

Lyman Gilmore Junior



California Aviation Pioneer

By ERNEST L. TRUE

This is the case of a relatively unknown aviation pioneer whose descendants would, if they could, put their ancestral hero into his rightful place in aviation history. Quite recently the family manuscript found its way into print (1), and it is this same manuscript that served as the basis for my research and this document.

The manuscript was written in 1954 by Mrs. Margaret Mayes (now Spurr), a distant cousin living in Roseville, California. According to her own words, she "gathered all this information from the papers of dear Uncle Lyman." Of all the available Lyman Gilmore papers that were carefully read by me, I failed to find all her information. Be that as it may, the manuscript in question begins:

"This is the story of Lyman Gilmore, Jr., the inventor who, in 1896 installed a two cylinder steam engine in one of his gliders, a monoplane with curved wings and an enclosed cockpit, and flew it over four miles. This was seven years before the Wright brothers famous biplane flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903. This amazing incident is revealed in a 16 page manuscript Lyman Gilmore, Jr. typed in January 1927 at Nevada City, Calif."

Another relative adds an interesting touch, and it is one that is held by several of the descendants. From a letter written by a Mrs. Theo Stevenson in January of 1951:

Lecture in Honor of Wilbur and Orville Wright
7660 Beverly Boulevard
Los Angeles, California
Gentlemen:

My heart is heavy every time I read all the "glory" the Wright brothers do receive, especially when we do know that poor Uncle Lyman Gilmore really invented what the Wright brothers claim. It is a known fact

that the Wright brothers obtained certain things from poor Uncle Lyman Gilmore, who got nothing, absolutely nothing, not even enough to eat, and lives in his cold house in Nevada City, California. (2)

Here then are two samplings why the 1965 GRASS VALLEY - NEVADA CITY, CALIFORNIA DIRECTORY says:

"Lyman Gilmore has often been referred to as one of the most colorful figures in Nevada County, California."

Lyman Gilmore, Junior was born June 11, 1876 in Sightly, Washington. No longer found on the map, Sightly was located in south central Washington. It is listed as having a Post Office established June 2, 1884 and being discontinued June 30, 1913. (3)

No available school records could be found but from his own words during a 1935 interview: (4)

"I had finished high school and started studying mechanical engineering and drafting." His introduction to flying can best be described from the following quotation found among his papers.

"I became interested in MECHANICAL FLIGHT from a Poem written in our school book: When Man has robbed from the Eagle his Eagle secret, then Man shall be able to soar through the air unconcerned. I realized what this meant and I at once set out and built a 15 foot glider which I could glide and run down hill."

Unfortunately, there is no way of determining when this event took place, but in a letter to the

Photo above shows the Gilmore Aerodrome. Although photo is marked 1907, this date is much too early. Lyman Gilmore, shown also in inset, stands by propeller of 2-passenger monoplane with Charles under wing. Man by 8-passenger transport is unknown.

author from Mr. Harrison (Harry) Gray Gilmore, the last of Lyman's brothers alive, there comes the following dated information:

"When Lyman was 11 years old in Slightly, Washington, he made his first airplane model out of wood. He put it on a pole on top of the woodshed and it was there for a long time." (5) Happening in 1887, there can be only speculation as to what the model was modeled after.

Quoting again from more of Lyman's papers:

"My Father objected to spending school funds on tom foolery and wasting my time and his money, which compelled me to set out into the World for myself if I continued in the Science of Flight. I left home in the Winter of 1893."

Age 17, schooling and aerial accomplishments still very vague, but continuing from Harry's letter, he confirms the 1893 date:

"Lyman left home when he was 17 years old and went to Dutch Flat, California."

Dutch Flat was a mining community located in the heart of the Mother Lode gold country of the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. Here Lyman began prospecting for gold and trapping birds. The gold was for money necessary to continue in the Science of Flight, and the birds aided him in gathering the information necessary to know wing area and weight. His own figures established a ratio of four pounds per square foot of wing area.

Continuing from the SACRAMENTO UNION 1935 story:

"In the spring of 1895 he built a workshop at a spot where there were cliffs and rising air currents."

Harry's letter, covering the same period, states:

"Here he made his second model but he did not have any success with it."

About this time Lyman took to sitting on a hillside at night, searching the heavens for a vision that would show him the way to rob the secret from the Eagle and soar through the skies unconcerned. It has been said that some such vision did occur in 1898 and this may be possible for it was shortly after this time that Lyman asked brothers Harry and Charles to join him. Harry confirms that he and Charles left Slightly around 1900 and went to Dutch Flat.

Trying to find out more about this period in Lyman's life, I personally interviewed Harrison Gray Gilmore in Toledo, Oregon on August 25, 1966. Harry is in his 80s and the details so necessary could not quite be recalled, but he remembered the journey to Dutch Flat. While there, he and Lyman

worked for nearly a year on a model airplane. The wing spanned about three feet and was covered with silk. The silk had come from a well-to-do doctor relative in New York City. (Dr. Pearly Gray, Lexington Avenue Hospital. Later reported to have become famous as an Army surgeon during WW I.)

This model becomes quite difficult to document, for Harry remembers it as gliding down from the cliff very well, but Lyman records it as flying awkwardly like a young bird. Be this as it may, Harry was to return to Slightly and Charles was to stay in Dutch Flat and help Lyman with the gold mine. The next time that Harry saw Lyman was around 1912. At this time, Lyman was seemingly devoting all his time to gold mining.

Trying to get Harry to go back 60-odd years became increasingly difficult, so I had to be content with what information I had and close the interview.

Regardless of contemporary claims I believe, after careful research, that the period between 1900 and 1907 can best be covered by a quotation from the previously mentioned family manuscript:

"In his workshop on the cliffs of the American River, Lyman tested every day in fair weather and with great secrecy."

I use 1907 as the next documented date for in a letter to the author from Mr. "Jack" Irwin, dated October 18, 1964:

"I first met Mr. Gilmore in the summer of 1907. I was then living in Auburn (California) and was also experimenting with aeroplanes and heard about Gilmore flying some model gliders. He had sent several gliders with about a four or five foot wing span sailing off over what we then called Cape Horn, a few miles out of Colfax (California) and about 1500 feet above the Royal Gorge of the North Fork of the American River. Well, he sailed some of his gliders over and into the thermos of this great canyon with some success. I witnessed a couple of these flights. They were good flights at the time but I thought the gliders were aerodynamically unsound." (6)

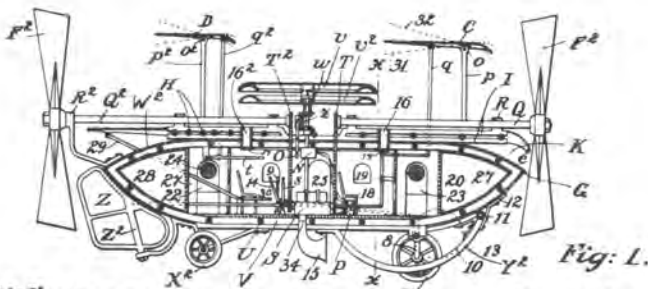
1907 is recorded in the family manuscript as the year that Lyman and Charles formed the Gilmore Airship Company. Stock prospectus was prepared by Lyman and contained such slogans as:

"The airship now goes 'round and 'round.

The bands begin to play, Man is about to

spread his wings and sail the Milky Way."

In 1907 Lyman and Charles built a barn-like hangar in Grass Valley, California. Located on a



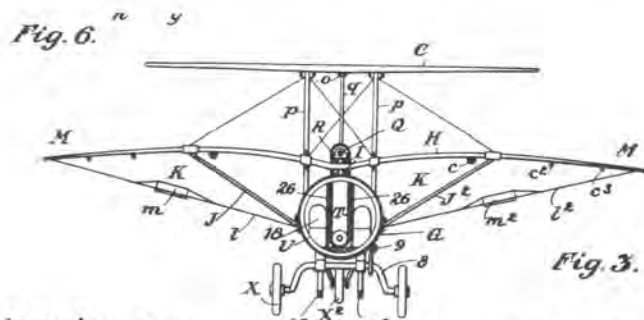
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An 1898 design for a cabin monoplane by Lyman Gilmore, Jr. that was similar to the 8-passenger monoplane on which he would begin work some ten years later. No further drawings or information have been found on this machine.



Lyman Gilmore, Jr. and his 2-passenger monoplane at Grass Valley, California, about 1912.

fairly flat hilltop, Gilmore Flying Field is reported to have "officially opened" March 17, 1907. ⑦

If this is accurate, Lyman couldn't have picked a worse month. Newspapers for this period carry front page feature stories about the torrential rains in the Sierra Nevada mountains that washed great quantities of snow into every creek and river causing great flooding. Grass Valley was cut off from the outside world by impassable roads and for the period during the latter part of March suffered a serious food shortage.

With the hangar built and some stock sold in the Gilmore Airship Company, Lyman and Charles began work on their eight passenger cabin monoplane. This aircraft is reportedly the result of his 1898 vision and from existing photographs, might well be described as a pregnant eagle.

Again, "secrecy" enters the story for from the family manuscript we find that construction was to "take five months of secret work."

The aircraft was never finished, but it was big with a 65 foot wing span and a 35 foot cabin, and it was a tractor, cabin monoplane which has to bear some merit for that era in aviation. Lack of a powerful enough engine is given by Lyman as the reason this airplane never flew, and I am content to let that bring this episode to a close.

Prior to 1911 and later than the following newspaper article, Lyman built his second monoplane.

SAN FRANCISCO CALL. Saturday August 21, 1909.

"LYMAN GILMORE flew his model aeroplane for a distance of 2,000 feet at 40 miles per hour and at an altitude of 250 feet at his Grass Valley Aerodrome. The model had the appearance of a huge butterfly with three wings covered with oiled silk. Mr. Gilmore said he now felt ready to build a monoplane that would carry himself and one passenger. Construction would start as soon as necessary financial arrangements could be made."

The model described above is not mentioned in any other manner nor in any other place that I could locate, and I strongly suspect that the article was sent into the SAN FRANCISCO CALL by the president of the Gilmore Airship Company.

The two passenger monoplane was designed with a 35 foot wingspan and can be assumed to have been finished prior to Robert G. Fowler's ⑧ first attempted west to east transcontinental flight. According to Lyman's papers, he offered this "superior, tractor monoplane to Fowler for the flight." During two interviews with Mr. Fowler, there was no recollection of such an offer. Lyman further claims that he met Fowler in Auburn, California where the Cole Flyer

was brought down for refueling. Lyman has written that he took one look at the biplane type and predicted, "You'll never make it over Donner Pass in that box kite." (Elevation of Donner Pass is 7089 feet, with peaks in the adjacent area towering over 10,000 feet.)

Robert Fowler and the Cole Flyer did not make it over Donner Pass but were forced down by mountain air currents near Alta, California.

From the PLACER COUNTY REPUBLICAN, Thursday, January 11, 1912:

"Over 80,000 shares of stock have been floated which means that Inventor Lyman Gilmore has spent over \$8,000 on the two machines he has constructed. Mr. Gilmore stated that his main problem has been the installation of inferior engines. The Gilmore Airship Company has ordered a new \$2,000 engine, to be installed immediately upon arrival."

Later news releases indicate that this engine was to be a 75 horsepower Roberts engine.

From the NEVADA CITY DAILY TRANSCRIPT, Monday, March 18, 1912:

"Lyman Gilmore, airship inventor, tried out his smaller monoplane yesterday at his Grass Valley flying field. Mr. Gilmore went out about 11 o'clock in the morning and ran around the field at intervals until nearly 4 o'clock. It was not what could be called a complete success, although Mr. Gilmore stated that he made as much progress as he expected. The machine did not leave the ground until toward the close of the trips around the field, but as it did so, one end of a wing tipped and struck the earth. One of the wheels also struck a boulder and the axle was sprung.

The reason for the inability of the craft to leave the ground is that it is just too heavy for the power that propels it. The total weight is estimated at 1700 pounds."

Perhaps the intervening months were spent in making repairs, for in the November 29, 1912 COLFAX RECORD:

"Inventor Lyman Gilmore of Grass Valley made another attempt to leave Mother Earth on Tuesday. Although he did so for a very short time, he came back to earth with a resounding smash that badly damaged his flying machine. The stockholders of the Gilmore Airship Company met Wednesday to discuss the future and to consider the advantages of the newly arrived Roberts 75 horsepower engine."

Apparently the future, with its dubious advantages,

was never realized, for there is no further mention of Lyman's attempting to get this monoplane into the air again.

From the book, *REVOLUTION IN THE SKY*, Richard Sanders Allen, The Stephen Greene Press, 1964, there appears on page 6 this sentence:

"Both brothers, (Lougheed), would occasionally knock off work and go up in the Mother Lode country to prospect for gold."

This happened during 1914 and made me wonder if these famous brothers ever met the Gilmore brothers. My answer from Mr. Allan Lockheed, dated September 1964, read:

"I am sorry that I cannot furnish you with any information regarding Mr. Gilmore's alleged aviation activities. I never met him and this is the first time his name has ever been mentioned to me. My brother Malcolm, who spent considerable time prospecting and mining in the Mother Lode, never mentioned Gilmore's name to me."

Claims that the Gilmore Airship Company was awarded an air mail contract were refuted by Mr. John V. Giarratana, Air Transportation Branch, Post Office Department, Washington, D. C. in a letter to me dated January 22, 1964.

The following excerpt from a newspaper article adds rather than detracts from some of the importance that Gilmore may have had in the field of aviation.

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, Saturday May 7, 1927.

"Lyman Gilmore, short of stature, but long of hair and wearing a beard that never felt a razor and generally appearing like a person from an age long past, came unobtrusively into the Aeronautical Conference in Hotel Whitcomb and listened avidly to all that was said. Most of those there wondered whence he had come and why he was there, but some of the oldtimers knew him and crowded around to shake his hand. Gilmore bashfully declined to discuss himself, but from the accord given him, it seems certain that this strange appearing man bears the distinction of being a pioneer in aviation and one whose experiments have done much to advance the science of flying."

During the late 1920s, Lyman was awarded a Guggenheim Award, which has currently been blown way out of proportion. In a letter from Mr. Marvin W. McFarland, Assistant Chief, Science and Technology Division, Library of Congress, dated December 19, 1963:

"The certificate, of which you enclose a copy, is one of the type of certificates issued to thousands of postmasters and private citizens around the country who cooperated in the roof-marking aerial identification campaign launched in the late 1920s...."

"Until the 1930s, the Gilmore brothers, Lyman and Charles, and their claimed experiments in aeronautics were totally unknown in aviation circles, and no trace of them appears in the literature. Through all the period of the airplane patent war, which waged in this country almost continuously from 1909 to 1928, and in the course of which the many litigants and claimants, including the U. S. Government, dug up every scrap of "prior art" in their futile efforts to disprove the priority and originality of the Wright patent, the Gilmores were never mentioned."

As Mr. McFarland stated, the Gilmore bandwagon began to roll in the early 1930s. Perhaps first was John Hix of *STRANGE AS IT SEEMS*, a newspaper oddity cartoon. Hix became interested and had a movie "short" made. Filmed by Scientific Films, Inc., 6052 Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood, California, there are at least two reels still in existence. One is in the Library of Congress, the other belongs to Mr. Downey C.

Clinch, a Nevada City, California business man. I viewed the copy of the film which is owned by Mr. Clinch.

The opening scene is an artistic view of the barn-like hangar, framed between the pine trees. A change and Lyman and Charles walk on screen, both with chest-long beards. A view of the eight passenger cabin monoplane shows the wing covering to be in shrouds of tatters and tears, while in the background of the hangar is very apparently the crumpled remains of the smaller monoplane. The movie ends with the two brothers sitting in the cabin waving out the glassless windows.

Mrs. Myrtle Shaw Lord took up the story in 1935 and it appeared in the *SACRAMENTO UNION* as a two part feature June 9 and June 16, 1935. Mrs. Lord interviewed Lyman and found him to be deeply convincing. She reported that he had flown before the Wright brothers.

In 1946, Lyman was guest of honor at the dedication of the Nevada City, California airport and the local newspapers retold his aerial life story. By now it had become nearer to legend and had been found to be valuable as a part of the folklore of this colorful area, so rich in gold mines and the tales of the "Forty Niners."

As Lyman's life ebbed and he became a total recluse, the descendants of the other Gilmore brothers and sisters (Lyman never married) began squabbling over the gold mines and his aviation artifacts. Much of the latter was lost in a fire when the Grass Valley hangar burned down in 1934, and much of it was thrown away by disgruntled relatives who claimed he was a phony. What is left and available today is very little, really not enough to prove the merits of the man's thinking. Surely he had done some thinking, though, for there is never a mention of a biplane in his endeavors, always the tractor monoplane. He also must have been a convincing man to sell some \$8,000 worth of stock to rough and tough gold miners on something so "crazy" as a flying machine. Perhaps in a more industrialized location with better engineering aid...who knows?

Charles Gilmore died February 7, 1946, and Lyman Gilmore died February 18, 1951. Both are buried in Pine Grove Cemetery, Nevada City, California.

FOOTNOTES: ① *Argosy*, May 1966. "Eagle of the Sierras"

② Files of James J. Sloan.

③ "Postmarked Washington" by Guy R. Ramsey. As of February 26, 1965, unpublished.

④ *Sacramento Union*, June 9 and 16, 1935. Mrs. Myrtle Shaw Lord, interviewing reporter.

⑤ Toledo, Oregon. October 12, 1964.

⑥ "Jack" Irwin, designer and builder of the Irwin Meteorplane, Sacramento, California, circa 1928.

⑦ *Grass Valley Union*, August 31, 1946.

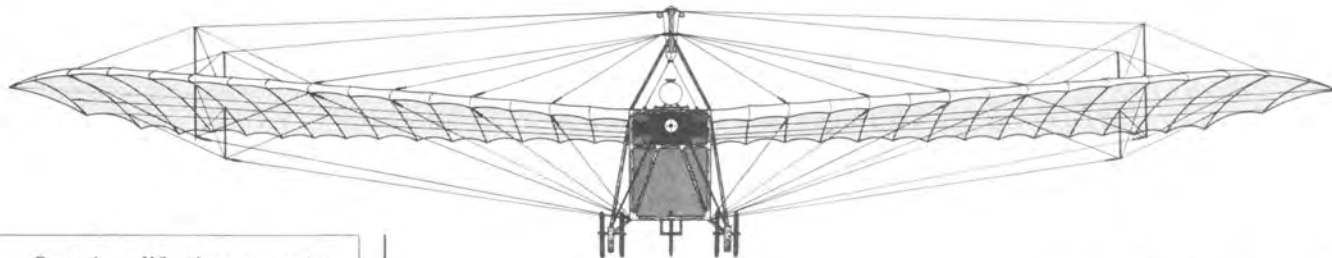
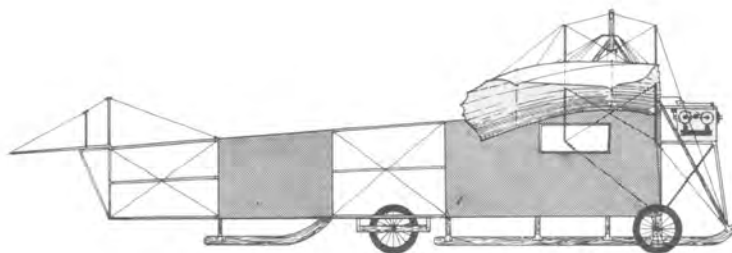
⑧ *A.A.H.S. JOURNAL*, Vol 11, No 3, page 221.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ernie True, of 2440 Lone Street, Sacramento, California 95825, is already well known to *JOURNAL* readers for his fine study of Waldo Dean Waterman, in Vol 11, No 4. For the past three years, Ernie has been working on this account of Lyman Gilmore, Jr, attempting to sift fact from legend. Always he has faced the problem of too many stories and rumors that cannot be traced beyond hearsay. On two occasions he completed the draft of the text only to change it, and he finally settled on the unique form of presentation found here which tells the story as completely as possible while relying only on material that can be accepted as factual.

The author has also added several of his own conclusions, based on his long period of research, and although they appear solid and secure, additional thoughts or conclusions by the Members will be welcomed for future publication in the *JOURNAL*.

Gilmore Airplane Company

Commercial Aviation
and
Manufacturing



Once in a life-time opportunity to participate in a safe, conservative, surprisingly profitable enterprise. An investment that can be adjusted to your cash resources and rated credit. If you are a skeptic and doubt the accuracy of this statement, read the following pages and be convinced.

See Inclosed Bank Reference

Inventor:
Lyman Gilmore, Jr.,

