Spokane just fourteen seconds behind Holman's Laird. Both planes had averaged 160 mph ground speed, with Tex Rankin third, at 151 mph. On Saturday and Sunday, as



Speed Holman and Laird LCR, X 7087, which later carried racing number "40". Wheel pants and streamlined exhaust stacks have been fitted and plexiglass hatch over the front cockpit is visible. (Photo - Northwest Airlines)



NR 6128 may be the J-5-engined Travel

Air D-4000 flown by Ted Wells in the 1929 race,

(Photo - Beech Aircraft)

they raced on across Idaho's Couer d'Alene Lake, through Mullen Pass, on through Missoula and over Montana's mines and mountains into the lonely country of North Dakota, Wells took the lead and held it. At Bismarck he was 13 minutes ahead of Holman.

But Holman came through on Sunday for the loyal crowds waiting in his home town. He roared into St. Paul at the head of the pack, cutting Wells' lead to five minutes. And on Monday, at Milwaukee, he had shaved off another 29 seconds. Now they were on the last lap; they had come 1340 miles, through the mountains and across the high plateau and forests of the west. The last 400 miles should be easy—south along Lake Michigan, a pylon turn over downtown Chicago, then east to zoom in front of the stands at Cleveland with \$3,000 for the winner and \$1500 for the runner-up. For Holman and Wells 400 miles should be two and one-half hours, time to resolve the difference of four and one-half minutes—and \$1500.

Tuesday, the last day, it was on to Racine, then Waukegan, Chicago, South Bend and Elkhart, Toledo and Sandusky. At Sandusky, 45 miles from the finish line, 18 minutes at 150 miles an hour, the race was won and lost. Holman's J-4 blew up. The little Laird limped in to land at Sandusky, out of the race, as surely as Clarence Bates had been 2200 miles back there on the sand bar at Bridal Veil, Oregon.

Ted Wells was an easy first, with 14:44:10 elapsed time; Tex Rankin, with 15:26:24, proved again that a Waco and racing number "13" brought him luck. Sydnor Hall won \$750 for third, with 17:26, and Emory earned \$450 for fourth place, 16 minutes behind Hall. Major Eckerson was fifth with 18:14 and collected \$300; Dick Rankin was close behind him. Bev Clark was several hours behind them all--the wheel pants wouldn't have helped him.

Clarence Bates got there in time to put on special

"short field" exhibitions in front of the grandstand as the year 1929 brought all the big names to Cleveland. There were Charles Lindbergh, Al Williams, Jimmy Doolittle, Freddy Lund, Doug Davis and the "Mystery S" and Henry Brown and the Air Express. The Graf Zeppelin was there, and the Los Angeles, along with the Heath "Baby Bullet" and the Boeing 80. Speed Holman must have parked the Laird in Sandusky for the races, since this was the year he looped and rolled a Ford Trimotor, as well as flying it inverted. And when we read of this out in Oregon, I wondered if he had taken Charles Dickinson along, and whether the old man sat up front with him and cursed and hollered about the view as Speed held the big transport on its back!

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Ted Wells is a consulting engineer and lives in Wichita, as he did in 1929 when he worked with Walter Beech. Speed Holman was killed in 1931, at Omaha, in this same Laird he had flown all those years. Bev Clark spun in at about the same time, crashing in a Travel Air 6000 at Cottage Grove, Oregon. Tex Rankin crashed in a Seabee at Klamath Falls, Oregon soon after World War II, and I think Dick Rankin has also "gone to his reward", as we used to say in those days. I do not know of the others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Les Forden, of 1448 Page Street, Alameda, California, is best known for his 1961 book on the Dole Air Derby. In GLORY GAMBLERS he told of the famous, or infamous, air race between Oakland, California and Hawaii in 1927. Like many aviation buffs, Les had a number of interesting little tidbits in his files, and in his memory, and in response to a JOURNAL request for such material he put together all he could find or remember on the 1927 race from Portland to Cleveland. Thus we have this brief and intriguing look back into days that are now long gone and otherwise forgotten.