

THE SAGA OF SAUGUS

BY MELVIN W. HODGDON

The Saugus Flying Field was located eight miles north of Boston, Massachusetts, on the site of the Old Saugus Race Track, near Cliftondale. This track was built near the end of the nineteenth century and was known for its slow horses and fast women, or maybe it was the reverse. But early in the twentieth century the race track fell into hard times and for several years lay deserted.

The first plane to fly from the field was in 1911. That summer a man named Shoemaker brought a plane he designed to the field and successfully flew it. His plane somewhat resembled a Farnum Biplane but had many of his own ideas. Among these was the use of light steel tubing for many of the normally wooden struts and beams. It was not until 1912 that the field blossomed into a real aviation field.

In 1912 The General Aviation Co. was formed in Boston and advertised in Boston newspapers and in aviation magazine "Aero" that they would conduct a flying school at their Aerodrome in Saugus. As advised lessons would be given on Wright biplanes, Curtiss biplanes, and Bleriot monoplanes. They would also operate a school for aviation mechanics and plane builders at their factory, 15 Harcourt St., Boston.

In April, 1912 I visited the General Aviation factory. I was a high school student very much interested in flying machines. At the factory I saw two Curtiss type biplanes under construction. The work was well advanced and the planes were nearing completion. There were eight or ten young men busily working on the planes. In talking with them I learned some were paying a fee to learn aeroplane construction. Others had signed for flying courses but not having the full four hundred dollars required, had paid what they were able and were paying off the balance by working in the factory.

Following the factory visit I journeyed to the Saugus Field. What I saw was that the company had acquired a one mile elongated oval dirt race track, several rows of horse sheds sufficient to house over one hundred race horses, a three story wooden hotel with forty guest rooms, a covered grandstand, a utility barn, and a forty foot water tower. A couple rows of horse sheds had been demolished and in their place a hangar building a little over two hundred feet long had been built.

By May 1912 there were more than thirty students signed up for instruction on flying. There was no Bleriot monoplane on the field and the answer to inquiries was that Sr. Guiseppe Colucci was in Europe purchasing a new Bleriot and that as soon as he arrived instruction on the Bleriot would be available. About half of the students enrolled had chosen instruction on the Wright plane and the other half had chosen Curtiss.

For the Wright students Harry N. Atwood was the chief instructor using the Wright plane in which he had made his famous flight from St. Louis to New York in 1911. His assistant instructor was Arch Freeman. Both Atwood and Freeman were graduates of the Wright School at Dayton, Ohio. The Wright students were divided equally between the two instructors. The customary lesson was a fifteen minute flight around the marsh land adjacent to the field. Three flights an hour with two hours of instruction for the day seemed to be normal. With only one plane for two instructors, bad weather, strong winds, mechanical problems, and failure of the instructors to show up, it was thus a fortunate pupil who received more than two lessons per week. Since four hundred minutes was assumed the required flying time to complete the course it meant three or four months to graduate.

For the Curtiss students Ripley Bowman was the instructor in a Curtiss, type D, but it had never seen Hammondsport. It was powered with a 40 H.P. Elbridge, four cylinder, two cycle engine. Bowman explained to the Curtiss students that while the Wright

Brothers believed in the dual control system for instruction, Curtiss believed that the solo hop method gave the embryo flyer greater confidence. So he would use this method. Lessons consisted of dividing the group present on any day into two equal sections. One section went to one end of the runway and the other section to the opposite end. The plane was carefully pointed straight down the runway. One student was assigned to swing the propeller and the others held back the plane until the engine was warmed up. Bowman then sat on the wing along side of the engine. He explained that he was there to prevent any over ambitious student from hopping the plane into the air before he had sufficient experience. With a student in the control seat, the holdback men were waived away and the student opened the throttle. The plane roared down the field at thirty odd miles an hour. The run lasted about fifteen seconds but it took usually ten or fifteen minutes to position the plane for the return "flight". Lessons were only given when there was no wind and the Wright plane was not using the runway. Few students got more than three or four runs a week.

In mid May there was considerable discontent in the Curtiss group. Various comments of the students revealed doubts if the plane used for ground runs had the ability to fly. They reasoned if the plane could fly and Ripley Bowman had the ability to fly it, why did he not take it up and fly around the field? They began calling the plane, "The Ground Hog."



The Ground Hog with student, 1912.

In May the first of the two planes built in the Boston factory was brought to the field and eagerly assembled by the students. Although built on the same lines as the "Ground Hog" it was trimmer looking. The wings had fabric on both upper and lower wing surfaces. It was powered with a 60 H.P. Roberts engine, twenty more horsepower than the "Ground Hog." The students now had a real flying plane and straight line hops without Bowman sitting on the wing were permitted.

The company planned an aviation meet for the three days of May 30th thru June 1st, 1912. May 30th was rained out but on the other two days bright sunshine brought large paying audiences to pack the field. The company hired Lincoln Beachey and Frank Terrill with their Curtiss planes, and Philip Page and George Grey

with their Wright planes to add to their three school planes. Including the "Ground Hog" there were seven planes parked on the infield of the track for the Meet.

To fill in between plane flights a hot air balloon ascension and parachute drop was arranged. An additional feature was a series of six motorcycle races each day. These were run under the auspices of the Lynn Motorcycle Club and thirty seven amateur riders raced each day. The closing event was a race between an aeroplane and a motorcycle. Lincoln Beachey flew the plane and it was arranged that each time the plane and cycle passed the grandstand Beachey's front wheel would be just above the motorcyclist's head. On both days the aeroplane-motorcycle race was called a draw.

On June 2nd the General Aviation Company announced they were out of business. Atwood and Freeman flew away with the Wright plane. The company's Curtiss planes were sold. All aviators hired for the show left except George Grey. Grey having no immediate engagement stayed for several weeks making daily flights. It would seem that the Saugus Air Field was finished. But such was not the case as it stayed in business for another fifteen years.

While none of the students at the school had finished their training, some felt that they had had enough to permit them to solo. Jack McGee, Harry Jones, Ruth Law, and Roy Waite purchased planes and made their first solo flights at Saugus during the summer of 1912. Each spent several weeks on practice flights before flying off for their aviation careers. Farnum Fish brought a Wright plane that he had wrecked to the field and after repairs spent several weeks carrying passengers and instructing pupils. Roy Waite purchased Atwood's Wright and set up a school on the field. Waite stayed through the winter of 1912-13.

During the years Saugus was an active flying field it seems that there was always a "Home Built" plane on the field. These planes were brought to the field for trial flights. Many could not leave the ground. Some would jump and bounce along like bucking broncos as they raced down the field. Some just crashed.

After Roy Waite left the field in the spring of 1913 the flying at Saugus was less active. Home-builts and occasion visits of itinerant flyers were the only flying activities until 1917. In that year the Whittemore-Hamm Company brought their Model L-2 to the field for tests and demonstration to the U.S. Army. It was a training plane comparable to the Curtiss Jenny. The L-2 was a good plane but the company failed to receive orders. The Whittemore-Hamm Co. stayed at the field until 1920, carrying passengers, training pupils, and making a dollar where they could. They brought out their Model L-3 in 1919 and sold it immediately, then gave up the struggle to survive financially in 1920.

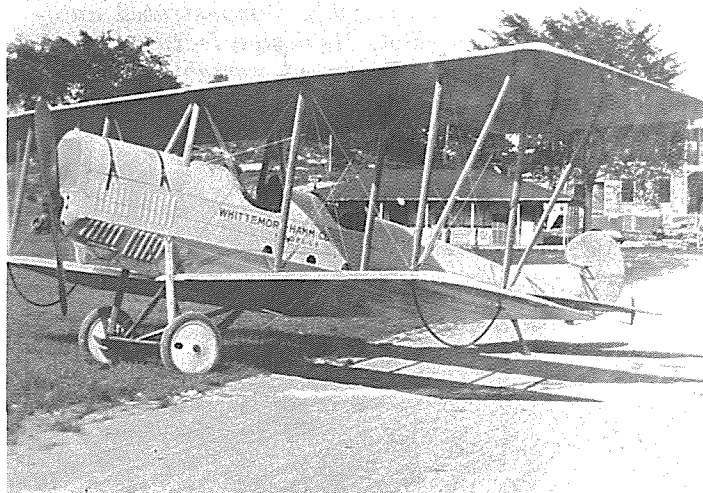
Following World War I many ex-pilots purchased surplus Jennies and Standards and flocked to Saugus to try out their new birds. Gordon Groah arrived with two Avro biplanes. Irl Elliot brought a Bristol monoplane. But this influx of young flyers lasted only a few years. Some found it an expensive hobby that interfered with their domestic life. Others sought small fields adjacent to main highways where the passenger carrying dollar was more plentiful. By the late Twenties the field was dead.

The first destruction of the buildings was in 1917 when a small tornado lifted two sections of the hangar building into the air and

deposited them twenty feet away. There were planes in each of the hangar sections but they received little damage. In 1919 all structures on the field except the hangars were demolished and sold for salvage. Today, only bare ground is left and some fond memories in minds of old timers who flew at the field in their youth.



Irl Elliot's Bristol monoplane, Saugus, 1919.



(Above) A Whittemore-Hamm plane at Saugus, 1917.

(Below) Hangars damaged by wind storm, 1917. Planes in hangars were relatively undamaged.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melvin W. Hodgdon is Vice-President of The Early Birds of Aviation, Inc. In 1915 while in high school at Somerville, Massachusetts, he joined the General Aviation School at the Saugus Flying Field. He had saved money for flying by working after school hours in his fathers machine shop. When the flying school went out of business in June, 1912, his father supplied further money to take lessons on Wright biplanes, from first Farnum Fish, and then later from Roy Waite. When the Whittemore Hamm Company was formed in 1916 he was their pilot until 1920, thereafter until 1922 was an inspector of aircraft for the Registry of Motor Vehicles for State of Massachusetts. In 1922 he gave up aviation as a profession.