

The forgotten man who made local aviation history

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Humankind has dreamed of soaring into the skies for as long as it could cast its eyes heavenward. The ancient Greeks, for example, had their myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and fell to his death. Hundreds of centuries later, Judy Garland's Dorothy Gale wondered, "If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why can't I?"

The dream of mechanical flight was finally achieved in Kitty Hawk, N.C., when Orville Wright took a 12-second sustained flight, in an airplane he and his brother Wilbur built, on Dec. 17, 1903. It was the first successful, powered, piloted flight in history.

But just a few years later, when aviation was not just in its infancy but still in its embryonic stage, a local man - not yet old enough to vote - started up the engine on his self-constructed mechanical biplane and managed to temporarily overcome gravity during test flights at the Clinton Country Club golf course.

Warren J. Bauman, a student at Carnegie Institute of Technology and a lifelong Lock Haven resident, was just 20 years old (the voting age was then 21) when he and a friend began building their "aeroplane" on the second floor of a carriage factory on Vesper Street, near the Eagle Hotel, in 1910.

His ambitious plan was to soar above the treetops and church steeples of Lock Haven someday, but first he had to get the plane built and tested.

Bauman began his adventure with a visit to the workshop and factory of aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss in Hammondsport, N.Y., where he and the then-famous Curtiss spent some serious quality time together and Bauman was allowed to pour over "aeroplane" plans and have them explained to him by a Curtiss assistant.

Upon his return home to Lock Haven, Bauman's work began in earnest. In the summer of 1910 he was visited at his carriage factory workshop by an Express reporter.

"When a representative of this paper called at that place he found Mr. Bauman and his assistant, Charles Good... clad in overalls and busily engaged in making the ribs (of the plane) from spruce, which are glued in several parts to prevent warping," The Express reported. "The various pieces of lumber to be used were lying about and the new 24-horsepower Curtiss engine is ready to be placed in the proper position... It was ascertained that barring few exceptions the air craft when completed will be just like a regulation Curtiss biplane."

Bauman told The Express that the plane was scheduled to be completed within a few weeks of the reporter's visit.

"The entire machine with Bauman seated in it will weigh about 400 pounds, but with the powerful, air-cooled engine (Bauman) expects to sail over the city and possibly about the entire West Branch valley with the ease and grace of a bird," the paper reported. "The work of assembling the various parts is a minor matter and in due time all will have an opportunity to see a man-bird sailing over the tree tops."

"Of course I cannot guarantee that I will fly on the first attempt, but there is no real reason why I should not," Bauman told the newspaper. "I will use a Curtiss biplane just the same as other aviators and I believe I have an equal chance with any who make their first tryout. At any rate I will not quit until I fly over the spires of the churches and the tops of houses in Lock Haven. I have made up my mind to become an aviator and barring any unforeseen accidents I expect to give my machine the first trial about the latter part of September."

The first public display of Bauman's aviation project took place about nine months later, in May of 1911, and if spectators came hoping to see the airplane soar into the skies over Lock Haven, they were bound to be disappointed. That is not to diminish Bauman's accomplishment, however. Like the Wrights eight years earlier, he did indeed get his plane gliding over the ground - however briefly - and despite the inexorable pull of gravity.

In picturesque language, The Express described an accounting of Saturday, May 27, 1911, "Aviation Day" at the Country Club in Mill Hall.

"The weather was on hand - beautiful sunshine and blue sky without the least suspicion of a treacherous cross-wind. The fashionable, expectant crowd was there, pleasantly grouped upon a spot chosen for the flight, which was near the perfection of



natural scenery as could be found. The ice cream man was there. The flying machine itself was there, with outstretched wings, timidly facing the crowd. The young aviator, Warren Bauman, in neat professional looking khaki outfit was also there, ready to furnish brain power to his big pet. A lark gaily sailed through the air, over its head, to show how the thing was done, but like a frightened young robin learning to fly, the big bird feared to soar aloft. It made several splendid attempts to learn its strength, gracefully skimming over the ground and once or twice bravely leaving Mother Earth for a moment or two, to quickly settle down with tired fluttering heart to wait another time to sail over the Nittany valley."

Bauman soon thereafter replaced his 24-horsepower motor with a stronger, 40-h.p. converted powerboat engine. By then he had invested over \$700 in the project (the equivalent of over \$16,000 today, based on the Consumer Price Index) and hoped to recoup some of that cash with a paid July 4 exhibition at Hecla Park.

Sadly, however, a shipment containing an electric distributor didn't arrive in time for the Hecla Park gig, and the plane was grounded for the event. In 1912 Bauman sold the plane to an Altoona resident, but retained the engine for use in a motor boat, and the propeller as a souvenir.

Then it was back to Pittsburgh to complete his studies at Carnegie, after which Bauman went to work for Glenn Curtiss - with whom he developed a warm friendship - at his Curtiss Aircraft Corp. There war production brought thriving business to the company.

World War I was the first air war, when both sides used the new aviation technologies against each other in battle, and where arial legends like Germany's "Red Baron" were freshly minted.

When the war ended in 1919, Bauman returned to Lock Haven and opened a Chevrolet dealership during those infant years of the automobile industry.

Ten years after the close of World War I, Glenn Curtiss merged his aircraft company with the competing Wright Aeronautical Corp., a successor to the business concern founded by Orville and Wilbur Wright. The resulting company, Curtiss-Wright, became for a time the largest airplane manufacturer in the U.S. Today it is an aircraft components company.

While Bauman retained his interest in aviation, his focus shifted to other technical and scientific pursuits. During World War II, he built a two-passenger "Victory Buggy," a mini-car that weighed just 225 pounds and was powered by a 1.5 horsepower engine. It had a top speed of 25 miles per hour, got 85 miles to the gallon and was written up in a 1944 issue of Popular Mechanics magazine.

In the early 1950s Bauman took a geiger counter in hand and went in search of uranium in Clinton County. He found several radioactive rocks with odd yellowish tints to them, but none of them had uranium in significant quantities to be of commercial or industrial value.

Mechanically gifted beyond the scope of the average individual, and seemingly driven to tinker with devices and machines even as he entered his 60s and 70s, Bauman built a stereo record player and an electronic piano organ from scratch in 1965, when he was 75.

Finished in ivory and walnut, the Bauman organ had its own amplifier, speaker system and "cross-over electrical network" which "separates the frequencies, or tones and channels - the base tones into one speaker and the higher tones into another."

After its completion, the organ was demonstrated by local developer and organist Steve Poorman at a small party given by Bauman at his longtime home at 116 Second St.

For the remainder of his life Bauman maintained a keen interest in technology and the sciences. He died suddenly at age 79 in 1969 while taking an automobile ride with his daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Donald McElwain of Harrisburg.

At the time of Bauman's death, Piper Aircraft held the record for manufacturing more civilian aircraft at its Lock Haven plant than anywhere else in the world, a fact that brought justifiable fame and fortune to company founder Bill Piper Sr. and his son, Bill Jr.

Still, it is Bauman - who is today largely forgotten - who has bragging rights for the construction of very first plane built in the city.

Like Icarus before him, Warren Bauman dared to dream of breaking past the confines of gravity, a dream he achieved - however briefly - nearly a century ago.

And while the flight of Icarus may have ended more dramatically, Bauman's journey of the air ended with him safely back on the ground, and allowed him to live another six decades to tinker and tool to his heart's content.

Few could want for more than that.

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