

THE TIME IS NOW!

This article is not for the casual reader; it is for the thinking Member of the Society, one who is truly interested in aviation history. It is not for the "button collector" type nor anyone whose self-interest is placed before civic duty or fraternal cooperation.

Every organization--whether it is a business operated for gain, a professional association, or a group such as the American Aviation Historical Society--must show progress on the right side of the ledger each year, or it will cease to exist.

The A.A.H.S. has been extremely fortunate in this respect. It has paid its own way and prospered--if that is the proper word--for the last eight years in terms of membership growth. In that time the Society has grown from a handful of historically-minded aviation enthusiasts into a responsible organization with more than 1400 Members in the United States and abroad. This sevenfold increase in membership has provided the funds required to publish an enlarged and improved JOURNAL, each year containing more illustrative material, varied in nature to suit those with specialized interests.

There has been more widespread communication between those belonging to the Society, and an increasing number of regional and local groups have been formed, allowing Members to become personally acquainted with each other. It has brought persons of similar interest together for mutual benefit--if only through the medium of correspondence. But perhaps most importantly, the Society has been instrumental in bringing into the record portions of history which, without the efforts of our Members, would have become clouded with the passage of time and perhaps irretrievably lost.

There is a limit to the time that an organization such as ours can be expected to endure--without some increasingly progressive aim to keep it vitally alive. The average lifetime of similar independent technical, historical and professional groups in the United States has been estimated to be a scant twelve years. The A.A.H.S., with its nearly eight years of steady growth, would seem to be over the hump. However, we are now approaching the critical point where a more vigorous participation--at the local "grass roots" level--is necessary to ensure that both present and prospective members will continue to be interested in the Society. If interest should begin to lag, membership will inevitably drop--and the work of years can easily go down the drain. Our organization is now mature enough to be judged on what it accomplishes, not on what it is.

Those very accomplishments must be made by the effort of the individual. Although administration of the Society and the publication of its JOURNAL is of necessity on the shoulders of a few, it is the individual who brings history to these pages. Each article is the result of many man-hours of labor spent on researching, compiling, writing and documenting by a single person, though in many cases he receives help of various kinds from others.

Many suggestions can be made for the ways in which the individual can, like the quail hunter, flush "birds" out of the brush. In this case the "birds" are items of unrecorded history, and the brush is the entire background of human endeavor. Communities all over the world include people who have, in the last 60 years, witnessed aviation history in the making, participated in the building of the machines and equipment, prepared them for flight, photographed the personalities and situa-

tions, and have felt the joy or despair of success or failure.

All of the history of aviation has not been recorded in books, nor documented in collections or museums. There is a vast and untold amount still dormant at the local level. Your own community may have one or more people who were active in and made significant contributions to commercial or military aviation of these six decades. By seeking them out and recording their stories, you can help fill-in the saga of flight. In so doing you will receive a large "dividend", the enjoyment of sharing these eyewitness experiences with them. And this sharing is greatly increased in company with other Members.

It has been said that most people are reticent to talk about themselves. However, quite the reverse is true. One only needs to be given the proper set of circumstances; once the barrier is down, the flood of words comes forth. But it does require a cool head to politely and firmly keep the conversation within the channel of the subject.

Many pioneer airmen will balk at preparing any sort of address before a formal gathering, and even when they do so, the speeches are many times kept on a lofty plane with references of admiration for the efforts of others, omission of details derogatory to their own or other performances, and a limited amount of information is given because the speaker feels that details would bore his listeners.

But in an atmosphere of informality and for a sincerely interested audience that same speaker may discourse at length and freely upon his participation in important events. Log-books, photo albums, letters and other documents will pour forth to stimulate the memory and add to the whole picture. In a sense, memory is as a skein of yarn--pull one end free and it may unravel easily into a single strand, but once knotted, the strands may only be broken. Also, as is so often the case, two or more people brought together will remind each other of names, places and events, far beyond the capacity of just one.

It is necessary, though, to remind our Members of the passage of time. The bare fact is, O Reader, that within a relatively few years we shall have no pioneer airmen to bear witness. The 60th Anniversary of the first flight of the Wright Brothers occurs this year. Those daredevil exhibitionists and barnstormers who created the sport of flying and showed the world, the cities and villages, their first airplanes, in the days before WWI, are men well into their 70s and over.

Our apologies for having to mention this, and it is in no sense macabre, but a fact of life. One of our Members has carried on a diligent correspondence with WW I airmen over the last six years. His mission has been to locate the flyers of the U.S. Air Service, Navy and Marine Corps, and for this date, some 44 years after WWI, he has had remarkable success in finding them. But he frequently remarks that the attrition rate is increasing rapidly. Bear in mind that these men of aviation were for the most part in their early twenties in 1918. Today about half have gone to the Great Beyond. Times marches

on.

It is sad, but also a measure of the headlong rush of modern technology, that barely 60 years after the first powered flight, we are seeing the passage of a personal brand of aviation from the scene. Oh, yes, more millions of people fly more millions of passenger miles, and there are thousands of business aircraft, and many thousands of people still engaged in aviation. But the emphasis has shifted.

The individual flights that become world news are not commonplace, and bravery and determination are needed as never before, as for example Astronaut Gordon Cooper's brilliant orbit and descent. Yet his flight was the culmination of an effort made by thousands of men and women, workers and scientists, and untold millions of dollars. Indeed, one gets lost in the statistics.

The airline captain and his crew are in charge of ever larger and more luxurious airplanes which fly from city to city at greater speeds, or conversely stated, in less and less time. But before takeoff on a trans-world journey the preparation for the flight must begin many hours before. The time will come when a New York to Paris flight of an hour and a half will require programming to the second, a process beginning many days before. Lindbergh's careful preparation, with a map from which he trimmed all excess paper to save weight, will have given way to the computer.

Likewise, in the days before WW II there was some significance to a transcontinental Bendix Trophy Race that pitted man against man (or woman) in a sort of sporting chance at victory and the prize money. But, and with all due respect to the physical endurance and skillful piloting performed in a "Crusader", where is the sport in flying from L.A. Tower to N.Y. Tower in 2 hours and 58 minutes by 3 military jets?

The point we are trying to make here is not to bring back the good old days, but that the golden age of flying of individual effort, of events of personal historical import, has come and faded in a scant 60 years. And the people who saw and did these events are also fading from the scene. There will be spectacular feats yet to come, flights to the moon, perhaps to other nearby planets, in the comparatively immediate future. But have we documented, examined, and fitted into proper perspective all of the history of aviation of that 60 years? And have we derived the maximum inspiration from those individuals who labored so hard and dared so much in previous decades?

Much has been said here and elsewhere of the need for oral history, the tape recorded interviews. Admittedly the real pleasure in this comes at the time of the interview, when associations are recalled, gestures of expression are made, and photographs and personal mementos pored over. However, after the recording has been made it should be put to use. It can be loaned to others, singly and in groups, to listen to and enjoy. But to be of real benefit to the recorded history of aviation, it should be transcribed or brought to paper, and we make the pitch to publish them here for posterity. Although it is a time-consuming process and even requires some skill to do, transcribing is a must in order to obtain widespread dissemination of the information.

One of the most discouraging aspects of research is to find that the personal photograph album, log-books and other documents belonging to an aviator have been destroyed after that person has passed on. There is some truth in an old proverb that a prophet is without honor in his own home, and many times the true value of personal papers is not recognized. This is still another reason for expounding over and over again--contact those people now, before it is too late.

There are numerous photographs--some of great interest and historical import--tucked away in forgotten albums and scrapbooks. To cite an example, an A.A.H.S. Member was casually informed one day by a business associate who happened to see a copy of the JOURNAL on his

desk, that "his father had been a flying cadet and had a couple of albums that he did not think were of any use." Upon investigation, these albums proved to be a nearly complete photographic record of cadets and machines at Love Field, Texas, in 1918. They had been made on glass plate negatives, sharp and clear. Not the most startling find in the world, but material highly valued as source data.

Also, one of our Members visited a San Diego newspaper one year and the custodian of the still photos mentioned a large group of glass plate negatives in a drawer about to be discarded as of no use to the paper. These were a very excellent series of photographs made at North Island in the early days of Glenn Curtiss and his flying school there.

Such records, and personal papers are a very real problem in storage, to private individuals and to business concerns. But regardless of the problem, the alternative, the unknowing destruction of them must be prevented. And when this is accomplished, and having found a storage place for them, the items must be identified, catalogued and collated with other collected material, a job quite beyond the staffs of most institutions, public or private. It is therefore an immense field wherein A.A.H.S. Members can be of aid.

One of the purposes of this Society, and part of the Articles of Incorporation, states "...to stimulate interest and aid in the education of individuals and organizations concerning the influence of aviation on world affairs." Once in a while we need to be reminded that we are not just a collection of statistics, and that there are many uses to which our knowledge can be put. To keep from being just a collection of statistics, means must be found to disseminate the information to those in need of such documentation in the objective writing of history.

What we have stated in the foregoing may sound like work, and indeed there must needs be some time devoted to it, but this can be a real pleasure. In fact, most of the Members of this Society devote their time to it as a hobby; very few make their living from this field of endeavor. However, one point to be reiterated again and again, is that it is enjoyed ever so much more in company with other persons of similar interests.

One of the more pleasurable uses of our knowledge is in helping those who are restoring old aircraft, by finding parts to be used as patterns in making new ones, establishing configuration, color scheme, or background history. One of us, with an outstanding collection of restored and replica aircraft once made the remark that "seeing one of these old crates fly will bring out of the woodwork more source data than you ever imagined existed." And he has been proven right time and again. While modern technology has increased the efficiency of power plants, and rendered materials of great strength and workability, means can be found to incorporate these into replicas without making garish imitations of them. Any reconstruction worthy of the effort should be as authentic as possible--the cause of history is not well served by out-of-scale wings, fuselage or other portions merely for the sake of expediency.

An area greatly mismanaged in this respect is that of color schemes. In spite of the best efforts of some very well qualified experts on naval aviation markings a recent restoration was marred by the whims of a high-ranking officer in charge of the project, and erroneous colors as well as unit markings were applied. Also, with all due respect to the valiant men of the Lafayette Flying Corps and the Lafayette Escadrille, there were other insignias used on Nieuports besides the famous Indian head. A.A.H.S. Members will do well to join with our brothers of the Cross & Cockade and other groups in bringing authenticity to these restorations.

In summary, the Society may feel that it has done well so far, but there is much yet to do, to be measured by our accomplishments. But it must be done now; next year may be too late.