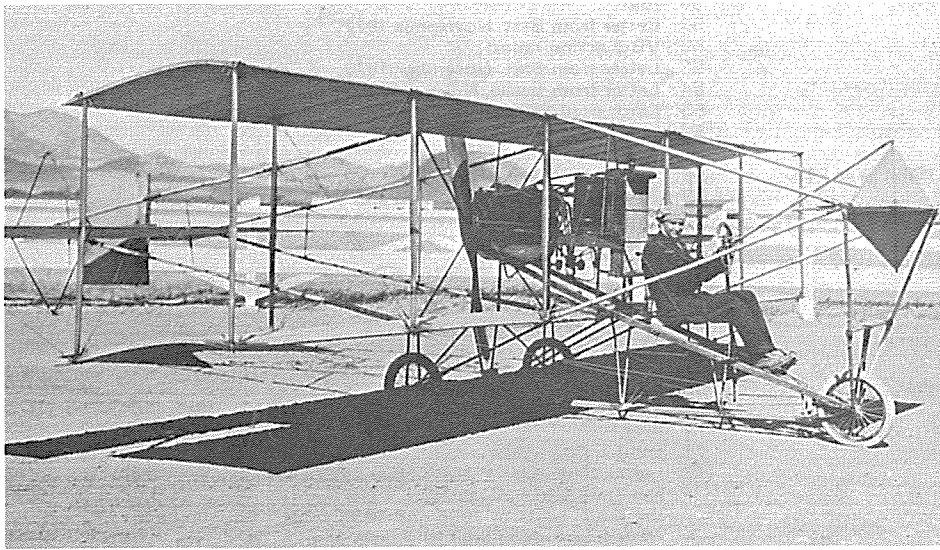




Photos: Montana State Historical Society

CONQUERING THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

by Martin Cole

Today, the Continental Divide is overflown continually by scores of high flying jets. Few, if any, pilots or passengers give a thought that once upon a time, someone was the first to top the crest. The first aerial crossing is only a footnote of history, nevertheless, it deserves telling.

So far as known, J.C. "Bud" Mars made the first attempt. It was during his exhibitions at the Montana State Fair in Helena in 1910. He tried twice to establish this unique record. He failed both times.

Taking off from the fairgrounds on September 30, his Curtiss pusher aeroplane reached an altitude of 7,600 feet, but just short of crossing the Divide, it was caught in a downdraft and forced to land at Magpie Gulch, some 21 miles from Helena.

On the last day of the fair, Mars made a second attempt to become the first to fly across the Rocky Mountains. Taking off at 11:00 p.m., he circled over nearby Fort Harrison to gain altitude and in the vicinity of the Scratchgravel hills he encountered a downdraft, losing 2,000 feet in two minutes. He landed hard damaging the propeller and tail sufficiently to discourage a further attempt.

The promoters of the Montana State Fair in 1911 capitalized upon Mars' failures by announcing a \$10,000 prize would be given to the pilot who succeeded. The Curtiss Exhibition Company of New York, no doubt with an eye on the \$10,000, booked Cromwell Dixon for exhibition flights during fair week. Dixon, a 19-year-old teenager, was known as the "boy aviator."

Although only a youth, young Dixon was an old-timer at giving exhibitions. At the age of 14, with the help of his mother and sister, he built a "flying bicycle" in his home at Columbus, Ohio. It was an elongated balloon with a propeller operated by foot power. It was not a great success, although it did serve to make his name known. After several seasons of exhibitions, he abandoned the boy-powered device and installed a motor. In June 1910, while giving an exhibition at Montreal, Canada, the improved dirigible in some manner escaped Dixon while on the ground, and ascended to a high altitude where the lack of atmospheric pressure caused the bag to burst.

Dixon discouraged over the loss of his dirigible turned his attentions to becoming an aviator. He enrolled in the Curtiss Aviation School and in time was issued Federation Aeronautique Internationale license No. 43, dated August 31, 1911. This was just a month before his history-making flight in Helena.

The Montana State Fair of 1911 was held the last week of September with young Dixon giving a daily flight exhibition. The aviation program was climaxed Saturday, September 30, with Dixon's attempt to overfly the Divide. He would, if successful, fly

to Blossburg, a mile-high community on the westward slope just below the Northern Pacific railroad tunnel that penetrated the Divide. It would be a 20-mile flight over extremely rugged country, subject to similar downdrafts that interrupted Mars' attempts.

Dixon took off from the fairgrounds at 2:00 p.m. flying west and struggling for altitude. The cooperative ranchers and railroad workers of the Blossburg community knowing his takeoff time, built a huge fire, and guided by a column of distant smoke, Dixon on gaining an altitude of 7,000 feet was able to spot and fly directly to his destination. Fortunately, he escaped the hazardous downdrafts and at 2:34 p.m. landed in a pasture near the railroad depot. He presented the gathering of people with a letter from Governor Edwin L. Norris thanking them for their cooperation. At the depot he sent a telegram to the Curtiss Exhibition Company advising them of his accomplishment.

At 3:16 p.m., young Dixon took off down the sloping field and following an uneventful return flight landed in the fairgrounds infield where he was met by an appreciative and enthusiastic crowd. Dixon's publicized flight was viewed with great interest by pilots on the exhibition circuits, as the performance of aeroplanes taking off from high altitudes and flying over mountainous country was an unknown quantity.

Two days later, on October 2nd, Cromwell Dixon was killed.

It occurred at the Spokane Interstate Fair. Witnesses stated that his machine while apparently flying perfectly at 100 feet, suddenly tilted up and dropped sideways towards the ground. It crashed on railroad tracks, Dixon received broken bones and internal injuries. Death came at 5:30 that afternoon.

Roy Knabenshue who had on several occasions given Dixon a helping hand during his dirigible years, was most vehement in a public statement. He stated, "We are reading every day of fatal accidents of men of all ages, but I believe that this is the first fatal accident to a boy, and I firmly believe that a law should be enacted, making it a crime to allow boys under age to give exhibitions with a flying machine."

Dixon had made a host of friends while in Helena. They immediately subscribed funds for a granite monument with a plaque to commemorate his flight over the Continental Divide. The monument today is located in front of the administration building of the municipal airport.

In 1913, Katherine Stinson of the illustrious Stinson family, flew her Model "B" Wright at the Montana State Fair, and while there was photographed with the Cromwell Dixon monument.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"Montana and the Sky," by Frank W. Wiley, Montana Aeronautics Commission, 1966.

AERO, October 10, 1911.