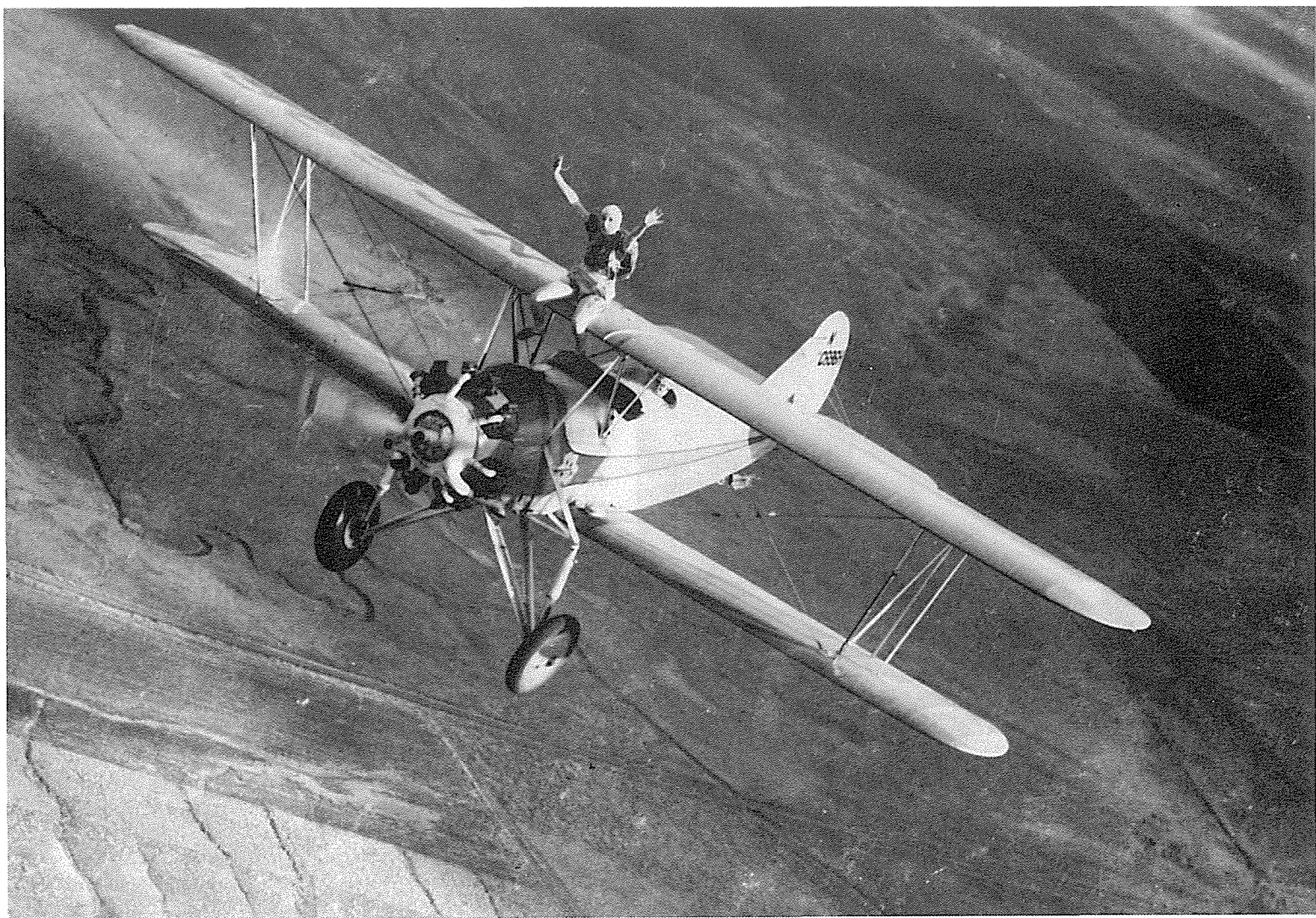
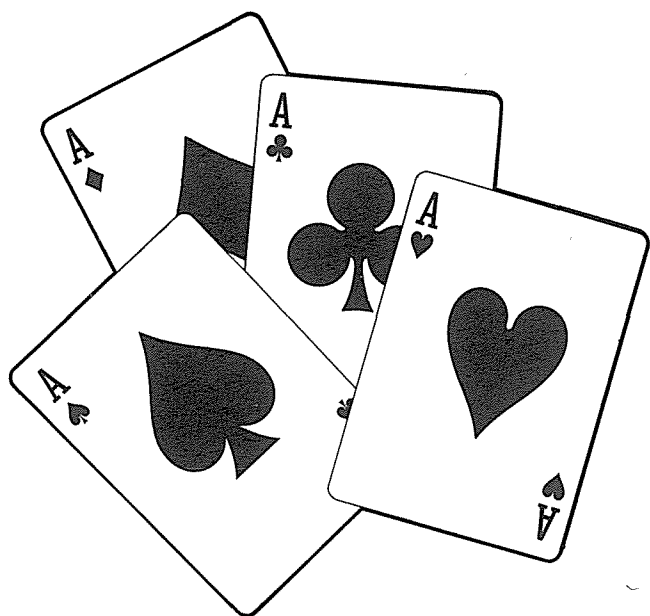




THE FLYING ACES AIR CIRCUS

by
Thomas E. Lowe



During the 1920s and early 1930s the United States thrilled to the exploits of the nation's newest heroes and attractions, the gypsy pilots known as barnstormers. These traveling pilots were rooted in the carefree, happy-go-lucky tradition of show business and the very name "barnstormer" brought forth visions of wing-walkers, parachutists, and stunt pilots scaring people half to death. They spread their wings over the land and kept the languishing world of aviation before the public during the post-WW I and depression era years, helping to prove that flying was really safe after all, and not just for supermen. As the times and competition became tougher the itinerate barnstorming pilots often banded together and the air show flying circus was born. Many of these consisted of just a few airplanes that operated in "fly by night" operations which quickly folded as easily as they were formed. A few operations were quite well organized and enjoyed the limelight of public attention such as the Gates Flying Circus which flew from 1922 to 1928,¹ the Doug Davis Flying Circus, the Mabel Cody Flying Circus, and perhaps the most famous of all, the Fordon-Brown National Air Show. Even some of these well-known air shows did not operate continuously, but closed down during the lean months and opened again when times were better.



Jessie and Jimmie Woods and Chandel "The Flying Dog" pose with the Stearman C-3R, NC 662K. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

Among the more durable shows was the Flying Aces Air Circus. It was the longest continuously operating air show in the country and flew a performance almost every week for nine years, from 1929 through 1938, gaining considerable fame in its time.² But today the Flying Aces Air Circus is virtually unknown and unmentioned by aviation historians and when the great air shows of the barnstorming era are named, it is totally forgotten.

The Flying Aces Air Circus evolved over a period of several years and began as most barnstorming ventures did, with one man, Jimmie Woods, and one airplane. In the early 1920s Jimmie Woods and his brother owned a farm and an automobile garage in western Kansas and after a bumper wheat crop they decided to sell out completely. With part of his share of the profits Jimmie Woods bought an OX-5 powered Swallow and began barnstorming, flying passengers and giving flight instruction. In the summer of 1928 Miss Jessie Martin returned to Kansas with her father from Washington where she had just completed her second year of college. Jessie Martin's father owned property in western Kansas and planned to move there and he hoped that she would stay and attend one of the Kansas colleges. During this summer visit Jessie Martin met Jimmie Woods at Ulysses, Kansas, and soon fell in love with him and his OX-5 Swallow. After a whirlwind courtship they were married and settled in Wichita, Kansas. As the summer passed and cold weather began to cover the country, coupled with a shortage of cash which was common in 1928, they decided to fly to Florida and a warmer climate. However, Jimmie's OX-5 Swallow was such a poor flying airplane that he took it to the Swallow factory in Wichita to have it inspected. They asked a factory engineer and test pilot to fly it to determine if anything could be done to improve its flying characteristics. After a test flight, the Swallow Company decided it flew so badly that they gave Jimmie a new OXX-6 powered Swallow as a replacement!³

Jimmie and Jessie Woods departed for Florida and worked their way south barnstorming passengers. En route, and while in Florida, Jimmie gave Jessie flight instruction as time, money, and weather conditions allowed and she eventually soloed the OXX-6 Swallow. While in Florida they were not making much money

flying passengers, so Jimmie determined that they needed some attraction to hold the crowd. He decided it would be great to have a wingwalker and Jessie was elected. She began learning the trade the only way possible, by trial and error. They purchased a rope ladder and parachute from the Thompson Exhibition Company in Trenton, New Jersey, and added a hanging rope ladder act and parachute jumps to their repertoire. The parachute was made of muslin, packed in a bag similar to a sailor's sea bag, and tied onto the wingstrut of the airplane. Jessie would wingwalk from the cockpit to the wingstrut, hook up the parachute and then jump. She never really enjoyed parachute jumping but continued to jump for several more years.⁴

By the spring of 1929 Jimmie and Jessie Woods decided to return to Wichita in their Swallow which was beginning to suffer the effects from wear and tear, including the OXX-6 engine that was beginning to falter. They made it as far as Macon, Georgia, where during taking off the engine failed. They had not gained enough altitude to clear a set of wires at the end of the field and the tailskid caught the wires. The Swallow stalled and pancaked into the ground wiping out the landing gear, forcing it up through the wing spars of both lower wings. They crated the remains and shipped it on to Wichita with Jimmie and Jessie following it via the bus.⁵

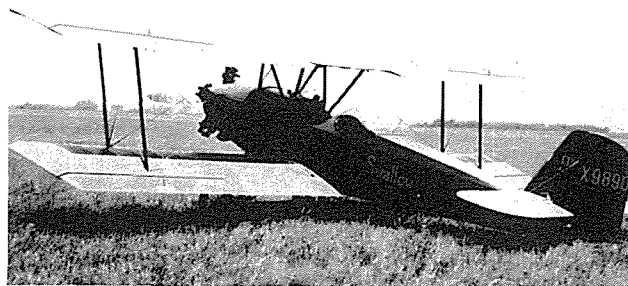
Back in Wichita times were as tough as ever, and even more so, since the Woods no longer had a flyable airplane. Jimmie picked up whatever employment he could, occasionally picking up or delivering an airplane for the Swallow Company. Generally there was very little work to be found. Jessie Woods recalled that Jimmie had a good watch and in order to survive, he would hock it for \$10 eating money. Then when he earned some more cash he would redeem it. This became a perpetual operation.⁶

Eventually, Jimmie Woods convinced a good friend, Max Walton, to rent him his beautiful black and cream OX-5 Travel Air. He and Jessie loaded the parachute and rope ladder aboard and flew down to the Texas Panhandle on a barnstorming tour. This trip proved to be profitable enough for them to make a down payment on a new Swallow T.P. About this time Jessie's father acquired a Hisso powered Swallow in a land deal and, even though he had a poor attitude towards airplanes or anyone associated with them, he gave it to Jessie with the stipulation that it be registered in her name, as well as any successive airplanes that he might acquire by sale or trade.⁷ They now had two airplanes and were big operators by the standards of the day. Jimmie Woods again had reached the conclusion that carrying passengers was just not profitable enough and that they would put on paid airshows instead. Thus the idea that would eventually result in the Flying Aces Air Circus was born.

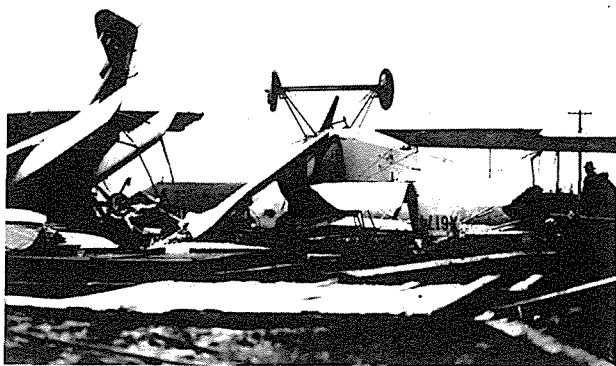
With this in mind, Jimmie Woods gave a young western Kansas farmboy, Hiram Randle, about four or five hours' dual instruction in the Swallow T.P. and proposed to him that he join with him in performing in air shows. "Hi" Randle promptly accepted, married the girl next door, and became the advance man for the air show. Jimmie Woods would barnstorm during the week and "Hi" would join him flying air shows on the weekends. As they barnstormed around the country flying air shows, they began to gather followers from the other barnstorming pilots. Often the other pilots would join with the Woods for a weekend performance since it did not cost them anything for advertising or promotions, and more airplanes on hand helped draw a larger crowd. The pilots would allow Jimmie and Jessie to use their airplanes for certain acts during the performance for the privilege of being part of the air show, and thus it could be advertised that a large group of airplanes would perform, rather than just a couple of beat-up old Swallows. Usually they gathered about five or six airplanes together on the weekends. There was no real organiza-



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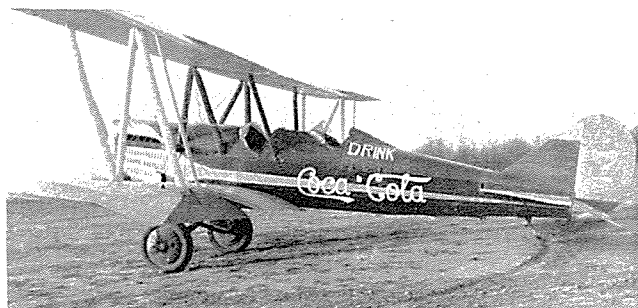
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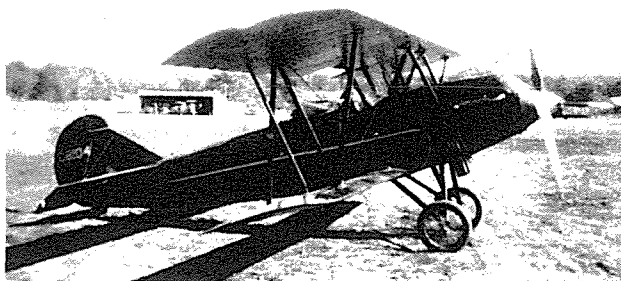


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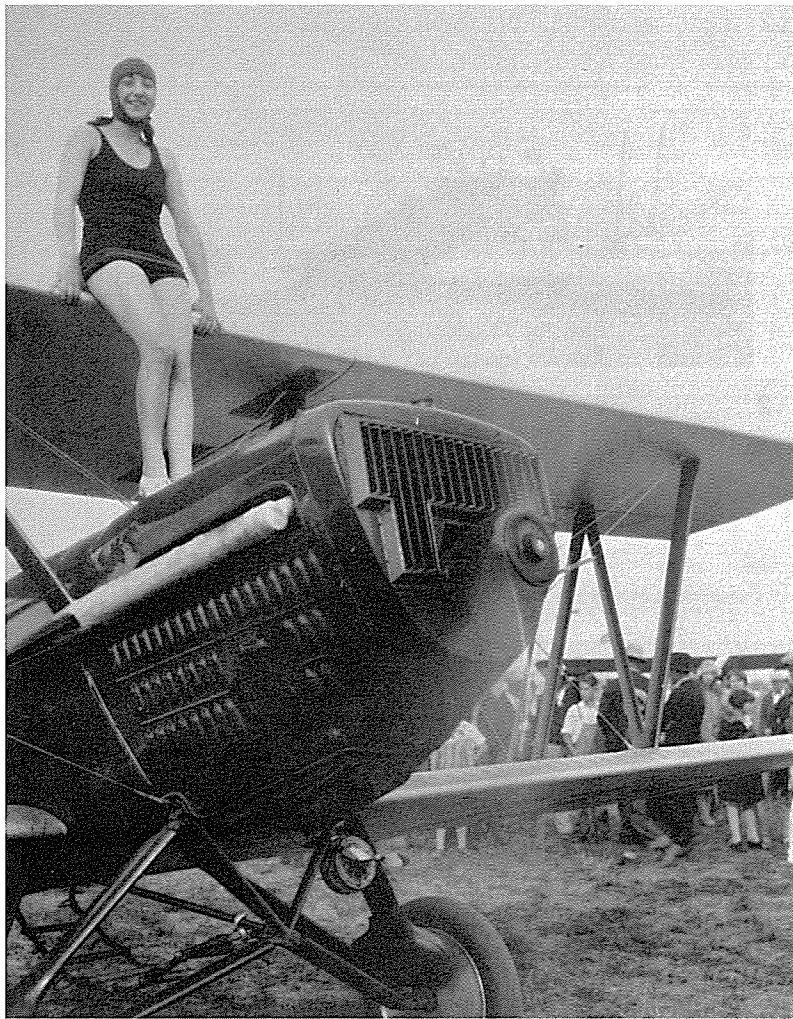


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1. Hiss powered Swallow parked in front of small FBO established by Jimmie Woods as the home base for the Flying Aces Air Circus. This was the first airplane owned by Jessie Woods which was given to her after her father acquired it in a land deal. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
2. 1929 Kinner powered Swallow T.P. Jimmie Woods owned a Swallow T.P. similar to this one except powered by a Hiss engine. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
3. Wrecked Swallow airplanes at the Swallow factory after a tornado struck in Wichita, Kansas, in 1929. Swallow standing on its nose, tail number 4706, was owned by Jimmie Woods. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
4. Hiss powered Eaglerock with water paint advertising on the fuselage for a local firm. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
5. Flying Aces Air Circus' Hiss powered Eaglerock, NC 754H, with water-based paint advertising on fuselage. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
6. Herb Bassett, the only pilot killed while performing with the Flying Aces Air Circus, on the cowl of a Hiss powered Eaglerock at Norfolk, Virginia. Those on the ground, left to right: Bob Gunn, Lilio Benvenuti, Jessie Woods, and the remainder unknown. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
7. OX-5 Travel Air, NC 8104, flown by John Thomas "Little Mac" McKenzie of Paris, Texas. (Photo: Jessie Woods)



7.



Jessie Woods on top wing of 180-hp Hiss powered Eaglerock, at Pratt, Kansas. Note hanging rope ladder attached to landing gear. This was aircraft that Jessie Woods had the difficult experience while performing on the rope ladder. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

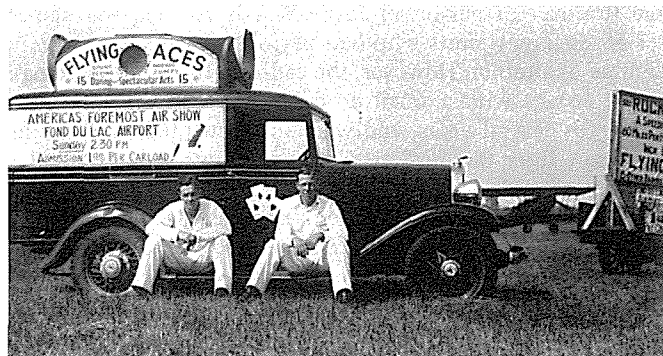
tion to the air show at this time. Each pilot performed whatever maneuvers he and his airplane were capable of, but they usually had a few standard acts; air racing, parachute jumping, a rope ladder routine, and wing walking. Gradually they worked their way south to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas and in the fall of 1929 formally organized the air show under the name of Woods and Clinesmith. Later the name would change to Woods and Sherard and finally settle on Flying Aces Air Circus.⁸

During the tour into southern Texas, in the fall and winter of 1929, many of the basic air show acts that were to become standards with the Flying Aces Air Circus were developed and perfected. Two of the acts the Flying Aces Air Circus became well known for, particularly in the early years, involved animals. One was billed as "Percival the Educated Cat" and the other was "Guinea Catching." Jessie Woods designed a small harness and parachute that would fit a cat and each Saturday evening they would scour the streets of the town until they located and captured an alley cat. On Sunday Jessie took the cat to the airport in a box, laced it up in the miniature parachute harness, and then tossed it out of one of the biplanes during the show. "Percival the Educated Cat" did not particularly enjoy this introduction to aviation and if they could catch the cat and get it out of the harness, once it hit the ground, they would give it away to some little girl in the crowd. One cat escaped completely. When last seen it was running away with his tail swinging like a prop,

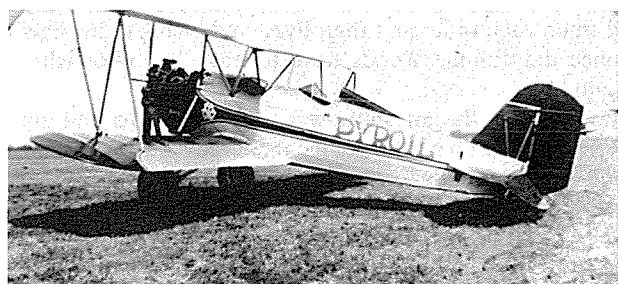
howling like crazy, with the little parachute billowing out behind. Jessie Woods also had a pair of guineas for about a year named Harold and Mabel. They traveled with the group in a small crate and in each town, where the Flying Aces performed, she would board them in a poultry yard until Sunday morning. During the air show they would take them up over the airport, stall the airplane, and release the two guineas backwards into the slipstream. The two birds would glide down and usually land somewhere on the airfield. They would award a five-dollar gold piece to whoever recovered the guineas, and there would be kids chasing all over the field after them.⁹

In the spring of 1930 they returned to Wichita where Jimmie had purchased the Wichita Airway Sales and Service Company, a small fixed base operation, and established the home base of the Flying Aces Air Circus. They gradually began acquiring additional airplanes, equipment, and full-time employees. By 1934 they owned all their own airplanes including two Swallows, a Travel Air 4D, two Stearman C-3Bs, obtained from Western Air Express, a Stearman C-3R, a Ryan B-1 Brougham, and a hot air balloon. The only exceptions to these were the airplanes owned and flown by the featured guest aerobatic pilots. The Flying Aces Air Circus had become a completely self-contained unit and was traveling over about two thirds of the United States, performing air shows in small rural towns and larger cities in the south and southeast. They also owned all their own equipment, cars, trucks, and sound systems and had about 15 full-time employees including pilots, ground crews, and advance publicity men. When they performed the only items they needed were a sponsor, publicity, and a flying field. Their sponsors most often were civic groups such as the American Legion, VFW, Kiwanis, or Chambers of Commerce. By this time they also had two advance publicity men. The first would line up the sponsoring organization, arrange for the publicity with the local newspapers and for poster displays in the windows of the stores. The second advance man would come into the town during the week before the air show and firm up the final preparations for the Sunday performance. The air show did a lot of advertising for the local merchants, cafes, and gas stations for free by painting advertising in water paints on the airplanes. In return they would receive free gas and oil and meal tickets for the crew. For example, the air show personnel would eat in the restaurants, in their uniforms, so the local people could see them. There were large ads in the newspapers tying in the local merchants with the Flying Aces Air Circus. Most of the Flying Aces' air shows were one-day events as two-day functions generally proved to be unprofitable. On Sunday after the air show was completed, the second advance man would leave for the next town scheduled for the air show and the cycle would be repeated.¹⁰

Each performance of the Flying Aces Air Circus generally followed a set pattern of acts that lasted about two and a half hours, with the only variations due to the different featured guest aerobatic pilots. The show usually began with all the airplanes in a mass flight with one carrying a parachute jumper who jumped from a relatively low altitude. This was followed by aerobatics, wingwalking, with Jessie Woods riding through loops on the top wing of the Stearman C-3R. Later in the show she would fly through a series of consecutive rolls on the top wing of the Travel Air 4D. A real crowd pleaser was a dual aerobatic act with the Stearman C-3R and Travel Air 4D with smoke systems. Other acts such as dead engine stunting, skywriting, balloon busting contests, handkerchief pickups with the wingtip of an airplane, bombing an automobile from the air, free for all air races, parachute jumps, and precision aerobatic demonstrations by the featured guest pilots and Flying Aces regulars rounded out the



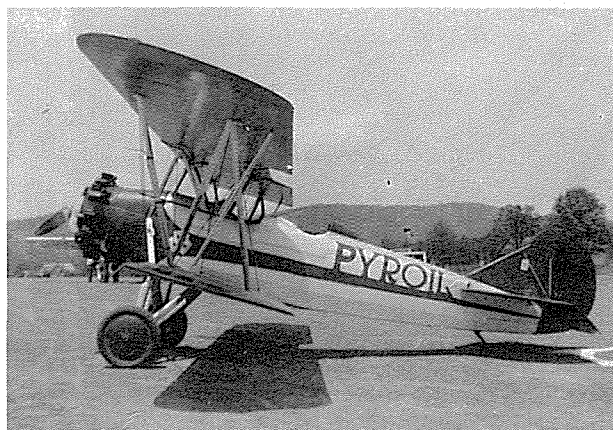
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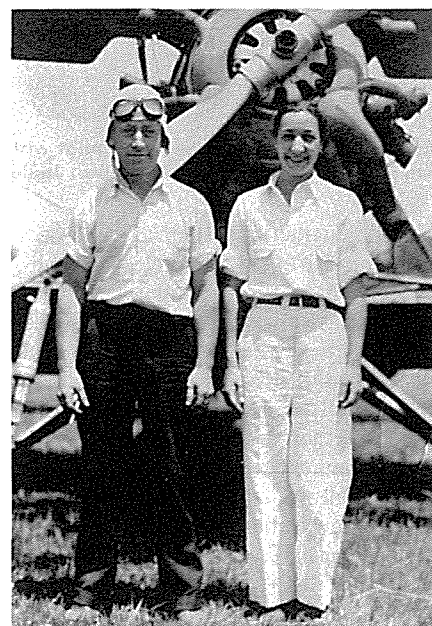
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1. Parker Cunningham (left) and unknown man with the Flying Aces Air Circus' sound truck at Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

2. Travel Air 4D, NC 696H, with water-based paint advertising on the fuselage. Note the four aces design on the forward fuselage which was the insignia of the Flying Aces Air Circus. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

3. Wright J6-7 powered Stearman C-3R, NC 662K, showing Flying Aces Air Circus' standard scalloped air show paint scheme. Notice cowling removed on top of fuselage behind engine. This Stearman C-3R was Jessie Woods' favorite. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

4. Stearman C-3B acquired from Western Air Express before Flying Aces Air Circus paint job was applied with water-based paint advertising on the fuselage. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

5. Vincent "Squeek" Burnett and Jessie Woods with the Flying Aces Air Circus' Travel Air 4D, NC 696H, at Lynchburg, Virginia, in March 1935. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

6. Jessie Woods and Vincent "Squeek" Burnett with Travel Air 4D, NC 696H. Jessie did not wear the parachute while performing her wingwalking acts and note the ropes tied around the center section of the upper wing which were her only means of hanging onto the airplane while it was flown through aerobatics. (Photo: Jessie Woods)



6.



Clem Whittenbeck, longtime star aerobatic pilot with the Flying Aces Air Circus, with his Great Lakes, NC 856K. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

show. Ground attractions such as head-on car crashes, balloon ascensions, and driving motorcycles through flaming board barricades also added to the excitement. Many of these ground acts proved to be much more dangerous and caused more injuries and damage than any of the flying acts, so much in fact that they eventually had to be dropped from the program.

The profitability of the Flying Aces Air Circus depended upon many differing factors at the time: weather, schedule, maintenance and equipment requirements. Sometimes there were hardly any profits as all available cash was directed back into the business to obtain newer, bigger, and better equipment, while at other times when things were going very good, the profits allowed a good standard of living. When times were tough for an extended period of time the group would band together, pooling their money, living in light housekeeping rooms with Jessie Woods doing the cooking for the whole group, and foregoing their pay until the show hit better financial footing again. The regulars did, on many occasions, go periods of time with little or no pay. But, when the money again was available, they always received their back pay in full. The ground crew and non-flying personnel were salaried and drew weekly wages. The flying performers received a base pay that was enough to pay for their living essentials plus a performance pay at each air show. An aerobatic pilot received his base pay plus \$50 a show. If the Flying Aces Air Circus had a two-day show he would receive \$75. When the weather was good and the Flying Aces were well scheduled a pilot could fly as many as four shows a month and earn over \$200. Not bad for the time, especially considering that he had no expenses on the company-owned airplanes and equipment, but only those of his own personal needs. The pilots were also allowed to take the Flying Aces Air Circus airplanes out barnstorming on their own between air shows. Any money made in this manner was split evenly between the pilot and the company.¹¹

The personnel of the Flying Aces Air Circus became a very close-knit group and considered themselves as an air show family. Throughout the nine-year operation of the air circus, many differ-

ent pilots and ground crewmen came and went. Even with such a large turnover of personnel Jessie Woods recalled the names of over 50 different pilots who had performed with the air show at one time or another. However, the cadre of the air show remained fairly constant with a small group of pilots who flew full time, usually for several years, and were supplemented by other hired performers from the local areas where the air show traveled. Jim and Jessie Woods were of course the mainstays of the operation since they were the owners. They served as the general and business managers, air show and maintenance supervisors, coordinators and general father and mother figure for the air show family.

Jimmy Woods placed only one restriction on the personnel of the Flying Aces Air Circus and that was that they be sober and in bed by midnight the night before a performance. Usually he and the advance man would make bed checks and the group was very good about complying with this request. They knew they depended upon each other and their lives could hang in the balance. Only once did Jimmie Woods have to ground a pilot who was drunk and late.

However, once the air show was over the pilots and ground crew were on their own. Sunday nights usually were a big celebration and Jessie Woods often spent Monday mornings bailing people out of jail, rounding them up from "establishments across the tracks," getting their baggage packed and seeing them on the way toward the next town. The pilots had a great sense of humor and would do most anything for a joke. Some of their Sunday night antics included shooting off a cannon in a hotel lobby, bombing people with firecrackers, and shooting Roman candles down the main street from the windows of their hotel rooms. On one occasion one of the stuntmen dressed up in a huge gorilla costume and invaded a formal party on the mezzanine of the biggest hotel in Peoria, Illinois. Women screamed and fainted, some went flying down the steps, and others locked themselves into closets. He then went downstairs and ran all the hired help out of the hotel, clerks, cooks, maids and all. The entire Peoria police department was called out that night and airmen were not welcome in that hotel for a long time after.¹²

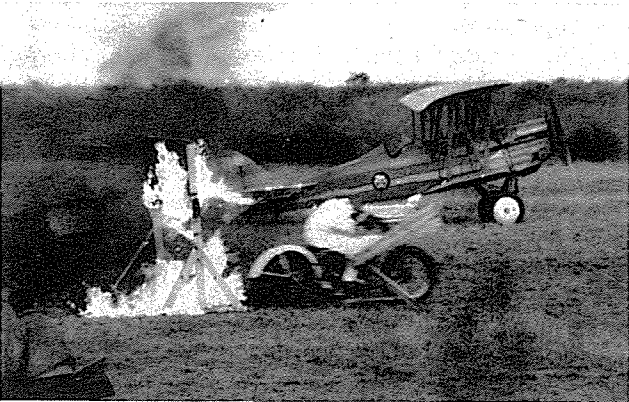
Jimmie Woods performed in almost all the different acts of the air show throughout the years, flying parachute jumpers, wing-walkers, and all sorts of solo and formation aerobatic routines. He was also an outstanding mechanic and a real stickler for maintaining his airplanes in top condition. Jessie Woods commented that Jimmie was probably a much better mechanic than a pilot. His insistence on owning all their own airplanes and equipment was so he could control the quality of the airplanes and pilots in order to have the safest possible operation. His insistence on high-caliber maintenance was fortified early in the formative days of the Flying Aces Air Circus by the only fatal accident incurred by the air show. It was directly attributed to poor maintenance by the aircraft's owner. Air show regular, Herb Bassett, was killed on Sunday, March 24, 1935, at Jackson, Mississippi, while flying a dead engine aerobatic act in a Hiss powered Eaglerock.¹³ Herb was fairly high, probably about 1200 feet, and was just beginning a maneuver, either a roll or a spin, when the upper wing failed and folded back over the cockpit. The Eaglerock fell off into a spin and began coming apart. Large pieces of the airplane came down like a whirlwind following the rest of the airplane. Herb Bassett was an experienced parachute jumper and evidently pushed the wing off far enough to stand up in the cockpit and pull his ripcord. The parachute blossomed out and those on the ground thought he had it made, but the spinning airplane made one more violent swing, before impacting the ground, and the fuselage between the cockpit and the tail surfaces hit the parachute shroud lines and wiped Herb into the fuselage. This action



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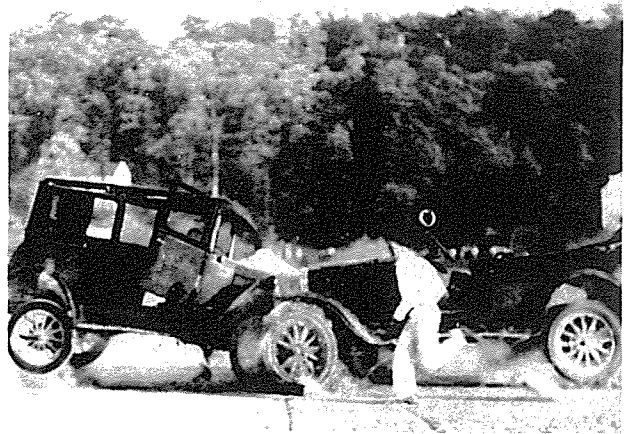


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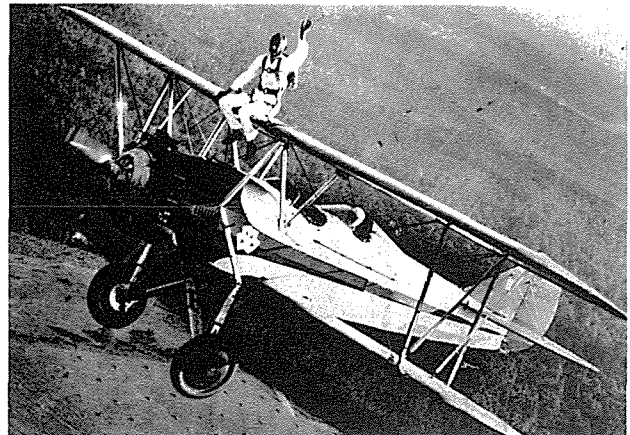
1. Vincent "Squeek" Burnett picking up handkerchief on the ground with the wingtip of the Travel Air 4D, NC 696H. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
2. Two used cars driven by Herb Bassett and Johnny Heck crash head-on during a Flying Aces Air Circus air show at the City Airport, Knoxville, Tennessee, on April 23, 1933. The drivers jumped from the running boards just prior to impact. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
3. Jessie and Jimmie Woods with their Travel Air 4D, NC 696H. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
4. Parker Cunningham, "The Human Torpedo," crashing a motorcycle through a flaming board barricade. Hisso powered Eaglerock in the background. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
5. Jack Huber, a longtime parachute jumper with the Flying Aces Air Circus and acclaimed as America's foremost jumper, poses with the Travel Air 4D, NC 696H. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
6. Jessie Woods sitting on the center section of the Travel Air 4D flown by her husband, Jimmie Woods. Parachute was not worn during air show performances. (Photo: Jessie Woods)



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Dexter Martin who occasionally performed with the Flying Aces Air Circus with his Stinson SM-8. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

was so violent that post-crash inspection showed all the shroud lines to be burned from friction and diagonal slash marks were burned into the fuselage fabric by the shroud lines. The Hisso Eaglerock was owned by Lilio Benvenuti, originally from Florence, Italy. Jimmie Woods had already barred all other non-Flying Aces owned airplanes from the air show except his. Benvenuti had been with the Flying Aces Air Circus for quite some time and was having financial problems, and Jimmie Woods had been carrying him along by grace. Benvenuti did not maintain his Eaglerock to Jimmie's standards and Jimmie felt that the cause of Herb Bassett's death was mechanical or material failure directly attributable to this poor maintenance. With no airplane, Benvenuti and his family left the air show and returned to their home in Detroit, Michigan.

Several years later the Flying Aces Air Circus again performed in Jackson, Mississippi, and an elderly couple introduced themselves to Jimmie and Jessie Woods. They lived adjacent to the airport and the rudder from the Eaglerock had fallen into their yard. They planted a lovely climbing rose and were using the rudder framework as a trellis. With this accident always in mind, Jimmie Woods insisted on all his equipment being maintained in excellent condition. Each pilot was responsible for all the minor maintenance and cleanliness of the airplane he flew, but Jimmie Woods performed the major work such as engine overhauls, recovering, and periodic inspections. He made arrangements at different airports around the country to use their facilities for repair work.¹⁴

Jessie Woods was the other mainstay of the Flying Aces Air Circus and was always one of the featured performers at all their air shows. She was billed as "Lady Redbird" and was proficient at parachute jumping, wingwalking, and using a rope ladder. She never really enjoyed parachute jumping and gave it up when the air show had grown enough to have full-time experienced parachute jumpers. She also was one of the best and longest lived wingwalkers in air show history. Her wingwalking performances included gymnastics such as handstands between the wings of a biplane, lying across the flying wires between the wings, climbing from lower to upper wings, and standing upright behind the pilot in the open cockpit of a biplane. She also specialized in sitting on the top wing center section while the airplane was flown through

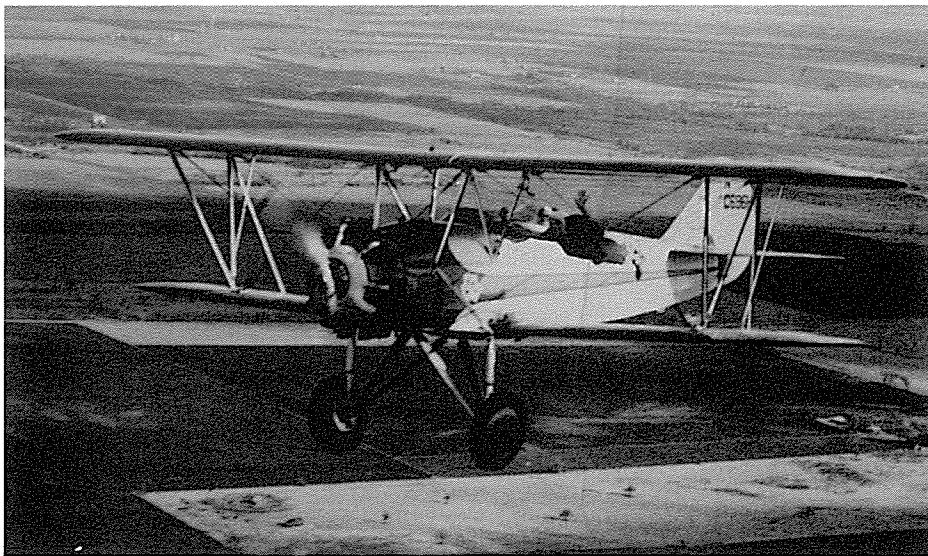
barrel rolls, spins, and loops and she claims a record of seven consecutive loops and several consecutive rolls. During this act her only means of remaining on the airplane was with a small hand-held rope stretched across the center section. The Travel Air 4D was the airplane usually used in this act. During her wingwalking career Jessie Woods rarely wore a parachute, except while filming the act or taking publicity photographs.

Jessie Woods fell off an airplane once. Luckily it was while Paramount News was filming her act in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and she was wearing a parachute. They were filming her sitting on the top wing center section while the airplane was flown through some aerobatics. The airplane being used was a Travel Air 4D, however it was not the one owned by the Flying Aces Air Circus, and the pilot, Melvin Sellmeyer, was not a member of the air show. He flew Jessie through a series of loops and slow rolls and performed the rolls so slowly that she had an extremely difficult time hanging onto the airplane. Eventually the strain became too much and she fell off the wing while the Travel Air was inverted halfway through a slow roll. They were flying at about 3000 feet and Jessie drifted quite a distance before eventually landing in the middle of a pen of short-horned calves. She climbed up the fence in the middle of the pen, gathered her parachute around her, and since she had no idea where she was, just waited there until someone finally came for her.

Jessie Woods' most harrowing experience occurred during her rope ladder act at an air show in Pratt, Kansas, during the early years of the Flying Aces Air Circus. Jimmie had a 180-h.p. Hisso Eaglerock rigged so that a rope ladder could be suspended beneath the landing gear. The trailing end of the ladder had a ring on it attached to a rope and the ladder was pulled up against the bottom of the fuselage during takeoff and extended by the pilot after becoming airborne. Once airborne Jessie would step out of the front cockpit, climb down onto the landing gear, and then onto the rope ladder using some special hand holds Jimmie had installed on the sides of the ladder. Once in position she would hang from the ladder by her hands, knees, and ankles. On this occasion "Ping" Vought was piloting the Eaglerock and he let out too much rope when extending the ladder and when Jessie climbed onto it her weight caused the trailing rope to wrap around the tail skid. The ladder did not swing forward as it should. She was suspended below the Eaglerock like a hammock and her weight kept turning the ladder over so she was hanging upside down. "Ping" Vought could not see her but he knew that something was wrong. He climbed to a higher altitude and Jessie managed to yell loudly enough to tell him she was trapped on the ladder.

They flew around for some time while Jessie vainly battled to climb back onto the landing gear against the strong slipstream created by the Hisso engine. "Ping" Vought flew out over a cornfield and yelled down to Jessie that he would fly down low over the field and would stall it as much as he could and for her to drop off. Jessie was getting extremely tired, but the ground looked very hard and she just could not bring herself to drop off. Finally with a great effort she managed to swing out high enough to get a toe hooked onto the landing gear strut. She kept inching her way up and finally got one foot over the strut. This gave her enough leverage to climb onto the landing gear and hang on. She was so exhausted that she did not climb back into the cockpit but just sat on the landing gear while "Ping" Vought landed back at the airport. Needless to say, this experience left quite an impression with Jessie, but she continued to perform this act until the rope ladder and some other equipment was lost when the airport at Vincennes, Indiana, was flooded.

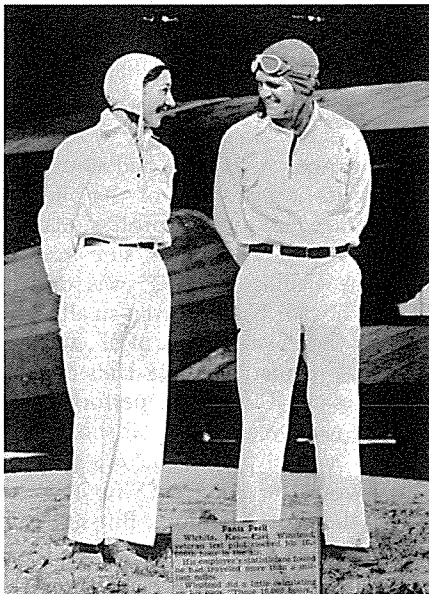
Jessie Woods was also well known for her pet, "Chandelle the Flying Dog." Jessie got her shortly after she was born and her



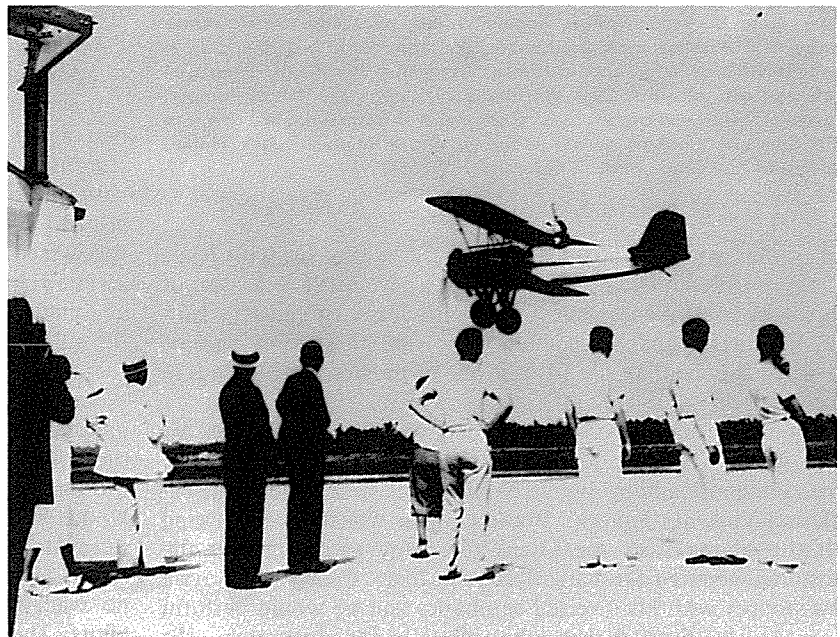
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1. Jessie Woods lying across the flying wires of the Travel Air 4D, NC 696H, piloted by Jimmie Woods. Parachute was only worn while taking publicity photos and was not used during the air show. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
2. Parker Cunningham — advance man, motorcycle crash, air show announcer and remote control car act. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
3. Jessie Woods and Carl Winstead, a longtime Flying Aces Air Circus pilot who later became a Cessna test pilot. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
4. Jessie Woods standing in cockpit behind the pilot, Jimmie Woods, in the Stearman C-3R, NC 662K, during a low pass at Richmond, Virginia. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
5. Newly acquired J5 Stearman taken from other J5 Stearman.



5.



Some members of the Flying Aces Air Circus in front of the Stearman C-3R, NC 662K, "Gumit II." Front row, l to r: Herb Bassett, pilot and jumper; Lilio Benvenuti, pilot; Jimmie Woods, pilot and owner; Parker Cunningham, advance man, announcer, and stuntman; 2nd row, l to r: unknown wife of a ground crewman; Stephania Benvenuti, admission tickets and gate receipts; Clem Whittenbeck, pilot; Jessie Woods, jumper, wingwalker, pilot, and owner; Lynn Gunn, wife of Bob Gunn; 3rd row, l to r: Ed Sherrard, booking agent, publicity, and announcer; Jack Huber, jumper; and Bob Gunn, pilot. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

eyes opened while on board an airplane. She traveled with Jessie and thoroughly enjoyed flying. She even gave birth to a litter of puppies in an airplane while flying with Jessie en route to Norfolk, Virginia. Chandelle acquired over 1000 hours of flying time and when she died, at age 14, was one of the best known dogs in the country.¹⁵

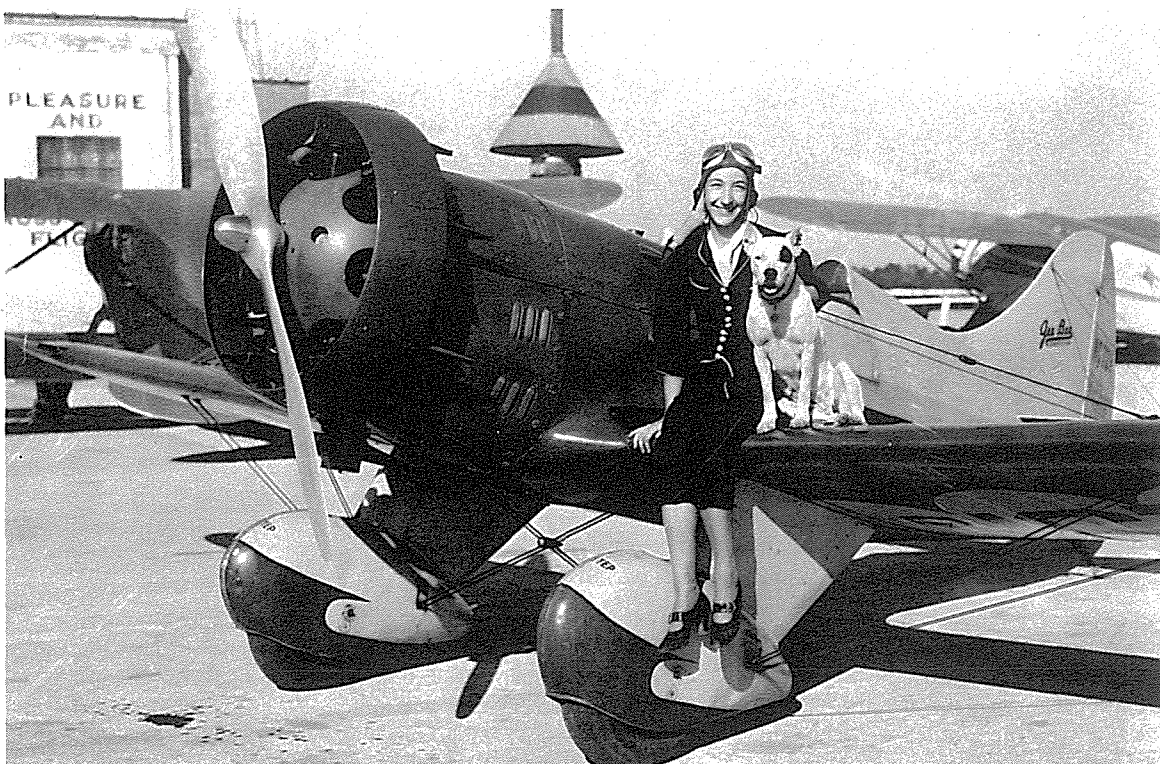
Among the many regular performers with the Flying Aces Air Circus were several standout showmen who were the stars of the show. Foremost among the aerobatic pilots were Clem Whittenbeck and Vincent "Squeek" Burnett. Clem Whittenbeck traveled with the Flying Aces Air Circus for many years and was the undisputed inverted aerobatic flying showman. Clem was always a show-stopper with his inverted aerobatics and he would perform any maneuver inverted that other pilots would do upright. His airplane was a sleek light blue and white Cirrus powered Great Lakes, NC 856K. He thrilled the crowd with slow rolls, snap rolls, double snap rolls, and culminated his act with a low inverted pass over the field at an altitude of about six feet followed by a gradual pullup to 30 or 40 feet where he rolled upright into his favorite crowd thrilling landing maneuver, the power slip. Before anyone was aware of it the Great Lakes had turned 180 degrees and was landing on the same runway over which it had just flown inverted. Clem would taxi quickly to the reviewing stand to receive the welcome applause from the crowd.¹⁶

During the last three years of the Flying Aces Air Circus one of the featured aerobatic pilots was young Vincent "Squeek" Burnett. For some time he had followed the air show around, in his Le Blond powered Golden Eagle, begging Jimmie Woods to let him join the air show. Jimmie finally told him when he got his commercial license he could become part of the show. "Squeek" became 18 shortly thereafter and obtained his commercial license and true to his word, Jimmie Woods hired him as a pilot. "Squeek" modified his Golden Eagle by installing a one-gallon

kerosene can between the landing gears to serve as an inverted fuel tank. With the ability to keep his engine running while inverted, he and his Golden Eagle quickly became a sensational aerobatic act. Eventually Jimmie Woods told him to sell the Golden Eagle and take over flying the Flying Aces' Travel Air 4D. "Squeek" continued to be a star attraction in the Travel Air, performing all types of aerobatics, inverted climbs and dives, inverted falling leaves, and ribbon pickups on the ground with the wingtip. A Raleigh, North Carolina, newspaper hailed his performance by stating, "One veteran flier on the ground declared that he was every bit as good as the famous German ace, Udet, and should prove to be a sensation at the National Air Races."¹⁷

"Squeek's" flying skill with the Travel Air was related by Jessie Woods. "We were down in Alabama, near Maxwell Field, and 'Squeek' was acting very much out of character. He was quite a ladies' man and had an active night life, but he was getting up before dawn and going out to the airport. We couldn't figure out what was going on and what he was so gung-ho about. Later we met some of the Army pilots from Maxwell who clued us in. 'Squeek' had made friends with some of the fighter pilots and was going out each morning to meet them in the air, dogfighting, tail chasing, and doing aerobatics. Apparently he could more than hold his own in that old Travel Air against the fighters and was just beating up the sky with them. One of the Army pilots said that 'Squeek' was the one who really showed them how aerobatics should be flown."¹⁸

Along with the star pilots, every air show had to have parachute jumpers and the Flying Aces Air Circus had some of the best and most famous during its years. Many of the pilots and stuntmen would also jump, if needed, but the professional parachute jumper was a featured attraction that was sure to draw a crowd. "Duke" Widiger, "The Falling Meteor," was one who specialized in jumping from a hot air balloon from an altitude of several thousand feet. Perhaps the most famous of all, acclaimed as America's foremost parachute jumper, was Jack Huber who got his start with the Flying Aces Air Circus and performed with them until they closed. In the early years of the air show Jimmie Woods would occasionally let a local person make a parachute jump during the show. They would be charged \$5 for the use of the parachute and \$5 to fly them for the jump. But sometimes the local jumpers scared the regulars half to death and Jimmie Woods soon discontinued this practice. Once while the Flying Aces Air Circus was touring Kansas, Jack Huber began to follow along, continuously asking Jimmie Woods to let him jump, but to no avail. He was smart, likable, and soon made friends with the pilots. They started working on Jimmie Woods to let him jump. He finally got his chance and paid the standard \$10 fee to make his jump. After that he was hired.¹⁹ He became the best and most consistent parachute jumper of his time. He had a kind of built-in altimeter that told him when to pull the ripcord. He was a master of the cutaway jump: jump, open a parachute, cut it away and fall further, open another one, and then cut it away. He used as many as six parachutes in one cutaway jump. He would also pack newspapers into his parachute so when it opened it appeared to explode. He would also fill a bag with flour to serve as a streamer during his free fall. He jumped in winds when most other jumpers would not and thought nothing of jumping with a standard round parachute in winds up to 35 mph. Jack Huber was one of the most colorful characters ever found both on and off the air show scene. He was tough and astounded people with such feats as eating light bulbs and beer glasses, or by sewing a button onto his arm to amuse a bar crowd and pick up some money on bets.²⁰ Jack Huber continued to jump for many years, completing over 2800 parachute jumps, before fate closed his act. He was killed on August 28, 1951, at age 42, while making a night jump



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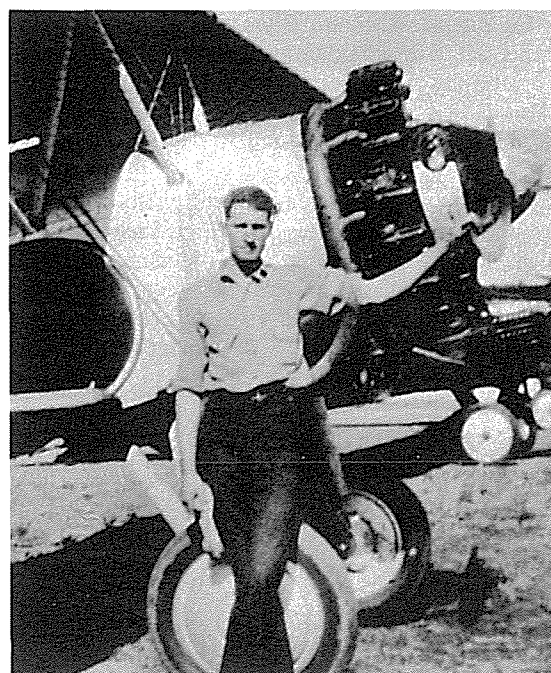


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1. Jessie Woods and her dog, Chandelle, pose with Johnny Crowell's Warner powered Gee Bee Sportster E, NC 72V, at Charlotte, North Carolina. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
2. Jessie Woods doing a handstand on the lower wing of the Stearman C-3R, NC 662K, which was flown by Jimmie Woods. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
3. Jessie Woods wingwalking on the lower wing of the Stearman C-3R, NC 662K. Stearman was flown by her husband, Jimmie Woods. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
4. Bob Gunn poses with one of the Wright J5 powered Stearman C-3Bs the Flying Aces Air Circus purchased from Western Air Express. Air show paint scheme had not yet been applied. (Photo: Jessie Woods)



3.



4.



Flying Aces Air Circus personnel pose at Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

at a fair in Lexington, Nebraska.²¹

During the last few years of the air show, the Flying Aces' second advance man was Parker Cunningham of Cape Girardeau, Missouri. He also doubled as a stuntman, billed as "The Human Torpedo." He drove motorcycles through a flaming board barricade and drove one of the automobiles in the head-on crash demonstrations. Parker was an outstanding showman and specialized in electronic gimmicks. One of his acts consisted of driving an automobile from an airborne airplane by remote control. He would have a new convertible or open touring car, from one of the local automobile agencies, driven in front of the crowd by one of the local salesmen who would leave it with the engine running. Parker would then give his wife a large board with many knobs and wires on it. She would fly over the field in a Ford or Stinson Trimotor the Flying Aces Air Circus used to carry passengers. She was supposed to control the car from the air. Parker would go to the sound truck, close the doors, and the car would move forward and backwards, circle around the field, and do figure eights in front of the crowd, all without a driver. No one associated with the Flying Aces Air Circus ever learned how Parker Cunningham accomplished this as he was very secretive about this act. He would not allow anyone around the sound truck or the automobile before or after the performance. But Jessie Woods said that whatever type of device he had, he could carry it on his person and install it on the car in less than 30 minutes.²²

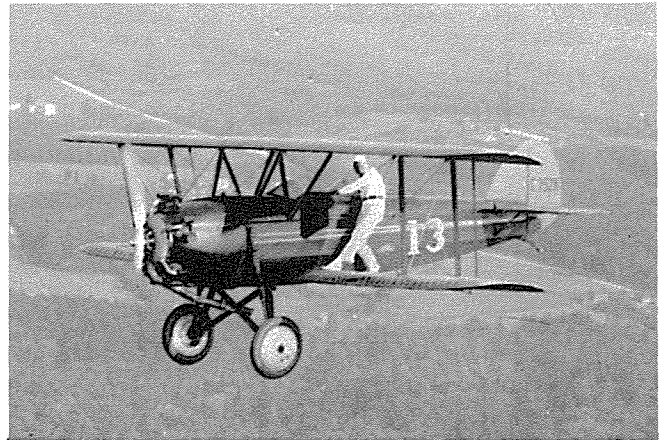
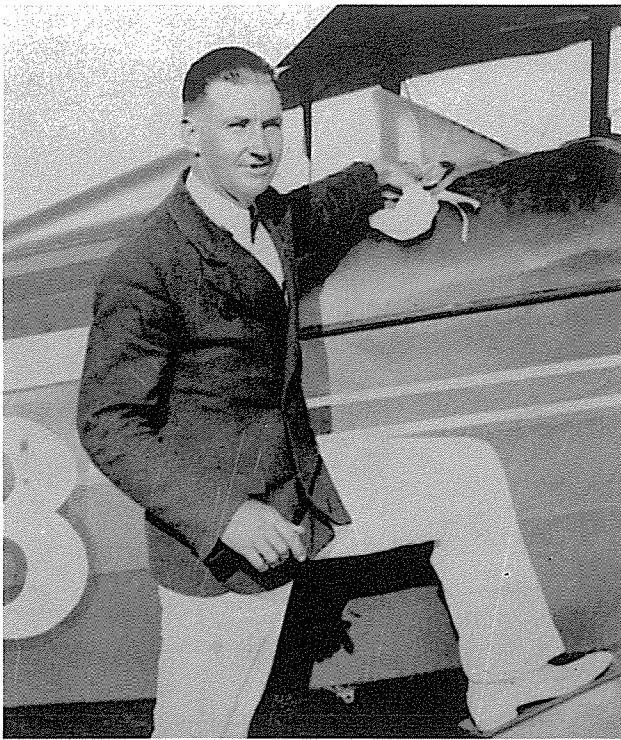
Besides those persons already mentioned, some of the other regulars with the Flying Aces Air Circus included: Ed Sherrard, Carl Winstead, who later became a Cessna test pilot; Connie Durant who specialized in balloon ascensions and parachute jumping; Herb Meeks, Paul Prevost, Rocky Moran, an Indian stuntman; John Thomas "Mac" McKenzie; Joe Schultz, who performed aerobatics in a Stinson Jr.; Herman Clinesmith, one of the early advance men; Johnny Heck, the head of the ground crew; Jack Eiler; Ezra "Possum" Wiggins; Bob Gunn, who at the time was the youngest pilot in the country with a transport license; Vern Christian, who specialized in aerobatics and landing with the engine shut off; Neil Hand; Walter "Red" Carey and "Birdie" Carey; Burt Carey, the sign painter; and Danny Fowlie, who flew aerobatics in the Flying Aces' Menasco powered Gee Bee Sports-ter.

Besides the regulars, many other pilots and jumpers performed with the Flying Aces Air Circus, as featured acts, whenever the air show was in their locale or when their schedules permitted. Some

of these individuals were very well known in their time and have been well remembered through the years. Among these were: Harold Johnson, who was famous for his aerobatic routine in the Ford Tri-motor; Odell Garrison, who specialized in stunting with the engine shut off and propeller stopped who later became a CAA inspector; Dexter Martin, who flew an OX-5 Eaglerock and a Kinner-powered Bird; Eugene Lawrence; Clem Sohn, the first man to use canvas sails for body gliding and also the first to be killed doing it;²³ Bevo Howard; and Johnny Crowell.

Perhaps the most spectacular of the featured guest performers was Johnny Crowell who flew with the Flying Aces Air Circus anytime they were within a day's flying time from his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. Johnny Crowell was another master showman, a spectacular aerobatic pilot, a designer and inventor who patented many inventions, including the first rotary engine-timing device, the first aircraft flying wire tensiometer, and the first automobile automatic choke. His mechanical ability led to modifications on his air show airplanes that enabled him to perform feats that have not been duplicated to this day and also satisfied his quest for ever-increasing knowledge of the science of flight and flying safety. One of his specialized acts consisted of flying an aerobatic routine with his hands tied by ropes outside the cockpit. He would take off, perform a loop, snap roll and spin, followed by a landing, all with his hands tied outside the cockpit! He performed this act from 1931 through 1952. His other act in a specially modified airplane consisted of climbing out onto the wingwalk of the lower wing of his Waco ASO and flying it through a series of climbs, turns, figure eights, and descents using only one hand in the cockpit to control the airplane. The stick was modified so that by twisting the top it would turn a rudder trim tab which in turn caused the rudder to turn the airplane. Johnny Crowell never has fully disclosed the manner in which he modified his airplanes, but wherever he performed he was the highlight of the show.²⁴

By 1936 the CAA was beginning to place many restrictions on the Flying Aces Air Circus, making it very difficult for them to conduct an air show in the manner in which they were accustomed. They were no longer permitted to bomb automobiles from the air or drive motorcycles through flaming board barricades. Wingwalking acts were banned completely or restricted to a minimum altitude of 1500 feet, with the wingwalker required to wear a parachute. The air show was required to provide its own fencing to contain the crowd, and insurance requirements were



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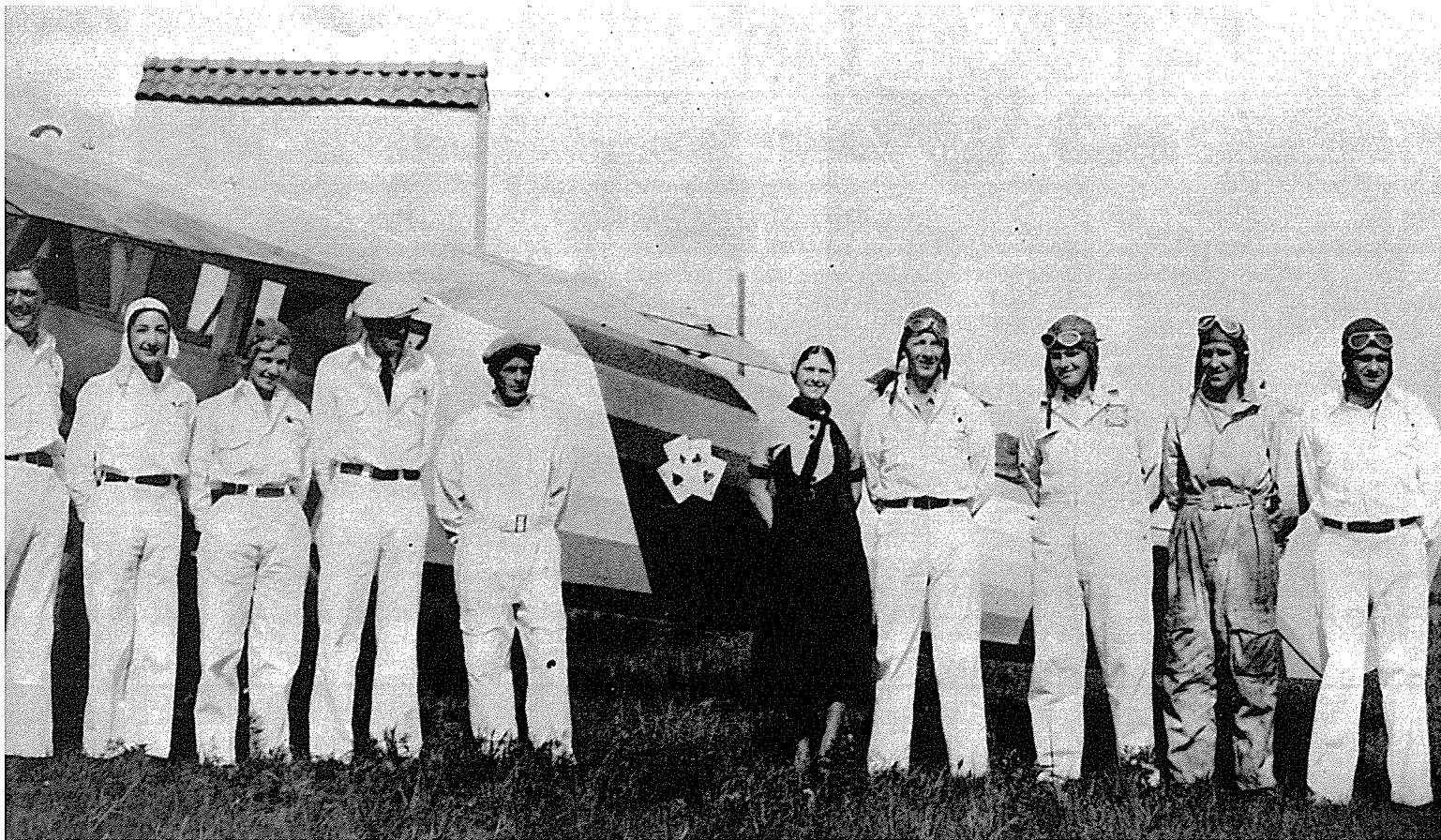
1. Johnny Crowell poses with his Waco ASO, NC 752K, that he flew as a special guest aerobatic performer with the Flying Aces Air Circus. Johnny Crowell flew for the Flying Aces regularly whenever they were within a day's flying time of his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

2. Johnny Crowell, of Charlotte, North Carolina, flying his Waco ASO while standing on the wingwalk, one of his several spectacular acts with modified airplanes. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

3. Stearman C-3R, NC 662K, owned and flown by Jessie Woods. This was the airplane Jessie Woods liked to pilot the best. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

4. Hot air balloon being prepared for an ascension and parachute jump by Dale "Duke" Widiger. (Photo: Jessie Woods)





Members of the Flying Aces Air Circus pose with the Ryan B-1 Brougham. Note patch on fabric of fuselage below four aces insignia where a bull poked his horns through. L to r: Jimmie Woods; Jessie Woods; Pearl Sherrard; Ed Sherrard; Burton Carey; Flora Widiger; "Duke" Widiger; Wilson "Soup" Sadler; Herb Healey; and Carl Winstead. (Photo: Jessie Woods)

raised drastically. Waivers were required, and all flying acts were moved further away from the crowd.

Jessie Woods recalled, "How are you going to perform a wing-walking act at 1500 feet? How could you do it so high that no one could see it? They had so many rules, just choking us down. They got very nasty about us being there. Every time we did something a CAA inspector would run up and jump into the cockpit to check and see what we were doing. They did not want air shows anymore, too sensational. All they wanted then was to educate the people to the safety of flight and encourage the growth of business aviation and the airlines. But what they did not realize was that there would not have been any airlines if there had not been people like us. We kept aviation before the eyes of the public and showed airplanes and flying to people all over the country who, otherwise, might not have even been aware that airplanes existed. We developed pilots and mechanics who later went on to the airlines and the military, and who knows how many kids our air show influenced into becoming pilots. The CAA put us out of business, but at least they were gentlemen enough to tell us what they were going to do."²⁵

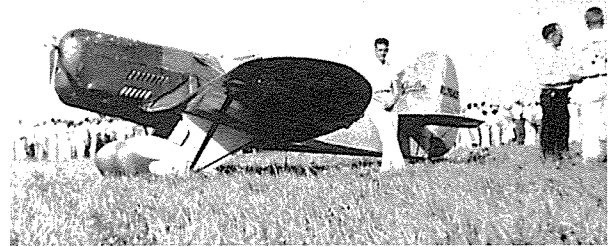
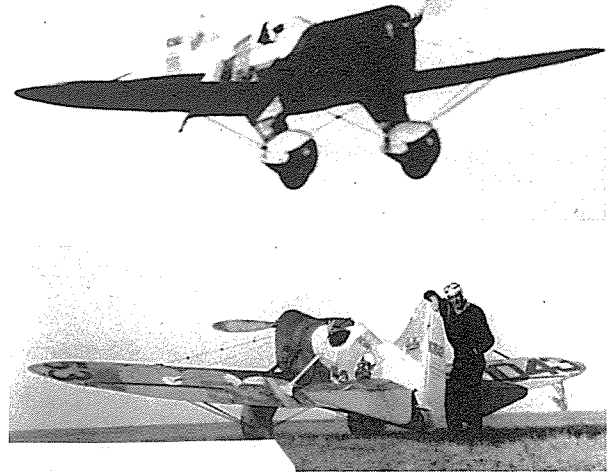
When he realized that they were being forced out of the air show business, Jimmie Woods gradually began selling off the Flying Aces Air Circus equipment and airplanes. They advised all the employees to find themselves a job somewhere else and when they did, to leave the show. They continued to fly air shows through 1938, always honoring their contracts. Near the end Jimmie Woods, once again, had to resort to allowing pilots to come in and fly because they did not have enough left for a full air show. They were operating, once again, on a shoestring, just

like in the early days of the Flying Aces Air Circus. Some of the members of the group had a rough time finding new jobs and Jimmie Woods kept the air show operating until they all were placed, then it quickly folded.

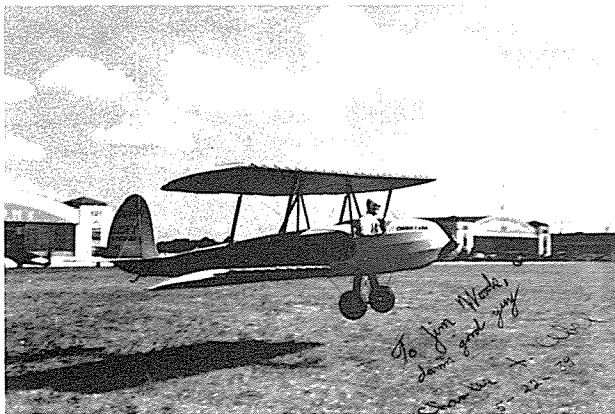
The last performance of the Flying Aces Air Circus was in the fall of 1938 at Kannapolis, North Carolina, near Charlotte. At the time of their closing they had only two of their own airplanes—Jessie's favorite Stearman C-3R, NC 662K and a Taylor E-2 Cub, NC 15003. The workhorse of the air show for many years, the Travel Air 4D, NC 696H, had been destroyed in a crash just a few weeks before. In its nine-year existence, the Flying Aces Air Circus had flown over 480 air shows, with over 300 of them being sponsored by the American Legion.²⁶ Besides these full air show performances, they flew many other shows with only one or two airplanes at small fairs, race tracks, and town celebrations on weekdays between their weekend shows. They flew an air show every week, summer and winter, except for the few times they were weathered out, a truly magnificent accomplishment. The Flying Aces Air Circus toured most of the United States except for the far west and the New England states, flying as far west as Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming and extensively covering the south, southeast, midwest, and east. Jessie Woods recalled that they had performed in 53 different towns in Texas, some of them two or three times, and it was gratifying to go back to a town and draw a larger crowd than they had the first time. The Flying Aces Air Circus usually avoided the major cities, particularly in the northern part of the country, and performed in the smaller towns and rural areas, which may account for its lack of notoriety today. They performed before crowds as small as just a few hundred people, on a ranch in New Mexico, to over 18,000 in the larger cities in the southeast.



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1. Captain Charles Abel who occasionally flew with the Flying Aces Air Circus. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
2. Danny Fowlie with the Flying Aces Air Circus' Menasco powered Gee Bee Sportster D, NC 11043. Danny Fowlie was the regular pilot of the Gee Bee during the last few years of the air show. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
3. Captain Charles Abel performed aerobatics in this biplane glider. He occasionally flew for the Flying Aces Air Circus. (Photo: Jessie Woods)
4. Chinese student pilot painting four aces design on Flying Aces Air Circus airplane at Wichita, Kansas. (Photo: Jessie Woods)



4.

After the Flying Aces Air Circus folded the personnel scattered all over the country and today only a few of them are still alive. Jimmie and Jessie Woods continued in aviation for many more years operating the airport at Camden, South Carolina, flying at Charlotte, North Carolina, conducting a non-college CPT program at Rock Hill, South Carolina, in 1940 and later in War Training Service. After WW II Jimmie and Jessie Woods retired to a Lake Murray, South Carolina, farm where they raised many award-winning, purebred, fancy bantam show chickens. Jimmie Woods passed away January 6, 1959, and Jessie Woods is retired in Sarasota, Florida, where she is still an active pilot. In reflecting on the history of the Flying Aces Air Circus, she remarked, "We were a self-contained unit, well organized, better than most of the other air shows, and we operated continuously for longer than anyone. We were very conscious of creating a good reputation and living up to it. We always flew exactly what we promised we'd do. In general, we were a darn good air show!"²⁷

TYPICAL FLYING ACES AIR SHOW PROGRAM²⁸

- 1:30—Form. Flts & Special Exhibitions
- 2:00—Music by Am Legion Bands & Drum & Bugle Corps
- 2:30—Form. Stunting Exhibition
- 2:40—Dead Motor Landing—Vern Christian
- 2:45—Picking Handkerchief off Ground with Wing Tip of Plane—Vincent Burnett
- 2:50—Wing Walking Exhib.—Miss Dorthea Aiken
- 2:55—Precision Stunting Exhibition—Dan Fowlie
- 3:00—"Dog Fight" Jimmie Woods & Lilio Benvenuti—ex-World War Pilots
- 3:10—Sky Writing Exhib.—Col. Art Goebel
- 3:15—Balloon Bursting Contests—All Pilots
- 3:20—Spot Landing Contests—All Pilots
- 3:25—Precision Stunting and Upside Down Flying—Vincent Burnett
- 3:35—Bombing a New Automobile from the Air
- 3:45—Stunting with Motor Completely Shut Off—Vern Christian
- 3:55—Free for All Air Race—All Pilots
- 4:05—Barrel-rolling and Spinning Plane with Miss Jessie Martin Standing on Top Wing
- 4:15—Demon. of How Not to Fly the Airplane—Kenneth Hunter
- 4:25—Speed Dashes and Power Dives at 300 Miles an Hour—Dan Fowlie
- 4:30—Airplane Tug-O'-War
- 4:35—Sky Writing Exhibition—Harold Neumann and Art Davis
- 4:45—Parachute Jump by Clem Sohn the "Bat Man" Using Home-made Wings
- 4:55—10,000-Foot Delayed Parachute Drop by Jack Huber Who Releases a Stream of Flour to Enable Spectators to Follow His Downward Plunge

In Conjunction With American Legion National Convention Held at Curtiss-Steinberg Airport

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Clem Sohn in his famous "Bat Wing" parachute jumping rig with a Waco ASO. (Photo: Jessie Woods)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Lowe, shown here with Jessie Woods during the EAA Sun and Fun Fly In at Lakeland, Florida, in January 1977, is a pilot for United Air Lines and is currently flying as a First Officer on the Boeing 737 out of O'Hare Field, Chicago, Illinois. He has had two previous articles published in the JOURNAL, "The 481st TFS in Vietnam, A Personal Account" and "The China Stearmans." He is an active antiquer, serving as the Illinois State Director for the AAA, the President of the Stearman Restorers Association, and as a member of the Board of Directors of the Antique Airplane Association Airpower Museum. He owns a 1942 Stearman N2S-3.