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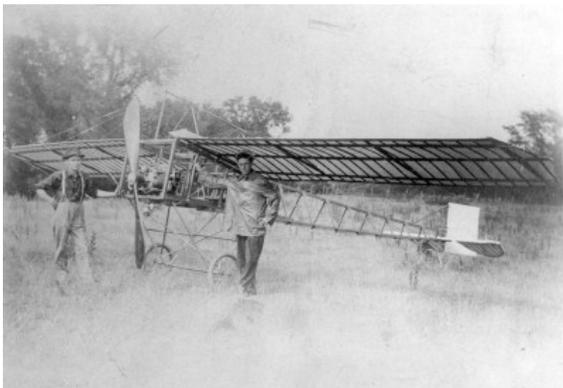
Posted July 5, 2010

Century of Flight – Part I

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NOTE: This is the first of 10 Ramblin' columns I'm writing from July 5 to Sept. 6 about the first 100 years of flight in Iowa.

Art Hartman flew his fragile airplane only 10 feet in the air — the height of a basketball hoop — and came crashing down. That was enough to put him into the record books as the first Iowan to fly a heavier-than-air craft.



Hartman's achievement — witnessed by five spectators early the morning of May 10, 1910, at the Burlington Country Club — is being celebrated this year as the "100th Anniversary of Powered Flight in Iowa."

Dozens of events in the state, including Fly Iowa on Sept. 18 in Burlington, pay tribute to the legacy of flight in Iowa.

Flight is a big deal if you think about it, from early airborne pioneers to entrepreneurs to the way many of us prefer to travel these days. Which is why each Monday, today through Labor Day, I'm taking a look at a century of flight in Iowa.

Even today, you can catch yourself craning your neck at an airplane overhead. You can find folks gathered at airport viewing areas, including the end of the runway at The Eastern Iowa Airport, simply watching planes take off and land. You still hear of adults finally flying for the first time in their lives.

This fascination with flight usually takes off at an early age.

Orville and Wilbur Wright, acknowledged as the first men to fly, played with a toy "helicopter" while growing up in Cedar Rapids.

Amelia Earhart, the world-famous aviator of the 1930s, saw her first airplane at the Iowa State Fair in 1908.

I recall laying on my back in the yard watching white jet contrails streak across the sky in the 1950s.

"I was the little kid on the Waverly airport fence watching nothing happen," says Tim Busch of Cedar Rapids. "A couple of pilots felt sorry for me, so they gave me rides."

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Tim, 52, serves as president of the Iowa Aviation Promotion Group, which puts on Fly Iowa. He also started his own business, Iowa Flight Training, in 2003 to teach people to fly.

He's agreed to give me a first lesson, so stay tuned.

With more than 3,000 hours in the pilot's seat, Tim knows more than a little about flying. Would he have flown in Hartman's single-wing,

translucent-skinned Tinkertoy-like airplane?

"No, no," Tim says, laughing and shaking his head. "I don't think so."

Taking to the air was a dangerous experiment a century ago. Historical newsreels show early flying machines crumbling apart before they even leave the ground. Consider that 29 pioneer aviators around the world crashed and died in 1910.

While the Wright brothers first flew at Kitty Hawk, N.C., in 1903, several sources say a third American didn't fly until March 8, 1908. (Dr. William Christmas in Washington, D.C.) The Wright brothers kept their achievement low-key, struggling for five years to get a patent.

Folks like Hartman, who became a balloonist at age 15, pursued their dreams. At 21, he built and flew his monoplane.

He was quickly followed in 1910 by three other aviators in Iowa — Eugene Ely (a Williamsburg native), James "Bud" Mars in Sioux City and Thomas Baldwin in Iowa City.



Ely would become the first man to take off from a ship on Nov. 14, 1910, and, in a separate attempt, to land on one Jan. 18, 1911. He would die in a crash in Georgia on Oct. 19, 1911.

Hartman, for his part, "flew" until he died in 1971 at age 82.

He rebuilt and sold crashed planes after World War I.

He began an airplane manufacturing company in 1928.

In 1956, at age 67, he hooked 50 hydrogen balloons to a bicycle and soared 150 feet into the air, 15 times higher than his historical flight.



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