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opinion

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Gibson House, 146 Clarence Street

Barry F. King

LANDMARKS

Air pioneer mounted a saddle on his maiden flight

Geoffrey Castle

The house at 146 Clarence Street is the former William Wallace Gibson residence. It is a typical Italianate two-storey structure built around 1885, with some later additions. William Gibson, however, was by no means a typical resident.

Born in Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1874, Gibson came to Saskatchewan as a youngster. He became interested in kite-flying and, in 1904, made a working model airplane using a window-blind roller to propel it. Encouraged with its success, Gibson designed a four-cylinder, two-cycle, 50-horsepower engine and airframe. He had to be secretive about the project because at that time anyone aspiring to fly was generally considered crazy.

The project proved costly but fortunately Gibson had some luck with a gold mining claim on the Elk River on Vancouver Island, which he sold in 1907 for $10,000. This enabled him to have the Hutchison Brothers machine shop in Victoria complete his engine. Gibson built his airplane in the coach house of his Clarence Street home and made the first flight ever on the Island from Dean Heights Farm, just south of Mount Tolmie.

This first all-Canadian-built airplane was provided with two 20-foot wings covered with blue silk which Fred Jeune supplied. The 210-pound engine drove two contra-rotating propellors and the undercarriage consisted of four bicycle-type wheels which Thomas Plimley made. The struts were fir and the seat consisted of a horse saddle from which the pilot worked the rudder with a rope. The test flight on Sept. 8, 1910, was promising, so that two weeks later Gibson was airborne for a measured distance of 201 feet, ending with a collision with an oak tree at a speed of 25 miles per hour. This compared to the 129 feet first flown by the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk and with the near 100 feet A.V. Roe flew in England in 1908.

Unscathed, Gibson improved on his design and built a six-cylinder engine. His plane made demonstration flights at Kamloops and at Calgary the following year but, owing to several costly crashes and the urging of his wife, he ceased flying and moved to California where he became a successful businessman.

Some 40 years later, Gibson visited the prairies and was made an honorary Cree Indian Chief, receiving a name which translated into "Chief Flash in the Sky Boy." He published a book of verse called *The Bird Man* and lived until 1965, when he died at 91. His second engine still exists — at the National Air Museum in Ottawa, and the Clarence Street house, now a multiple dwelling, stands as an unofficial national monument to this little-known early airplane pioneer.

Geoffrey Castle is president of the Victoria section of the B.C. Historical Federation.