

Flying Pioneers

By HAROLD E. MOREHOUSE

CHRISS J. PETERSON

Chriss J. Peterson was born at Albert Lea, Minnesota September 19, 1877, one of a large family of children. He attended local schools and at an early age enlisted in Co. F, 1st South Dakota Volunteer Infantry at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and served in the Spanish-American War in 1898. He re-enlisted as Corporal in the 11th Volunteer Cavalry, Troop K on July 31, 1899 and was discharged from the service June 30, 1901.

Following this, Peterson decided to go west and take up ranch life. Locating in Utah, he worked for some time at various jobs, including that of cook on ranches there. He then took up barbering and located in Tucker, Utah.

In November, 1910 a friend induced Peterson to go with him to Denver, Colorado to attend an air meet being held there between November 16th and 19th. Peterson had never seen any flying and was not particularly interested, but finally consented to go. Three Wright aviators, Ralph Johnstone, Arch Hoxsey and Walter Brookins had been engaged to fly at Overland Park near Denver for this event, but before the two men started on their trip, they learned that Johnstone had been killed at Denver. They left hurriedly hoping to get there before all the aviators had crashed to their deaths. After Johnstone's death, Hoxsey took over and did the flying and Brookins departed, escorting Johnstone's body to his home in Kansas City. As a result, Peterson and his

friend saw Hoxsey fly on the remaining days of the event.

As soon as Peterson saw Hoxsey in the air, he was so thrilled and overcome by the spectacle, he told his friend, "Man, there's real sport. Some day I'm going to fly like that." His enthusiastic decision made during Hoxsey's flights remained, and the following year he joined with other aviation enthusiasts in an unsuccessful attempt to start an aeronautical venture in Denver. Peterson's determination to learn to fly kept growing, and by 1913 he had saved enough to go to Dayton where he enrolled for flight instruction at the Wright Company Flying School. He started his lessons in mid-September from company instructor Oscar Brindley. Other students there at that time were Howard Rinehart, Lindop E. Brown and Albert B. Gaines. Peterson was an apt pupil and made excellent progress. By mid-October Peterson and Gaines took flying license tests together, Peterson being issued License No. 270, October 18, 1913 at Simms Station, Ohio on a school Wright airplane. His test flights and the required spot landings were unusually accurate and well executed, landing precisely on the mark every time, to the admiration of the judges and spectators.

Upon completing the course, and his tests at Dayton, Peterson returned to Denver where he had been engaged to fly a plane built by the General Aviation Company of that city. This firm had been formed in October 1910, headed by E. J. Cavanaugh and a number of local business men. They proposed to manufacture and sell aeroplanes and their first machine, a monoplane, was completed in 1911 but was not successful. This was followed by a modified Wright-copy, designed and constructed by Arthur C. Wagner. It was ready to test fly in 1912, equipped with floats, and Ivy Baldwin made numerous, short, partially successful flights with this machine at Sloane Lake for the remainder of that year and into 1913, many ending in smashups.

When Peterson joined the firm late in October 1913, he brought with him much needed firsthand experience and judgment in flying and handling Wright machines. After several necessary changes and adjustments, Peterson was able to make satisfactory flights with this machine as a land plane. Having a 50 foot span, it was, with minor changes, essentially a standard Wright biplane. It was powered by an 8 cylinder Hall-Scott 60 hp engine driving two Wright-type pusher propellers by the usual dual chain transmission. The plane had been designed as a single seater, with the seat to the left of the engine instead of the right, as was customary on standard Wright machines. During the second week of flying, Peterson carried Arthur Wagner as a passenger on what may have been the first passenger flight in Colorado. At that time this was considered quite a feat, due to the natural elevation of Denver and the rarefied atmosphere. On November 14th, Peterson treated the people of Denver and vicinity to flights from the Municipal Golf Links under the auspices of the Rocky Mountain News and the Denver Times. This was followed by several additional public demonstrations in Denver and nearby communities, but exhibition receipts were not enough to save the firm from financial failure near the end of 1913. Cavanaugh, Peterson and Wagner carried on, however, with this plane and continued to make local aviation history as their finances would permit.

During the winter months of 1913-1914 Peterson made several flights when he almost froze in his open seat. He had taken employment at other jobs and flying was done as a sport and when they could obtain exhibition



Chriss J. Peterson: Early Wright Pilot - World War I Instructor. (Photo - Mrs. Chriss J. Peterson)

engagements. Over the spring and summer months of 1914 Peterson made some 175 flights, many at local fairs and carnivals. At various times he carried local news photographers who took pictures of Denver and surrounding countryside from the air.

This activity continued through the summer of 1915 when he again flew for the Denver Post at Lakeside. Special trains were run to the park and admission was free. There Peterson's flying was witnessed and enjoyed by huge crowds on weekends and holidays. This continued through the 1915 season, and in 1916 he and Wagner were planning to open a flying school in addition to flying at fairs and special local occasions. During 1916 Peterson made some exhibition flights at night with fireworks attached to the plane.

Just before the U. S. entry into World War I, there was talk of raising a local subscription in Denver and vicinity, to make Peterson and the Wagner plane available for free instruction to all local Army Air Service enlistees, but apparently this plan did not materialize. Later, in May 1917, Lt. William Russell arrived in Denver and a training unit was planned in which Peterson and the local plane were to be made a part, but nothing came of this venture. Peterson did some flying there during the spring and early summer, and about July 1917 he joined the U. S. Army Signal Corps Aviation School at Chanute Field, Rantoul, Illinois as a civilian flying instructor. On December 15, 1917 Peterson moved south with the school to their winter location at Park Field, Millington, Tennessee, where he remained until all civilian instructors were discharged from the service on December 21, 1918.

In November 1918 Peterson had applied for a transfer to the Air Mail Service, but his application was merely "put on file." After his discharge from instruction service, he did some barnstorming, but that field was so overcrowded he soon decided to give up the flying game.

Peterson had a desire to retire to a safer and quieter life, and in 1919 bought a farm near Scottville, Michigan. He never lost his interest in aviation, however, and occasionally did some flying with local pilots when given the opportunity. He was also a guest at various state aviation meets and functions on numerous occasions. After gradually failing in health, Peterson passed away at the hospital in Ludington, Michigan, September 8, 1953 of a heart ailment at age 76. He was survived by his wife and three sisters. There were no children. He was buried in Lakeview Cemetery, Ludington, Michigan.

Flying Pioneer Chriss J. Peterson deserves much credit for the part he played in the development of early American aviation progress. It was through his enthusiasm and faith in the new science of flight, that he joined the now celebrated fraternity of those who dared to take part in helping to create the aviation industry and air travel the world accepts and enjoys today. In World War I he answered the call to serve his country and taught many of the aviators who served in that conflict. During his flying career, Peterson had few accidents, all of a minor nature. Somehow he never found time to join the Early Birds organization.

As one of the early Wright Brothers' students, Chriss J. Peterson's name appears on the famed Wright Memorial Plaque near Dayton, Ohio, at the site of the field where he learned to fly.

Much credit is due Mrs. Peterson for her assistance in preparing this biography and supplying the photograph.

ALBERT ELTON

Born in Youngstown, Ohio, August 9, 1888, Albert Elton became interested in automobiles and later was the Cadillac dealer there.

Becoming interested in aviation in May 1911 he



Albert Elton: Early Wright Pilot.

enrolled as a student at the Wright School at Simms Station, Dayton, Ohio in August, with A. L. Welsh as his instructor. While training he placed his order for a Wright Model B plane, which was ready by the time he finished his course.

Elton then wanted to fly the plane home and induced Welsh to go with him. On September 3rd they flew to Columbus, a distance of 70 miles, September 4th to Trinway, Ohio, making stops at Pickerington, Newark and Wakarusa, and reached Youngstown September 5th after stopping at Canton and Salem. The total distance for the trip was 244 miles, which was the first long distance two-man trip in the United States.

On September 9th Elton flew an exhibition engagement at Ashtabula, Ohio, making a 22-minute flight over the city and vicinity. About October 1st he went to St. Louis, Missouri to enter a small local meet at Kinloch Field to be held October 14th to the 21st. He had not flown for his license up to this time, so while there, on October 8th, 1911, he obtained Certificate No. 75 on his Wright machine.

Walter Brookins was flying at Kinloch at that time and Elton took some additional instruction from him. On October 7th he started booking exhibitions through the AERO Magazine Pilots' Advertising Section. He did some flying at St. Louis during the meet and made one flight over St. Louis. He remained there through October, continuing his practice under Brookins' observation. Following this he flew a few more exhibitions late in the fall season.

In the early summer of 1912, Elton became one of the proprietors of the Silver Lake Aviation Company at Silver Lake, Ohio, a summer resort near Akron, Ohio. There he did some flying, along with F. W. Kemper, another Wright pilot. Their contract was to give exhibitions and carry passengers and he finished out the season there.

Apparently Elton did not engage in flying during 1913, but in 1914 he organized the Elton Aviation Company, Youngstown, Ohio, including H. P. McQuiston and Howard Rinehart, to engage in exhibitions and passenger carrying. Elton's Wright Model B was used, and they also purchased the Wright Model E single propeller exhibition machine, the only plane of this model ever produced. After this venture, Elton gave up aviation. An Early Bird, Elton is still living at Eau Gallie, Florida. While his flying was not extensive, he does deserve to be listed among the pioneers who took a gamble on aviation and did his bit. His name appears on the Wright Memorial.