

The Story of Billy Robinson



Billy Robinson's Air plane And Backers

On a chilly, gray March afternoon, an aeroplane fluttered down from the sky like a falling leaf. It came in erratic swoops and dives, as though some hand were trying in vain to regulate it. The plane landed with a resounding crash in a field near Ewart. W. G. Cleland, who was nearest the scene of tragedy, reported that there was a great explosion with flames shooting 300 feet in the air. Billy Robinson, daring pioneer aviator, had crashed to his death and with him had crashed the hopes of the infant industry which had been built up around him. The date was March 11, 1916.

Billy had taken off about 3:30 p.m., in an attempt to break the existing American altitude record, which was supposed to be 17,000 feet at that time. He had already been up to 14,000 feet. His attempt accentuated a long standing dispute between Billy and his directors. Billy was determined to fly, and they were equally determined to keep him on the ground. When the fatal day came Billy announced that he would try for the record if he received a telegram of authorization from the Aero Club of America in Chicago. The tele-

gram came through, J. L. Fellows, who had been appointed observer, sealed the barograph on Billy's homemade biplane and he took off, full of hope and cheer.

It is remembered that the day was chilly and cloudy. Word of the attempt to break the record got around and the Saturday afternoon crowd often stopped to watch the plane as it worked its way upward, now momentarily obscured by the shifting clouds and again breaking through to clear visibility. Up and up it went until it was a mere speck in the sky and people were beginning to say that surely Billy had broken that record when Ed Brande stuck his head out of the window of his second story office on Broad street near Third avenue and shouted that word had just come over the telephone that Billy was down. Hal Wells, the Aeroplane company manager, was the first to take off for the scene of the tragedy in J. L. Fellows' Cadillac. Following closely were Dr. O. F. Parish in his car, accompanied by DeMotto, bookkeeper for the company and the writer, as representative of the Grinnell Herald. The coroner, Dr. J. H.

Friend, came in F. E. Spaulding's car and others followed closely.

When they arrived on the scene the biplane was still burning fiercely and the blackened body of the aviator had been removed from the wreckage and was lying on the ground close by. The body was brought back to Grinnell in the Parish car.

The Herald issued an extra which was on the streets early in the evening. There had been a college play at the Colonial theatre that night and as the audience left at the close of the play they found the paper awaiting them at the door. The whole town was moved as it seldom has been before or since.

The final chapter was written when a group of his close business associates in the Aeroplane company, J. L. Fellows, Fred Spaulding, H. L. Beyer, E. B. Brande, O. F. Parish and P. E. Somers, carried the casket out of the Methodist church, following largely attended funeral services.

The body rests in Hazelwood cemetery where now stands a granite slab split from a lone boulder which a glacier deposited a mile and a half from the

city. Inset is a bronze memorial tablet, bearing the inscription:

This stone marks the resting place of
of
William C. Robinson
Pioneer non-stop flyer
and second
authorized carrier of air mail
He met death in his plane a few miles south of Grinnell when making an altitude flight March 11, 1916
Erected by those who honor the memory of Billy Robinson

There has been endless speculation as to what caused the fatal crash, but no one will ever know for sure. It is known that Billy had a weak heart, which had given him trouble at the 14,000 foot elevation. He was also handicapped by having the sight of only one eye, having lost the other in an accident. The fact that a cushion from the plane was found a mile from the scene of the actual crash has prompted some to believe that Billy had thrown it out in an effort to secure better visibility. One theory is that he may have been blinded by a hail stone in his good eye. Possibly his heart failed under the strain of the high altitude. Maybe the motor went out and the plane could not be controlled. Perhaps the wings iced up. A physician expressed the belief that the rapid descent caused high blood pressure which resulted in cerebral hemorrhage. Everyone hopes that Bill was unconscious when he hit the ground. He had always claimed that driving an aeroplane was as safe as walking down the street, because if you had trouble all you had to do was to come down.

No one ever knew whether or not Billy broke the record, as the barograph was destroyed with the plane, but friends like to think that he accomplished his objective before death overtook him.

Whatever caused the tragedy, it snuffed out the life of a genius who had made great strides forward in the then infant science of aviation on his own initiative.

There is always the possibility that had it not been for the death of Billy Robinson Grinnell might have gone on to become a great aviation center. He was a

man who brought to the industry new and original ideas He had designed a new type radial motor. There had been radial motors before, but Billy's contained practical innovations. Professor Grant Gale has written that the motor "would have been revolutionary even ten years later."

There is now on exhibition at the college a radial motor later made by the Dodge Tool company, a Grinnell enterprise headed by W. S. Dodge, following Billy's plans and drawings. This is supposed to be an exact duplicate of the motor destroyed when Billy crashed. Some of Billy's original plans and drawings are also in possession of Professor Gale

On a card signed by W. S. Dodge, F. J. Whinery and Grant Ramsey, trustees of the Dodge Tool company, which accompanied the motor when it was placed on display at the college, the statement appears that the motor had been built at the request of the Aircraft Division of the Ordnance Department of the United States government and had been given a block test at McCook Field, Dayton, Ohio, in August, 1918. The statement continued: "The Armistice was signed before any decision was made regarding using air cooled motors."

The company languished after Billy's death. There was an effort to carry on, but the spark was gone and finally operations were suspended. It is understood that patents had been applied for, but there is no record available that they were ever granted.

The career of Billy Robinson reads like a Horatio Alger story except for its tragic ending. If the Alger formula had been followed Billy would have become the head of his own great company and found wealth, success and happiness.

For the following account of Billy's career, the writer is indebted to a paper written by Professor Gale for the Poweshiek club some years ago and also to an article by the late W. G. Ray in *The Palimpsest*, the monthly publication of the State Historical society issued in September of 1930

Mr. Ray described Billy in the following words:

"Billy Robinson, even in his maturity, was not a large man.

Small of stature, he was nevertheless endowed with endurance much in excess of the physical proportions of his body. His quiet, courteous manner enabled him to meet his friends with dignified familiarity. And he had an innate enthusiasm that imparted a certain charm to his demeanor. Many who knew him remembered the light which kindled in his eye when he spoke of his work and plans. Indeed, next to his mechanical genius this enthusiasm for his profession combined with unlimited courage, was the most prominent trait of his character."

Billy was a poor boy. His mother, Mrs. Franklin Robinson, with her three sons and a daughter came to live in Grinnell in 1896 when Billy was about 12 years old, having been born in Redfield, South Dakota on Sept. 24, 1884. His father had died in Florida and the boys helped to support the family. Billy worked for Walter Preston, Grinnell's first "handy man" and according to Mr. Ray, lived with Preston when the family moved to Oskaloosa. After his two brothers were killed in a mine explosion, the mother and daughter returned to Grinnell to live.

Professor Gale writes of these early days as follows:

"Like the Wright brothers and Glen Curtis he was a bicycle repairman and general tinkerer and handy man de luxe. In his bicycle shop in Grinnell (which he had purchased of Mr. Preston, Ed.) Billy Robinson was busy designing and making his own plane. In the Wright machine used by Orville in New York in 1909, he still had skids instead of wheels . . . Billy Robinson had some special plan for a landing gear and his own ideas for a motor of unique design, and so the little genius of a man went about making his flying machine."

Billy attended Grinnell college for a time but always returned to his chosen work with undiminished zest. Professor Gale described him in those early days, as an "inveterate worker with a violent temper."

"In his little shop on Fourth avenue", continues Professor Gale, "Billy had caught the vision of flying, where I do not know, and with simple tools

and the help of Charles Hink he had constructed a small aeroplane, possibly a glorified glider.

"The original monoplane which he had constructed contained a 60 horse power radial motor built here in Grinnell by Billy. Whether or not Billy ever flew this early plane I do not know. It seems unlikely that Billy would have been so enthusiastic and so ardent without ever having attempted flight, successful or otherwise."

Billy's quiet life in Grinnell was interrupted when the Robinson circus came to town. It was announced by a half page advertisement in The Grinnell Herald of July 10, 1914. Apparently the actual date when the circus came to town was Saturday, July 15 and Billy was there with his monoplane as a featured attraction, which proved so popular that when the circus left town Billy went along.

He did not stay with the circus long but settled in Frankfort, Ind., where he remained only a year. While there, according to The Herald, he flew

his monoplane using the 60 horse power radial motor which he had made in Grinnell but had not used. At Frankfort he met Max Lily, a famous aviator, and spent the winter of 1911 with him in Florida taking flying lessons. They returned to Chicago together in the spring of 1912 and Robinson taught for some time in Lily's school. Then he became associated as a partner with the National Aeroplane company, a manufacturing concern in Chicago and was with them until he returned to Grinnell in December of 1913. He stopped here on his way to Kansas City to start his own aeroplane company. Grinnell business men became interested in the venture and persuaded Billy to stay in Grinnell to found the Grinnell Aeroplane company and a school for training pilots. Stock was issued and subscribed for generously around the square. A stock certificate in Professor Gale's possession is signed by E. B. Brande as president and H. L. Beyer as secretary.

He built his hangar on Eleventh avenue a short distance west of West street, or No.

146, and had his shop on the south side of Commercial street in the building previously used by the Blue Line dray office. He had a monoplane in 1914 and also built the biplane in which he met his death. Billy loved to fly and his plane was a familiar sight over Grinnell and nearby towns. At one time, in 1914, he flew at the Iowa State Fair as a special attraction.

Then on Saturday, Oct. 17, 1914 came the day of his greatest glory, when he set a new American record for continuous flight and also became the second aviator to carry the United States mail. Sponsored by the Des Moines Capital and the Des Moines Tribune he took off from Des Moines that morning at 10:56 bound for Chicago on a non-stop flight. By authority of the government he carried a package of letters from Des Moines and Grinnell. In approximately forty minutes he covered the distance from Des Moines to Grinnell. As he passed over Grinnell the whistles blew and people crowded to the roofs of buildings to wave him on his way. At 12:57 p.m. he was sight-

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ed at Rochester and he was over Clinton at 1:30. He was reported over Sycamore, about thirty miles west of Chicago, at 2:35. Then the clouds closed in so low that he dared not fly below them, and fearing that he might overshoot Chicago and wind up in Lake Michigan he landed at Kentland, Ind., about eighty miles southeast of Chicago at 3:40 p.m. His gasoline supply was too low to venture further.

He was in the air a total of four hours and forty-four minutes and had traveled approximately 390 miles, exceeding the American record by one hundred and twenty five miles. He flew at an average rate of eighty miles an hour which in those days was a spectacular feat.

This feat brought Robinson, and incidentally Grinnell, wide acclaim. While there seems to be no official recognition of this record it was generally accepted and Billy became famous almost overnight.

On Sept. 24, 1918, on the occasion of the dedication of the memorial for Billy Robinson, a local cachet was made and used

on the mail commemorating Billy as the second authorized carrier of mail by air. At that time local philatelists tried to verify this claim with the post-office department through the cooperation of Postmaster A. M. Burton. A letter received from the department states that Billy's claim "is about as good as any others. There were many informal attempts to carry mail prior to this but none on an authorized basis and none of so great a distance."

In its issue of Dec. 28, 1915, The Grinnell Herald published a picture of Billy delivering a 2-pound sample of "Sam Nelson, Jr., Company's" Amber Rice popcorn to Eugene Hardy, "The Popcorn King" in Iowa City. He flew the distance of 65 miles in 46 minutes.

Then came the tragedy, and oblivion. It is fitting, at the time of this centennial celebration, to summarize a chapter in Grinnell history which carried with it a flavor of high romance and adventure.

Billy lived at the corner of Eighth avenue and Park street, across the street north from the

new St. John Lutheran church, in a little brick house which many Grinnell people will remember. The site is now occupied by the new Charles Lindhorst home.

Grinnell, Iowa

Official Population—

1950 Census6,828

Altitude1015 feet

Land Area1½ sq. miles
1440 Acres

Average Rainfall37.40 in.

Average Temperature49.1

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