



Slat Rogers, Duster (right), loading up the old-fashioned way. New Standard D-25, NR 30K. Near Corpus Christi, Texas, July 16, 1939. (Photo F. F. "Doc" McGregor)

SLATS ROGERS-DUSTER FROM THE VALLEY

By HARRY B. ADAMS

"The Valley" is a nickname used in South Texas when referring to a long strip of land whose edge lies along the Rio Grande. The area extends inland, up the river for hundreds of miles westward of Brownsville. It is a fertile fruit and vegetable growing area, and cropdusters were to be found there at an early date in that type of business. One such person who ended his flying career in Mission, Texas, in the early 1940's, was Slat Rogers. His actual name was Floyd Hurtial, but few persons ever heard those formal words. In earlier days, particularly through the Prohibition Era, he was a good old-fashioned, good-natured hell-raiser, of a type that was common in the West, at least until recent years.

With the aid of a friend, Hart Stilwell, Slat authored his life story shortly before he died in the mid-1950's. A look at this book, which is unillustrated and long out-of-print, will give a few highlights of the man's earlier adventures. I shall then add some further information obtained in recent research. In the book, Rogers is vague about dates, and hardly mentions his childhood. He was born in Georgia March 7, 1888, died in McAllen, Texas, July 5, 1956, and is buried at Mission. ①

In his book, Slat says his flying life consisted for years of "smuggling, bootlegging, sometimes a little gambling, always flying, always going to air meets and hauling people and stunting." ②

He built his first aeroplane partly by guesswork and partly from reading some flying magazines, in 1912. He lived in Cleburne (north Texas) then, and saved up some money while working, although underage, for the Santa Fe Railroad as a fireman, and later as an engineer. The flying-machine was named "Old Soggy Number One" when completed, because it was a little lopsided and its right wing always dragged in flight. Slat taught himself to fly in this craft. It suffered many mishaps

and was "retired" in 1913. After taking a few lessons from Eddie Stinson, Slat was briefly hired in 1916 as a flying instructor at Ft. Sill. After the war, he became a railroad engineer on the Santa Fe on a run to Paul's Valley, Oklahoma. That was already a dry state, and in order to get some money to go flying again, Slat tucked some liquor into his locomotive and sold it in Oklahoma.

The plush days arrived with National Prohibition. Eventually, Slat saved up enough money to buy a new Lincoln Standard (\$6,500) and decided to go into the aerial delivery business. He not only ran stills, but also smuggled various things over the Mexican border--including Chinese immigrants! All through the 'Twenties Slat flew--and cracked up in--Standards, Swallows, Bellancas, and especially Jennies, whose price had got down to only a few hundred dollars each by mid-decade.

There are perhaps two incidents for which Slat gained undying fame in Texas flying circles. I shall mention these only in passing, in order to induce the present reader to fully savor the originals in the book. Rogers, caught on one booze-run, got tossed into the Dallas jail. While there, and typical of him, he talked his way into becoming a trustee. Sent to the Evidence Room, one day, he discovered a mountain of confiscated whiskey being held for trial evidence. He made a spare key, and gradually, sold all 680 gallons--right out of the jailhouse! Nothing came of this because, as he said, everybody knew the "courthouse gang" was crooked, anyway."

On another occasion, also in Dallas, Rodgers--on a bet--flew between two large downtown buildings at about sixth-story level, popping out a number of windows as he passed. The result of that was a \$100 fine at City Court, followed by a \$3,000 federal fine, and the loss of his pilot's license again. Slat was in considerable trouble with the CAA, in its early days; as he said, his license



View of Slat's Rodgers' duster, used in his Valley Aero Duster Service of Mission, Texas (1939). (6) (Photo - F. P. "Doc" McGregor)

ADDENDUM:

A biography of this ship, taken from FAA files, shows it had a useful life of somewhat over fifteen years. (7) Registration NC30K, New Standard D-25, s/n 149, built October, 1929. Span 45 feet, length 26 1/2 feet, height 10'2". Two cockpits, 4 passengers carried in front. Gross weight 3400 lbs. One 220 HP Wright J-5 engine. Sold new to Reliable Flying Service, Watertown, Connecticut. Sold to Continental Airways, Newark, New Jersey, April 1931. Sold to Wings Flying Service, Floyd Bennett Field, New York, June 1933. Sold to Franklin Airways Advertising Service, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, August 1934. Sold to private individual, Pennsylvania, January 1937. Sold to Floyd Hurtial Rodgers, dba Valley Aero Duster Service, Mission, Texas, April 1937. Rebuilt to place dust-hopper in front cockpit. Maximum indicated payload at that time 810 lbs. with 62 gal. fuel. Rodgers sold out Valley Duster to Aero Dusters, Inc., March 1944. This aircraft was cancelled from the United States civil aircraft list in February 1948, as no inspection reports had been received in due time, and an aircraft status question sheet was returned as undeliverable.

FOOTNOTES:

- (1) Letters from Mrs. J. B. Parker, November 17 and December 15, 1967. Recently retired from *Mission Times* (Texas) newspaper.
- (2) Stilwell, Hart (as related by Slat's Rodgers). *Old Soggy No. 1*. New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1954, p. 10.
- (3) Letter, Mrs. J. B. Parker, December 15, 1967.
- (4) Corpus Christi Municipal Airport, commissioned in 1929, was named in honor of Cliff Maus in early 1936. He had been an early field manager there. He was killed in a crash in Ft. Worth in November 1935 in bad weather. An early Braniff pilot, he was ferrying an empty Vega to Waco.
- (5) Interview with George H. Guy, Corpus Christi, November 12, 1967.
- (6) Green, William, and Pollinger, Gerald. *The Aircraft of the World*. London: Macdonald & Co., 3rd ed., 1965, p. 308. Photos of NC30K taken by F. P. "Doc" McGregor of Corpus, a newspaper photographer in the 'Thirties. Still doing some commercial work now, in his seventies.
- (7) Data on NC (changed to NR mid-1937) 30K from FAA Cancelled Aircraft File, Records Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Several visits, during 1967. Special thanks to Mrs. Margaret E. Hood, Supervisory Conveyances Examiner, Aircraft Registration Branch, for obtaining this and similar folders. Records this old are not kept at the Records Center, but rather, in storage elsewhere.

seemed to be constantly in transit between Washington and Texas, by 1930.

Slat's finally experienced a "conversion" of sorts, and in the early 1930's gradually straightened himself out. He went full time into crop-dusting, of which he had done a little in the 'Twenties. He was Manager of a cropduster service based at a small field at Mission, from 1931 to 1943. (3) He continued dusting in the Harlingen-Mission-Merced area of South Texas until age and a happy second marriage made him decide to quite flying entirely.

While engaged in another aviation research project, I interviewed three people who knew Rodgers in the 1930's. Mr. Wilbur Cain of Corpus Christi was one of the officers of the Texas Aeroplane Corp., a cotton-dusting outfit started by Cliff Maus and Robert Maverick (both of San Antonio, originally) in 1928, which moved to Corpus in 1929. Cain flew for several years into the early '30's. Mr. George Guy of Corpus Christi flew quite a bit in the late 1930's. And Mrs. Natalie (W. Cliff) Maus, now of New Braunfels, was living in Corpus in the early 1930's. All agreed that Slat's could fly anything with wings, that he was "an old rascal," and that he was also a charmer, a fellow you just couldn't help but like, even if you knew he was doing something he ought not to do.

George Guy was at Maus Field, one day in the mid-30's, and a CAA inspector was there, too. (4) Slat's flew in with an old wreck of a duster whose sides were caked with a mixture of sulphur dust and dried tobacco juice. The inspector stuck his finger through the rotten fabric; then, without a word, he took out his pocket-knife and cut a slice all along one side of the ship. "Better get it recovered, Slat's," he said. Rodgers agreed with a smile, but as soon as the inspector left (after having also cut through Slat's safety-belt, a piece of rope), our pilot got some linen and glue out of the hangar, slathered on a big patch, tied his "safety-belt" back together, and headed down to the Valley.

In recalling this, Mr. Guy said, "Many of the dusters in the Valley were like that, in those days. You could get away with it in the low-and-slow biplane days, but you could not do it now--not for long!" Continuing his comments, he said that by today's standards, Rodgers would probably not be considered a particularly good pilot. (5) Yes, he flew just about everything in the old days, but the record shows that he cracked ships up almost uncountable times, all through his flying career. Still, it's all "water under the bridge" now, and he surely was a fine old Texas ripper!