FIRST FLIGHT BY CANADIAN-BUILT PLANE

'Insane Notion' Made History

By JOHN MANNING

On Sept. 24, 1910, dawn broke quietly over Lansdowne field. By 4.30 a.m. there was enough light in the farm shed for William Gibson to make a final check on the controls of his strange flying machine.

"Seems all right," he said to a helper. "Have a look outside and see if anyone's watching."

Gibson was taking no chances on being further ridiculed by the townspeople of Victoria. Following his testing of an engine out at Beacon Hill Park a number of citizens had greeted him in the street by flapping their arms at him. Even his minister had tried to talk him out of going ahead with "the insane notion of flying that weird invention of yours."

He 'Got a Horse'

Nevertheless, Gibson dismantled the 'Twin-plane' at his workshop in Victoria and transported it secretly by horse carriage to Dean's Farm near Mount Tolmie. There it was re-assembled in a secluded shed and the take-off date set for Sept. 8.

The plane itself was a carefully engineered work of genius. Gibson had even included baffles in the gas tank. The aircraft's 34-foot-long spruce frame was covered with pale blue waterproof silk obtained from Jeune Brothers, tent manufacturers of Victoria. When finally assembled the whole flying machine weighed but 566 pounds.

READY for a test run, William Gibson is pictured in his "Twin-plane" at the top end of Lansdowne field in September, 1910.

On Sept. 8, 1910, the Twin-plane made its first flight but while landing suffered damage to its undercarriage. However the airman had been seen and the following day a front-page account of it appeared in the Times.

Poorly-Kept Secret

"A machine of the originality and size of an aeroplane cannot be handled at daybreak or at dusk for long without its discovery becoming known. His flight this week was seen by several people who wondered what the enormous moving thing in the air could be as they saw it sailing out across the fields towards Mt. Tolmie . . ."

By the morning of Sept. 21 all necessary repairs had been made and Gibson prepared to once again take off. When his assistant reported back that no one was in sight, they opened the doors of the shed and rolled the invention out on the grass.

The airman climbed aboard and fitted the control yoke over his shoulders. From it were attached two ropes, one to each rudder. There were no ailerons or other methods of lateral control.

"Start it up!" he said.

By this time it was 5 a.m.

A minute later the six cylinder engine, which he had designed himself and had built by Hutchinson Brothers, a local machinist firm, was turning both propellers with a steady roar of power.

Gibson signalled for his helpers to let go and the Twin-plane started forward, bouncing across the uneven turf. Fifty feet away from the shed it was airborne.

For 20 seconds all went well. Then a cross wind took effect and the plane began drifting sideways.

It was at this moment that the pilot made an unfortunate error. In the hope of overcoming the drift he leaned to the wrong side causing the plane to veer sharply towards a clump of oak trees at the far end of the field.

"He shut off his engine," said a press account the following day," and came down but unfortunately his wheels were not equipped with brakes and the momentum drove the plane into an oak tree at the rate of about 25 miles per hour."

The airman was thrown free, suffering only shock and minor scratches. However, the Twin-plane was so badly damaged that Gibson decided to move his testing operations away from Victoria to the interior of B.C., where, as he later said: "One could get away from those oak trees!"

Although the two flights were not the greatest success possible, they were, as Frank H. Ellis points out in his book "Canada's Flying Heritage", the first free flights made by a Canadian-built plane.

Today the first successful aero engine fabricated in Canada has a place of honor in the aeronautical museum at Ottawa — William Gibson's Victoria-built "masterpiece".

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Victoria's First Pilot Dies at 91 in California

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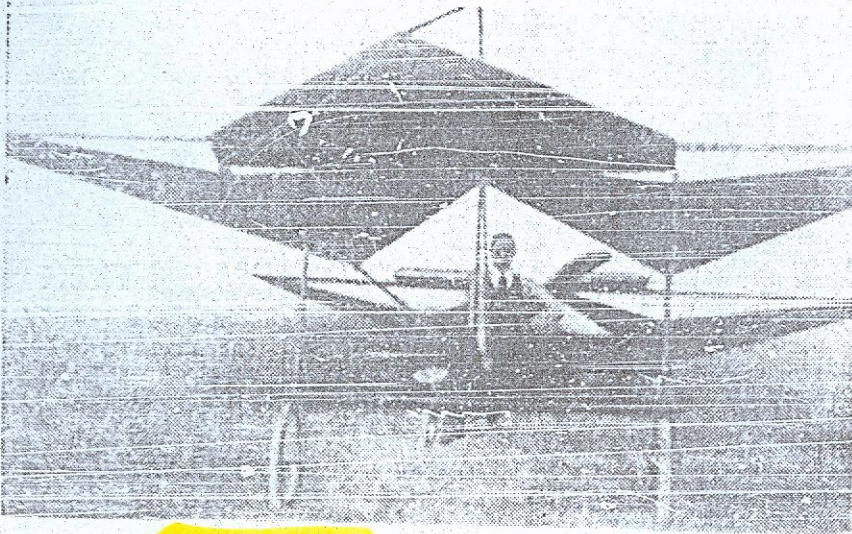
W. W. Gibson *in his flying machine*

The Cree Indians had a name for him — "Chief Flash-in-the-Sky Boy."

Plain William Wallace Gibson was his real name. And many Victorians had cause to be just as thrilled by it.

"Imagine a man teetering on the edge of the first skyscraper, praying he won't plunge to his death. Then you'll have an idea of how I felt that morning of Sept. 8, 1910."

MOUNT TOLMIE

This was Mr. Gibson, the man from Saskatchewan, recalling the historic occasion when he flew one of Canada's first planes.

The take-off was from the grassy pastureland of Dean Heights Farm, Mount Tolmie, Victoria.

The craft, he himself admitted, was "ridiculously crude." The pilot's seat was an ordinary horse saddle, the undercarriage four bicycle wheels and struts of fir wood. He used a shoulder yoke to operate the rudders, and the two 20-foot wings were covered with sky-blue silk.

THEN REAL THING

But it got airborne, and though he almost immediately cut the engine for a bumpy landing, Mr. Gibson exulted in the knowledge he had actually flown.

That was a test flight. Two weeks later came the real thing, and the aircraft skimmed through the air for more than 200 feet.

True, the plane eventually smacked, with a sickening crash, into a sturdy oak tree, at 25 miles per hour, and the pilot himself narrowly flew past it.

CHANGED TUNE

But this was how history was made.

And Victorians who watched him fashion that plane by hand and openly ridiculed Mr. Gibson, had cause to change their tune.

William Wallace Gibson, pioneer aviator, was buried Monday in Oakland, Calif.

SISTER HERE

He had lived 91 years, including those two momentous days he took to the skies just outside Victoria.

A sister, Jean W. Gibson, still lives here.

"For nature's plan was ne'er intended
That man through space should be suspended,
And naught but fool, a bird would make,
Or nature's secrets try to take."

In these lilting couplets did British Columbia's father of flight, William Wallace Gibson — "Birdman of Victoria" — recall the mocking skepticism which surrounded his efforts to fly 60 years ago.

But time has vindicated Gibson's faith; today history acknowledges the miracle the unassuming Scotsman achieved with blacksmith's forge, sticks and canvas one summer morning in a quiet pasture near Mount Tolmie.

Born in Dalmellington, Ayrshire, in 1876, Gibson was the fourth of four boys and a girl. He was seven years old when the family sailed for Quebec, April 25, 1883. After a rough and sickly 13-day voyage, the suffering family landed at the historic city. Settling at Wolseley, Sask., the Gibsons' nearest neighbors were Chief Piapot's band of Cree. For the next three years, young William enjoyed a Tom Sawyer existence with the Indian children, free of school. Soon "Jumping Deer" could hunt with bow and arrow as well as his friends.

BIRDMAN OF VICTORIA. W. W. Gibson, centre, during ceremony making him an honorary chief of the Cree Nations in 1918.

Victoria's Birdman

By T. W. PATERSON

At 13 — after three years' schooling — it became William's duty to shepherd the family's growing herd of cattle and horses. The keen youngster soon learned he could devote his talents to other fields on windy days as the herd would graze into the breeze to escape flies. During these lazy hours, William turned with increasing intrigue to the mysteries of flying.

With his newly-found interest came "the first passenger flight in the Dominion of Canada."

His initial experiments, as the herd foraged contentedly over the plain, were with kites. Time and again, the marvelling lad charged across the prairie on his pony, kite trailing behind on bailing twine. With each design he learned to keep his creations airborne longer and to soar them higher and higher.

Then he devolved the scheme of snaring gophers, placing them in cardboard boxes, and sending them aloft on the tail of a kite. "I could only keep them in the air for about an hour," he wrote long after, "because some of them became deathly sick, and when I brought them down they sat on the grass with their eyes half-closed for about two minutes before they scampered off to find their holes."

With this observation came a plan to increase the duration of his passengers' flights by making conditions more comfortable. To this end, he fashioned a dome-shaped basket of willow wands. The young inventor had chosen willow for two reasons: Firstly, to cut wind resistance, and, secondly, to enable his gophers to enjoy the view!

With each successful flight, William's plans advanced. Finally, one gusting May afternoon, he launched his masterpiece: A seven-foot blue kite with nine passengers.

For an hour he sailed the enormous kite until his arm tired, when he tied the string to a rail fence. He then lay on the grass "to ponder and see visions of powered flight."

His reverie ended abruptly when the kite plummetted to earth, killing all aboard. "Anxious to know what caused the crash," William inspected the wreckage. His probing eye soon discovered one of the gophers had chewed through the cord securing the basket to the kite. The mystery was solved. The rueful inventor, sadly noting what he believed "the first air casualty in Canada," vowed to use brass wire in future flights.

With adulthood, Gibson had to forsake his experiments for a livelihood, opening a blacksmith shop in Wolseley. Business seems to have prospered as, in 1903, he bought out a bankrupt

hardware merchant for $3,000, shipping the inventory to Balgonie. Once again all seems to have gone well as he soon was devoting spare hours to his old hobby.

But now Gibson turned his attention to building models of airplanes. Remembering how he had flown kites on calm days by towing them behind his galloping pony, he pondered means of powering his creations. The blacksmith and hardware merchant had as yet never heard of propellers or gasoline engines.

In 1903 he heard the momentous news that two Americans named Wright had successfully flown a machine at Kitty Hawk, N.C. Inspired, he redoubled his efforts, building paper models with which he practised continually, seeking a design which would support an engine. Making his work all the more difficult was the fact he had to advance step by painful step, improvising all the way. He had not even seen a picture of the Wright craft; all he had to work with were boyhood memories of kites.

Coincidentally, his research progressed along the lines of that of the much maligned Professor Samuel Langley, whose remarkable accomplishments in the U.S. years before had earned him only ridicule. Gibson hadn't heard of the hapless professor, either.

He described one advanced model as being "like two small kites, one behind the other." With a wingspread of 20 inches, it was powered by the spring of a window-blind roller, which doubled as fuselage. Control was achieved through changing the angle of the forward plane, while the rear plane remained stationary at an angle Gibson had found to be successful with kites.

"The window-blind roller was the backbone of the plane," he explained. "I trimmed the spring end of the roller to 1-16 inch to lighten it and the solid part I cut down to one-quarter diameter and wrapped the whole length with linen thread. The steel end that projects from the roller I lightened by filing and I soldered a small screw to fasten the propeller to."

He carved a 10-inch propeller from Spanish mahogany, then constructed a launching ramp 10 inches wide by nine feet long, with a vane down the centre to guide the "plane." When he had "varnished and polished it like glass," he fashioned 12-inch legs to one end, three-foot legs to the other.

Another problem had been that of secrecy.

"At that time," he recounted, "I had a general store in Balgonie, branch hardware stores in Craven and Cupar, and had considerable money borrowed from the local bank. I was afraid if my bankers heard of or saw me playing with such a contraption they would think I had gone clean crazy and call in their loan, and perhaps ruin my business.

"Also, at that time the NWMP had authority to pick up any one reported queer and take them to Regina. Gossip travels at great speed, so I decided to keep my experiment secret."

One dawn in June of 1904, Gibson crept to the roof of a downtown building with his model, set it carefully on the launching ramp, wound the propeller spring and stepped back. Propeller spinning eagerly, the little craft leaped from its rail and was airborne, soaring across the street, then crashing into a boxcar 130 feet distant.

A wing was damaged but the ecstatic Gibson cared not: "I had proved beyond a doubt that I could build a machine that would fly!"

In following months many a sunrise would find the beaming inventor on the roof, launching models of varying designs. As ever, Gibson exercised every precaution to remain unobserved. One day the local doctor visited his store to tell the alarmed merchant he had seen him on the roof that morning. As Gibson stiffened, heart pumping violently, Dr. Kaulbfleisch had blithely continued: "Billy, that was a funny looking bird you were trying to catch ... this morning. I never saw any bird like that in my life. It flew right over my buggy and lit on the grass over by the station!"

Encouraged by his success, Gibson resolved to build a full-scale craft on his farm. He had almost completed a four-cylinder, four-cycle engine for it when he heard of an opportunity to contract for 42 miles of the building Grand Trunk Pacific. "I lost $40,000 in 18 months."

When finally he paid off all debts, Gibson was bankrupt. Deciding to start afresh, he moved to Victoria. Here, Gibson met veteran prospector Locky Grant, who offered to sell him a gold mine near Clayoquot. Although penniless, Gibson agreed to look it over.

He reached the mine in 10 days, travelling up the Island's rugged west coast in a 17-foot motorboat. The young inventor from the prairies was seasick most of the way, almost swamped himself several times, and drifted ashore, where he was fed by Indians. He reached Clayoquot 12 pounds lighter.

When Grant showed him a pan of nuggets, Gibson "took one look at it and got gold fever." For $100, his boat, camera, telescope and rifle, he

found himself owner. Before long he had the mine in production, built a stamping mill and poured the first gold brick from a west coast quartz mine.

Selling out for $10,000, Gibson returned to his old dream of flying. Again solvent, he had his four-cylinder engine shipped from Balgonie. He soon finished it, but found its six-inch stroke much too long—"It jumped around like a chicken with its head chopped off."

Undaunted, he designed a two-cylinder, six-cycle, air-cooled model. Constructed at Hutchinson Brothers' machine shop in Esquimalt, the engine, first of its kind built in Canada, and now displayed in the National Museum at Ottawa, developed 60 horsepower.

From morning till night, week in and week out, Hutchinsons' forges glowed hot as Gibson hammered bits and pieces of steel into an engine. He handcrafted virtually every part himself; even the more than 100 bolts which were bored hollow to save weight.

Months passed, Gibson working steadily with his silent partner, known only to history as "Dave."

"With spruce and cedar, silk and wire,
Our bird began to show attire."

Motorcycle wheels proved too weak, so he had a set custom-made at Thomas Plimley's.

Finally came the great day. Twice before all had seemed ready, but, at the last moment, the anxious inventors had detected weakened struts, propeller blades too long, the engine improperly placed. This time they were ready.

On the evening of Sept. 7, 1910, the "Twin-Plane" waited quietly in a circus tent near Mount Tolmie. With prospector Locky Grant as sentry, Gibson and Dave had completed their final rehearsal. The next morning, as Victoria slept in ignorance, they would make history.

With a skeleton of spruce, the ugly craft had two enormous wings, each 20 feet by eight and covered with blue tent silk from Jeune Brothers, which gave 300 square feet of lift. Fifty feet long, the plane's unique features included 100 springs for flexibility. The engine, with a larger propeller forward, and a second aft, straddled the frame's centre.

With the first feeble rays of dawn, the trio had towed the ungainly creation into the pasture. The monster roared to life instantly when Gibson spun the propeller, then climbed into the seat—a horse saddle. Hands at the controls, tense with excitement—and fear—he had nodded to Grant to release the plane.

Bucking wildly, the giant bat sped across the pasture, then, sniffing the dawn air hungrily, zoomed skyward in a long, lazy arch, bumping heavily to earth seconds later, 200 feet from her starting position. When the engine stuttered into silence, peace reigned over the fields once more.

William Wallace Gibson had flown!

"Local aviator makes aeroplane and flies," cried Victoria Times headlines that afternoon. Despite the inventors' secrecy, word had spread rapidly of the momentous occasion, the Times noting "a machine of the originality and size of an aeroplane . . . cannot be handled at daybreak or at dusk for long without its discovery becoming known."
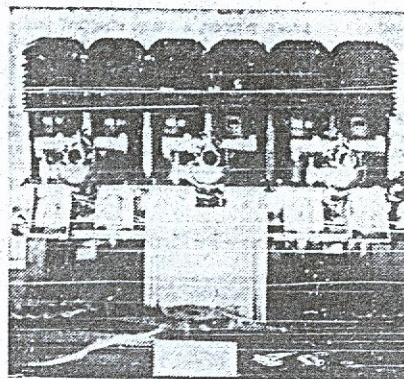
A broken wheel, reported the paper, had delayed further flights.

"May the ingenious and plucky bird-man have all kinds of good luck," wished The Colonist.
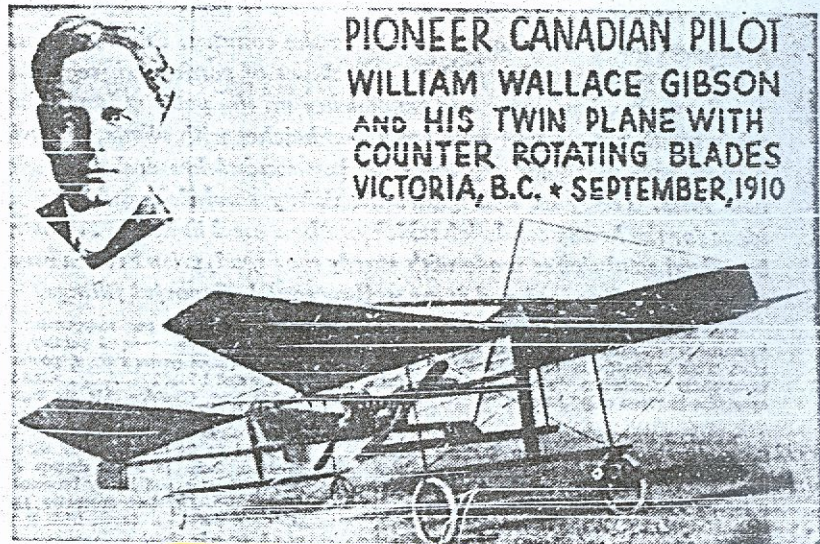
PIONEER CANADIAN PILOT WILLIAM WALLACE GIBSON AND HIS TWIN PLANE WITH COUNTER ROTATING BLADES VICTORIA, B.C. ★ SEPTEMBER, 1910

WILLIAM WALLACE GIBSON'S WONDERFUL TWIN-PLANE.

Engine of W. W. Gibson's twin plane in the National Museum at Ottawa.

Amazingly, Victoria was not impressed. Instead of hailing Gibson as a genius, his friends laughed rudely, called him "Birdman," and, passing on the street, would flap their arms and laugh. Others would point skyward, grin, then cover their faces. One clergyman went so far as to solemnly urge Gibson to give up his wild venture for the sake of his family; that "it was the devil who was urging me on."

But Gibson had tasted success; he could not quit.

Two weeks later, the twin-plane was repaired. Again Gibson started the engine, the propellers whirled furiously, and he climbed into the saddle-seat. And again his partners had released the craft. Seconds later, the plane soared through space, its elated pilot working the elevators and rudders happily.

Suddenly the twin-plane veered to the right. Panicking, Gibson levered the rudder in the wrong direction. A split second later, the craft smashed into an oak tree at 40 miles an hour, then tumbled, lifeless, to the ground. Gibson was thrown clear, crushing two fingers and gashing his head; he carried the latter scars for life.

His wonderful twin-plane was a total wreck.

Not discouraged, Gibson immediately set about building the Multi-Plane. This time, wary of oak trees, he obtained permission from Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Paterson to test the new craft on his farm at Ladner. Unfortunately, wet weather weakened the laminated spruce frames, forcing another move to Kamloops. Other difficulties resulted in a third shift, this time to Calgary. Here, in the dry humid air, his multi-plane performed several successful flights. Gibson dreamed of opening his own aircraft plant.

Sadly, on Aug. 12, 1911, while landing, the test pilot crashed trying to avoid some badger holes. The pilot escaped without serious injury, but the multi-plane was ruined.

Gibson had lost a fortune — $20,000 — in attempting to prove heavier-than-air flight was feasible. This time he had to consider his family. The crash of his multi-plane in an Alberta field marked the end of the ingenious pioneer's battle to fly.

In 1948, members of the Piapot reserve, where Gibson had played as a boy, made him an honorary chieftain of the Cree Nations, naming him Chief Kisikaw Wawasam — "Flash-in-the-sky-boy."

The Gibson Twin plane

By Iain Lawrence

On Sept. 24, 1910, a handful of reporters and bystanders gathered on a small farm near Mount Tolmie to watch history in the making. For on that day, William Gibson climbed into his handbuilt "Twin-plane" and made the first flight of a Canadian built airplane.

The following day, with apparent disregard of its historical importance, the *Colonist* reported the event:

"Mr. Gibson left the shed with the plane about 4 o'clock yesterday afternoon and starting his engine on a slight incline rose to the air about 50 feet from the shed. Passing the shelter of a clump of trees a strong cross wind was encountered with the result that the aeroplane was drifted dangerously near some trees, Mr. Gibson not using his rudder. He shut off his engine to avoid collision and came down, but unfortunately his wheels were not equipped with brakes and the momentum drove the aeroplane into an oak tree at the rate of about 25 miles an hour."

Gibson's Twin-plane suffered heavy damage but the pilot excused his accident, as he was at a disadvantage having to learn to fly by experience alone.

The story of the Twin-plane goes back to the 18th century when Gibson, as a boy, amused himself by kite flying while tending his father's cattle on the prairies.

By 1905, when a section of the vast Northwest Territories joined Confederation as the province of Saskatchewan, William Wallace Gibson was a prosperous hardware merchant, with stores in Balgonie, Craven, and Cupar.

Although the hardware business was his living, the mysteries of flight were Gibson's passion, and he spent hours building model airplanes. Afraid of destroying his high standing in Balgonie society, Gibson restricted his flying to the first few hours of daylight, launching his models from a chute on the roof of his hardware store.

Gibson must have been elated by his experiments for he soon began construction of a four cylinder engine, designed for a man-sized aircraft.

When the Grand Trunk Pacific was being pushed across the prairies a hundred miles north of Balgonie, Gibson saw an opportunity to make some money. Flying was an expensive pastime and he contracted to build 42 miles of the railroad's right of way.

The venture, however, proved to be somewhat less than a success. Gibson lost $40,000 and, at 27 years of age, fell into bankruptcy. He headed west, arriving in Victoria in the fall of 1906 with his unfinished engine.

Soon after his arrival, in the spring of 1907, Gibson met a prospector who owned a mine on the Elk River at Muchalat Inlet, on Vancouver Island. Locky Grant, the mine's owner, showed Gibson his claim and, on the strength of a test pan,

Gibson immediately closed the deal. For his boat, a camera, his binoculars, his rifle, and $100, W. W. Gibson bought a gold mine.

Together they worked the mine until Gibson sold it soon after for $10,000, and resumed work on his airplane.

Testing his theories with large models flown from Beacon Hill, Gibson completed the designs for his full size craft. He ignored the ridicule of seeing his friends on the street pass by with flapping arms and grinning faces, and slaved to his task.

Disappointment followed disappointment. Gibson's four-cylinder engine, on completion, was useless. It vibrated, shook, and bounced up and down. Undaunted, Gibson designed a new engine; six cylinders in line with a 4½-inch stroke and electric ignition.

Gibson disregarded the pessimistic criticism that was levelled at the engine by its builders and insisted that it was built his way. The crankshaft came from New York and the crank case from Seattle, but the rest was done by Hutchinson Brothers of Victoria.

When completed, in March 1910, the new engine was better than even Gibson had hoped. Weighing only 210 pounds, the engine developed between 40 and 60 horsepower and is now on display in the National Air Museum at Ottawa.

Finally, in early September 1910, the airplane was finished and he christened it the Gibson Twin-plane.

Fifty-four feet long, with a 20-foot wingspan, the Twin-plane sat firmly on its four bicycle wheels. Tom Plimley, who was just then advancing from bicycles to automobiles, had built the flimsy-looking

undercarriage which later proved to be the craft's worst failing.

The two spruce-framed wings were mounted one behind the other, secured to the fuselage with clamps, and covered with pale blue silk from Jeune Brothers of Victoria. By loosening the clamps, the wings could be slid up and down the fuselage until the Twin-plane was properly balanced in much the same way as children fly their models today.

One of Victoria's heritage buildings, a huge handsome house at 146 Clarence, in James Bay, is probably where Gibson assembled his aeroplane. With the construction completed, the Twin-plane was loaded onto a wagon and hauled secretly to a farm near Mt. Tolmie.

There, on what is now a school playground bordered by Richmond, Lansdowne, and Shelbourne, the Gibson Twin-plane was re-assembled.

Early in the morning of Sept. 8, 1910, Gibson and two helpers pushed the Twin-plane onto the grassy meadow. Gibson climbed into the horse saddle that served as a seat and started the engine.

He pulled the long lever in front of him and tested the huge triangular elevator at the craft's nose. It tilted up and down at his command and he looked over his shoulder to check the rudders. Pulling on the two ropes that led over his shoulders, he watched the two small rudders wag back and forth. The engine revved up and W. W. Gibson signalled to his helpers.

Nobody knows for sure exactly what happened that morning. The press, though, had been hounding Gibson since the beginning and the events of that day did not go unnoticed.

On Sept. 10, two days later, the *Colonist* reported:

"Several residents of the neighborhood of Mount Tolmie witnessed Mr. Gibson in his initial trials. The final trial was the most successful, when the breaking of the wheels occurred. This flight was not witnessed by anyone as far as can be learned."

It is now generally considered that Gibson, not wanting the embarrassment of a failure, used that day, Sept. 8, as a test flight. He did get off the ground, shutting off his engine as soon as he was airborne, and he did damage the landing gear.

On Sept. 24, two weeks later and the damage repaired, Gibson made his second attempt. As press reporters stood around expectantly Gibson and his helpers wheeled the Twin-plane back onto the meadow. He climbed into the saddle and warmed up the engine.

With undue optimism, Gibson had mounted two 10-gallon gas tanks above the engine, intending to taxi down the field, take off, and land in Vancouver.

At Gibson's signal, his helpers let go and the Twin-plane bounced across the meadow. Fifty feet later, Gibson pulled the lever, raised the elevator, and climbed quickly into the air. He watched as the ground dropped away below him and then started to slide sideways under his wings. In an attempt to overcome the cross-wind, Gibson shifted his body, turning the rudders.

The Twin-plane swung around but Gibson, in his confusion, had turned the wrong way. With the wind at its tail, the Twin-plane picked up speed and its pilot watched helplessly as a stand of oak trees rapidly approached across the field. Completely bewildered, Gibson shut off the engine and drifted to the ground.

Gibson was thrown clear as the Twin-plane piled into the trees, escaping without serious injury, but his beloved Twin-plane was a wreck. He had flown 200 feet, though, a tremendous feat in those days for an airplane of new design.

In those brief 200 feet, W. W. Gibson made the first flight in history of a Canadian-built airplane.

For a complete amateur who taught himself the theories of aerodynamics by flying model aircraft, William Wallace Gibson had done an incredible job.

Among its innovative features, the Gibson Twin-plane boasted gull wings, now often used for added stability, baffle plates inside the gas tanks to stop the fuel from surging back and forth and now found in almost all aircraft, and contra-rotating propellers mounted one behind the other, driven directly from the engine, and still found in use today.

During the winter of 1910-1911, Gibson designed and built a new airplane. The Gibson Multi-plane was the result and the old Twin-plane was scrapped. Gibson moved to the mainland, anxious to get as far away from oak trees as he could, and continued his experiments in aviation.
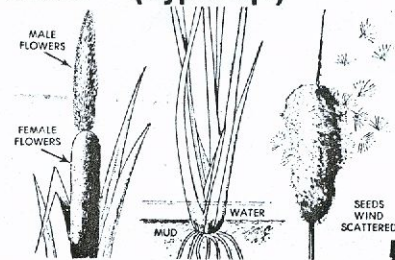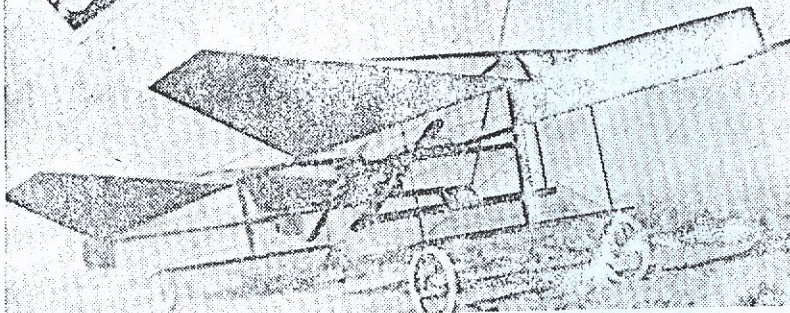

PIONEER CANADIAN PILOT
WILLIAM WALLACE GIBSON
AND HIS TWIN PLANE WITH
COUNTER ROTATING BLADES
VICTORIA, B.C. ★ SEPTEMBER, 1910

GIBSON AND HIS PLANE were described in a 1910 article in the Times accompanied by this illustration, as skepticism was giving way to awe for men and their flying machines.

Victoria Flight Pioneer Got Scant Recognition

By PETER BEVIS

Seven years before the Wright Brothers' flight, a Victorian by the name of William Wallace Gibson was putting aloft manned flying devices he had designed. The "men" in this case were gophers.

Gibson also witnessed the first air fatality in Canadian history when one of his larger craft — a kite — manned by nine brave gophers crashed to earth killing all aboard.

After many years of experimenting on a Prairie farm Gibson moved to Victoria with the dream of becoming one of the first aviators in Canada.

"For nature's plan was ne'er intended
That man through space should be suspended,
And naught but a fool, a bird would make,
Of nature's secrets try to take."

This poem accompanied a story about Gibson in the Daily Colonist. It indicates the skepticism which surrounded some of Gibson's and other aviators' intentions to fly some 70 years ago.

Although Gibson was not the first to fly, his efforts surpass those of Nova Scotia's J. W. McCurdy whose Silver Dart flight in 1909 was built mostly in the United States.

Gibson's was the first all Canadian-effort.

Time vindicated Gibson's faith and history acknowledges the miracle the unassuming Scot achieved one summer morning in a quiet pasture near Mount Tolmie.

Gibson, like many aviation pioneers first experimented with kites. With each design he learned to keep his creations airborne longer and so soar them higher and higher.

At the time of Gibson's experiments, the North West Mounted Police had authority to pick up any one reported "queer" and take them to Regina. For fear of being taken away, Gibson kept his experiments secret. Gossip could travel fast and any news of aeroplanes in those days made good gossip — and sounded like a queer idea.

Gibson, through a number of bad business deals in hardware, went bankrupt and had to halt his experiments. Eighteen months later Gibson invested in a gold mine and promptly made $10,000. Just as promptly, he sold his share of the mine to pay his debtors and continue experimenting with model aircraft. Gibson's first plane engine proved unsatisfactory. Undaunted, he designed a two-cylinder, six-cycle, air-cooled model which proved to be adequate.

The 60-horsepower engine was constructed at Hutchinson Brothers' machine shop in Esquimalt. The engine was the first of its kind built in Canada, and now is displayed in the National Museum at Ottawa.

Gibson hand-crafted virtually every part himself; even the more than 100 bolts that were bored hollow to save weight. After the engine was fitted in the plane, Gibson made two attempts to get the plane aloft but failed because of strut trouble and propeller problems.

On the evening of Sept. 10, 1910, the "twinplane" waited in a circus tent near Mount Tolmie.

The next morning an assistant spun the propeller, the engine roared to life, and Gibson hopped in and took the controls of the aircraft. Soaring skyward, the plane flew 200 feet.

When the engine slowed, the plane glided in to complete William Wallace Gibson's first successful flight.

"Local Aviator Makes Aeroplane And Flies" was the headline in the Victoria Daily Times that evening.

Gibson, however, met only ridicule and rudeness from his friends. They laughed and called him birdman.

Gibson had spent $20,000 proving that heavier-than-air flight was feasible. He was the second man in Canadian history to fly.

Yet the sleepy town of Victoria remained unmoved.

Victorian a Flying Pioneer

By DON VIPOND

How time flies. The pioneering Twin-Plane of W. W. Gibson would fit snugly inside the Boeing 747 Air Canada recently added to its Vancouver-Toronto run.

Both planes are giants in their own right. Herewith a respectful comparison:

The Twin-Plane had two complete wings, 20 feet tip to tip and eight feet at the widest, one set well behind the other.

Pale blue waterproof silk material (from Jeune Bros.) covered the wings' spruce framework. Gibson attached the wings to the fuselage, such as it was, so they could be shifted to obtain the best centre of gravity for lift.

It was the first "gull wing" design, with streamlined spars.

W. W. GIBSON
. . . first hesitant hop

Each wing rib had an ingenious tube device to overcome the problem of sagging wing cover occasioned by Victoria's sometimes soggy climate. The tube could be lengthened to produce a taut cover for flight.

• • •

The $22 million Boeing 747 has a wingspan of almost 196 feet, is a shade over 231 feet long. Its tail stands 63½ feet. To clean the pilot's windshield somebody must climb the equivalent of a three-storey building.

A man of average height can walk upright inside the 747's main fuel tanks. Their capacity (47,000 U.S. gallons) is enough to run the average family car for 80 years.

The 747 has room for 32 passengers in the first class section, another 333 in the four economy sections. The lounge, reached by a spiral staircase, seats 14.
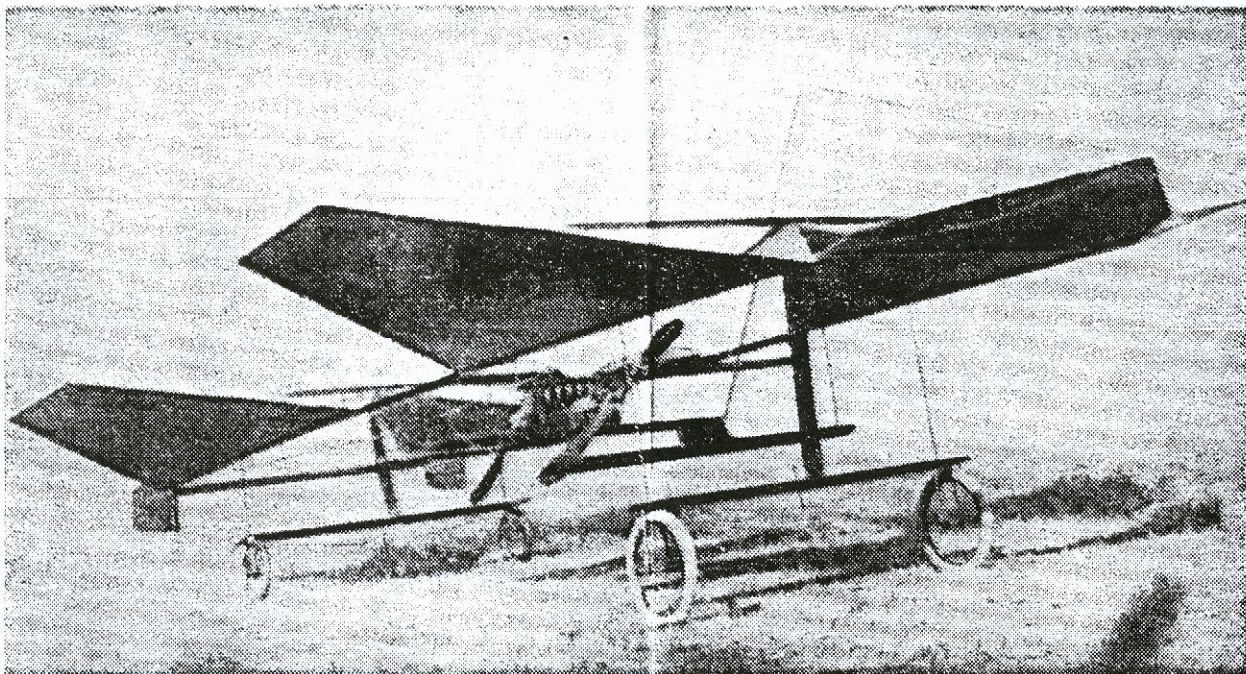
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Gibson's seat in the Twin-Plane was a horse saddle, stripped down to save weight.

Two fuel tanks held 10 gallons (Imperial) each and were fitted on each side and well above the engine to provide a good gravity feed. They had baffle plates within to prevent surging, another "new-fangled" feature.

Landing gear was four widely spaced bicycle wheels.

• • •

The landing gear on the 747 totals 18 wheels, with each wheel, tire and brake assembly weighing 610 pounds.

Having one nose gear and four main gear, not only must the nose gear be steerable for ground handling but also two of the main gear. The ratio of turn between them is regulated by a computer.

• • •

The Twin-Plane had a kite-like elevator mounted up front, eight feet by four feet and controlled by a lever in the pilot's hand. Gibson controlled the two rudders at the rear with a shoulder yoke.

But the pilot had no lateral control, no ailerons, no vertical tailfin.

• • •

The 747 will be automatically guided from one destination to another by its inertial navigation system. That will, for example, precisely direct the aircraft from Montreal to within 1½ miles of Paris where local navigation aids will take over for approach to the airport.

• • •

The engine Gibson designed (remember, he made his living as farmer, merchant, miner and blacksmith) showed great originality, reports air historian Frank Ellis.

It had six cylinders, was air-cooled, obtained ignition by battery through coil and distributor. Like modern outboards it had oil mixed with the gas for internal lubrication.

There were two six-foot propellors fore and aft, a radical departure, but Gibson's successful solution to the troublesome torque problem.

The engine weighed 210 pounds, developed about 50 horsepower, and proved to be the first successful aircraft engine produced in Canada.

• • •

It's no idle flattery to call the 747's engines hot. The jet turbines operate at 2,100 degrees Fahrenheit. Each of the four JT9D Pratt and Whitney engines produces 45,600 pounds of thrust.

Each has a maw almost eight feet in diameter through which it inhales 1,600 pounds of air a minute.

The 747 has a fifth engine. This auxiliary power unit is in the tail cone and generates 1,100 horsepower. It starts the other engines, powers the air conditioning and supplies electrical power on the ground.

• • •

The 747 and Twin-Plane are identical in one respect. One was and the other is piloted by one man.

Awesome technology tends to mask this simple historical truth: Progress is the story of people who tried.
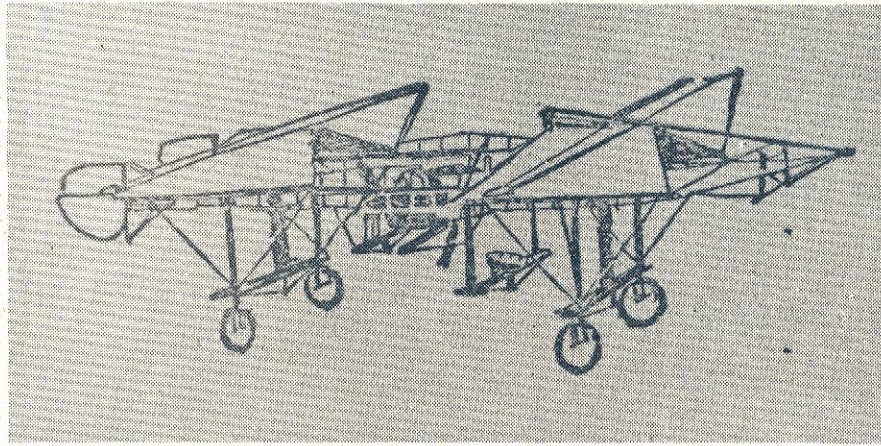

Gibson's Twin-Plane: Victoria flight a first for Canada.

It's a well-known fact that some small boys are notorious dreamers. Of such a type was William Wallace Gibson who, in the '90s, arrived with his parents on the plains of Saskatchewan. A long journey from his native Ayrshire.

Long before the Wright brothers, Willie got the idea he could fly; so he built himself a big kite with which he used to run into the breeze hoping for a lift-off. Probably now and again he got higher than tip-toe; we don't know. When he disisted it was mainly because he thought the neighbors might pass word to his parents that their son was a bit of a weirdo.

When he reached manhood he came to Victoria (in 1907) to work in a real estate office . . . still with that dream of getting into the air.

He enthused others, and the result was an airplane.

Spruce for the 20-foot wings came from a harbor mill and was covered with water-proof silk by Fred Jeune. The Hutchison brothers (Bob, Dan and Tom) made the motor in their Bay Street shop alongside the VMD. This was a 6-cylinder job, developing 40 h.p. at 80 r.p.m. with a propellor each end of the drive shaft.

The undercarriage (four bicycle wheels) was built by Tom Plimley, then just graduating from bicycles to automobiles.

On Sept. 8, 1910 the group got their dream-child out to the grassy acreage bounded today by Richmond, Lansdowne and Shelbourne. Gibson climbed into a western stock saddle which was lashed to the chassis and, with a length of sash cord over each shoulder to handle the rudder, the motor roared and he took to the air. True, he only got 20 feet off the ground, but he flew for 200 feet and made a landing. Marking the first plane flight on Vancouver Island (second in B.C.) in the first all-Canadian plane.

If you happen to be in Ottawa you can see the Hutchison motor in the Aeronautical Museum established by the National Research Council.

Spur for today's recollection, by the way, comes from Mr. Clifton McLean, 710 Cormorant, who asked where Gibson made his historic flight. His curiosity, in turn, prompted by a brief commemorative item put out by Canada's Postmaster General . . . showing a sketch of the plane. Which you see on the left. On the right is the historic airfield as it looks today.

JB 146 Clarence
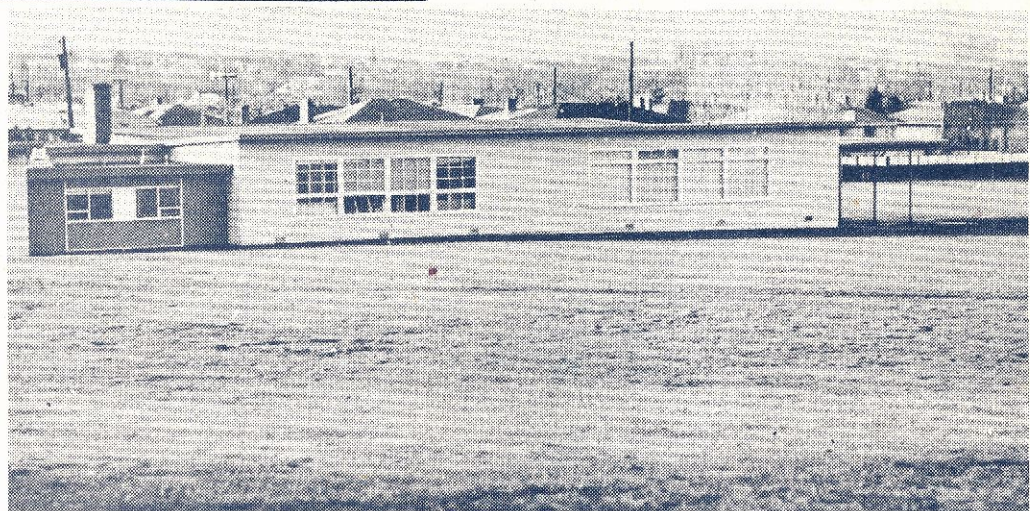
It was about 22 years ago that I happened to notice (and photograph) a group of model airplane enthusiasts indulging their hobby on the expanse of meadowland bounded by Richmond, Lansdowne and Shelbourne. I thought it interesting mainly because, aeronautically-speaking, they were on rather historic ground.

For it was from this same tract of land (later to become the Lansdowne airfield) that William Wallace Gibson, on Sept. 24th, 1910, made the first airplane flight on Vancouver Island in a bi-plane built right here in town. Spruce for the 20-foot wings came from a local mill, and covered with water-proof silk by Jeune Bros. The engine, a 6-cylinder, 2-cycle, air-cooled job that weighed 210 pounds and developed 50 horse power, was built by Hutchison brothers, and the undercarriage — four bicycle wheels rigged on bicycle tubing, was the work of Thomas Plimley.

Gibson handled the rudder control with a couple of sash cords (one over each shoulder) and, as none of the builders had ever seen a plane, the pilot took to the air seated on a western stock saddle!

Came the take off, the plane rose like a bird and Gibson circled the field at a height of about 200 feet, then came in for a very nice landing. Unfortunately he didn't take into account a following wind which caused him to taxi into a clump of oaks, whereupon he left the saddle and slid along the ground on his face. No personal injury, but the plane was a write-off. Someone at the time suggested that if Gibson had had stirrups he might have saved himself a skinned nose. But as any Air Canada pilot will tell you today, this is probably a moot point.

And, by the way, for Air Canada pilots interested in the subject, they can see the original Hutchison motor in the Aeronautical Museum established by the National Research Council at Ottawa.

It was in 1928 that the Lansdowne acreage became the first licensed airfield in Canada, and a Customs-Immigration port of entry.

Today, of course, this historic site is devoted to school buildings and playing fields. Picture on the right, taken a week or so ago, is from the same viewpoint as the one on the left.

Wed. Feb. 12/75

The Flying Heritage of I

Whenever You See An Airplane In Canadian Skies, Think of ==William Wallace Gibson== . . . He Designed And Built Canada's First Airplane Engine In British Columbia 35 Years Ago

ANYONE who dabbled in flying 35 years ago, was thought to be a bit "off," and even the friends of Gibson who met him on the street openly ridiculed him and many would hold out their arms as they passed him and would go through the movements of flapping them.

Gibson was born in Ayrshire, Scotland, and with his parents, as a baby, went to Saskatchewan when that province was still a part of the Northwest Territories.

As a boy kite flying became his hobby and often as he tended his father's cattle he would gallop his pony over the open prairie on windless days towing a kite behind just for the sheer pleasure of watching its flight.

As he grew to manhood he moved to the village of Balgonie, 15 miles east of Regina, where he bought out a general store and spent much of his spare time experimenting with large models of aircraft of his own design, patterned much after the kites he had flown. In 1904 he had considerable success with a type manufactured with paper and bamboo, using the spring from a window-blind roller as the motive power for the propeller.

Gradually his vision grew and he set his mind to designing and building a full-sized man-carrying machine.

He Dared Dangers of West Coast Seas and Later Found Gold to Finance Aircraft.

His first engine, a four-cylinder affair, was almost completed in 1905 when Gibson contracted to build 42 miles of grade for the Grand Trunk Pacific, which was pushing through his district at that time.

Instead of making a fortune he lost out to the tune of $40,000 and when he had finished paying his debts he was minus store and farm.

With what money he had left he decided to pull up stakes and moved out to the Pacific coast to start anew.
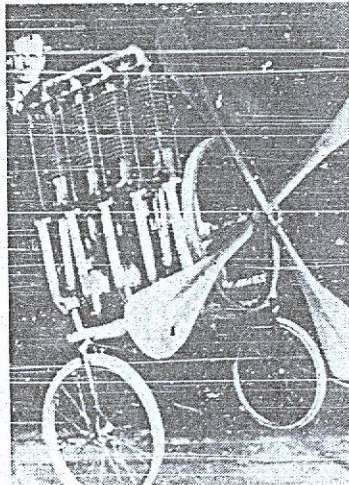
He arrived in Victoria in the fall of 1906 and fortune turned her smile upon him. In the spring of 1907 he met a miner named Locky Grant who had a good gold prospect on Elk River, Vancouver Island. He also was broke. Grant offered the prospect to Gibson for $500.

Brought up on the prairie, Gibson knew nothing of the sea, but being an adventurous soul he bought a 17-foot launch, provisioned it and with $300 in cash set off northward to look the offer over. He had looked at the water route on a map and as he himself recalls, "It seemed so calm and peaceful" he expected no difficulties.

The journey he made is a story unto itself. He was eight days getting to his destination, and he lost 25 pounds on the way. The Pacific off the west coast of Vancouver Island is noted for its violence, and apparently it particularly resented a landlubber's intrusion on that occasion.

He met Locky, was shown the mine, and although it was the first "hole in the ground" he had ever seen, a deal was made.

Before the season was over, Gibson had brought out a gold brick worth $1200, and on the strength of that he was able to sell the mine for $10,600 cash, and with this new capital he at once resumed his experiments with aircraft in an endeavor to conquer the air.
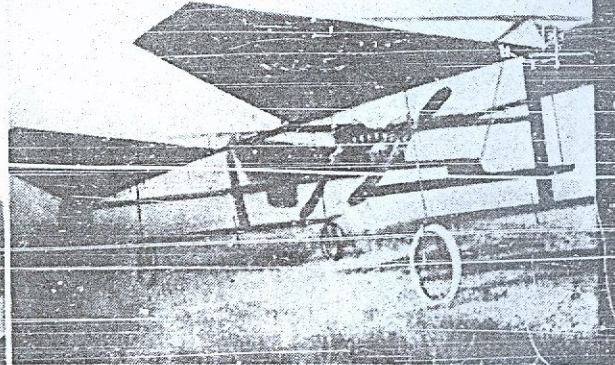

Gibson's first engine, started on the prairies at Balgonie in 1905, and completed in Victoria, in 1908. Although unsuccessful, it paved the way for a second engine, which turned out to be a masterpiece of design and construction.

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"It jumped around like a chicken with its head chopped off." Nothing daunted, he set to with a will to build a better.

The First Complete Aircraft Ever Built In Canada Was Designed and Fabricated In British Columbia.

This time it was a six-cylinder, air-cooled motor of very original design. Gibson went to Hutchinson Bros. machine shop in Victoria and asked them to do part of the job.
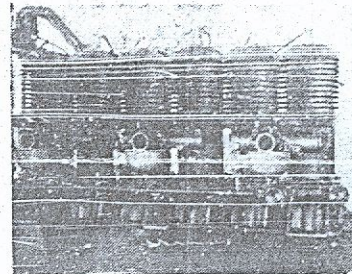
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Three-quarter view of the Gibson Twin-plane built and flown in 1910. The two airscrews attached to the front and rear of should be noted.

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The first flight on September 8, 1910, was of short duration; and although the distance flown is not known, reports of the flight were published in the newspapers, the landing gear was slightly damaged in landing, preventing further trials until September 24.

At 4 o'clock in the morning, western flying history was made. The engine was started up. Gibson took his place in the machine and he signalled his helpers to let go. A light cross-wind was blowing over the field, and after a run of only 50 feet, the machine rose lightly off the ground and soared away.

Being unaccustomed to the intricacy of actual flight, Gibson became a bit confused when he noted the machine was drifting towards a large stand of trees. Fearing a crash, he shut off the engine, and made a perfect landing, after flying a distance of 201 feet, which is verified by accounts published at the time.

The momentum of his machine carried it with considerable impact into a particularly sturdy oak, and the airman left his seat to conclude his flight for some 20 feet without the aid of his machine.

After This Experience and Study Gibson Decided to Redesign Entire Machine.

He received only a severe shaking up and some cuts, but the machine was badly damaged. Gibson hoped to repair it without undue loss of time, but the damage was greater than he anticipated, and before he decided on what course to take, he obtained a book on flying, entitled "Artificial and Natural Flight," written by Sir Hiram Maxim, and this completely changed his ideas and influenced him to redesign his entire machine.

As a consequence further tests were not held until the following year, and they were conducted first on the farm at Ladner, owned by Hon. T. W. Paterson, Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia, and later at Calgary, where very successful flights were made.

Although Gibson's longest flight in 1910 was only 201 feet, it was an accomplishment of first magnitude. Compare it with the first hop of the Wright brothers, at Kitty Hawk, which was only 129 feet, and the first flight in England made by A. V. Roe in June, 1909, of less than 100 feet.

Santos Dumont flew only 200 feet, to make the first heavier-than-air flight in Europe in 1906, so Gibson's flight rightfully takes its place as an outstanding pioneer effort, and it is greatly to be regretted that Canada passed lightly over his experiments without having them officially recorded.

The experiences, difficulties and climax of Gibson's 1911 flying activities will be described in the next article of this series.

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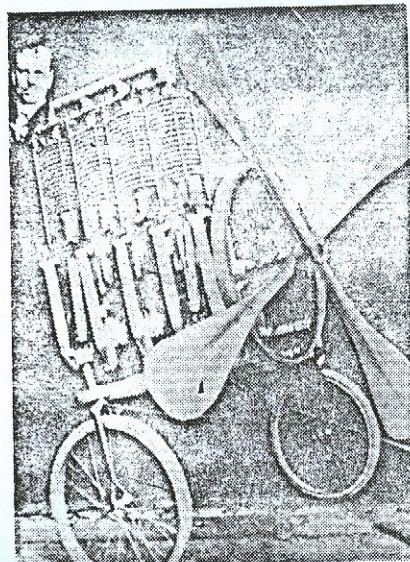
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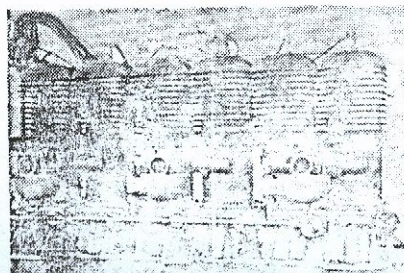
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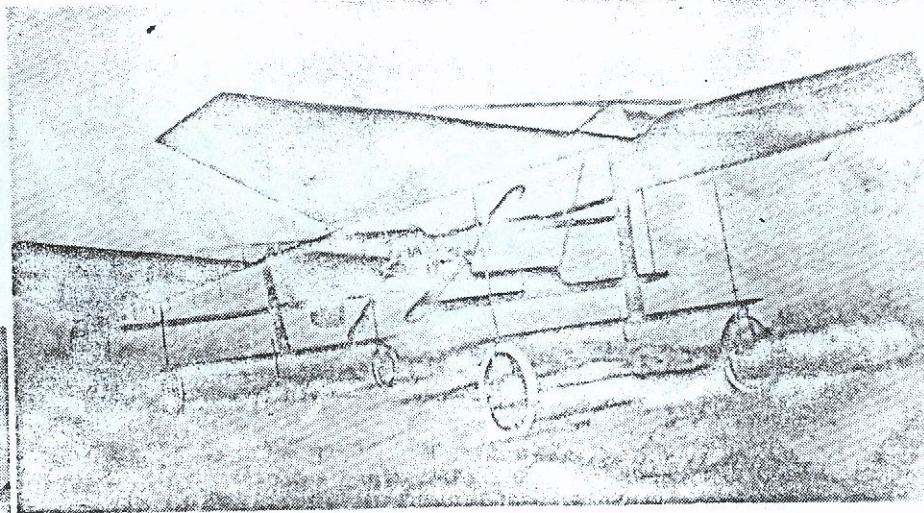
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WILLIAM WALLACE GIBSON, designer and builder of two successful Canadian pioneer aircraft. His genius and inventiveness should have brought him world-wide acclaim.

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It was the year 1908, there was no one turn to for advice, and it was truly tough ing, every single part had first to be signed, and then made by hand. Further odels were built, on a much more pre ntious scale than those made at Balgonie, d they were test-flown at Beacon Hill Park fore Gibson finally settled on the type he cided was best fitted for the design of his ll size machine.

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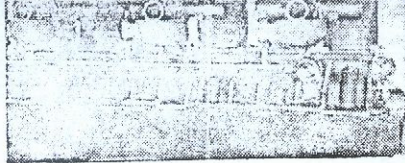
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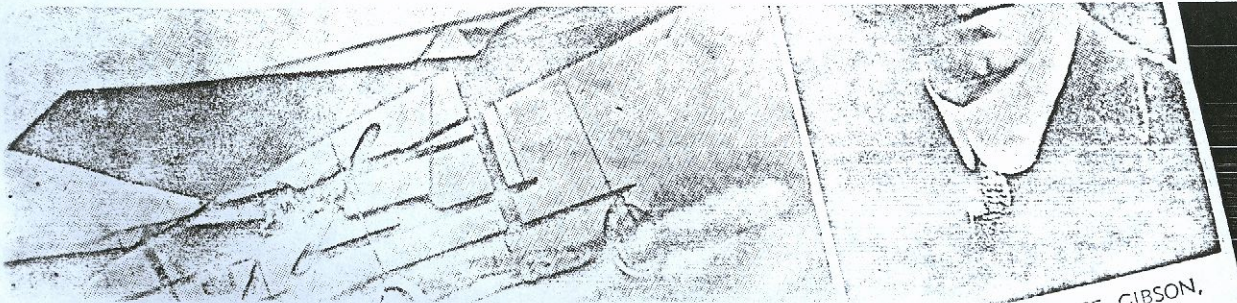## After This Experience and Study Decided to Redesign Entire Mac

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GIBSON.

146 Clarence

Time, BC Nov 16/85

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, 40 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 1905.

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, 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 to "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.

A daring young Victoria man, and an original flying machine

By Ab Kent
Times-Colonist staff

Eighty years ago today, made-in-Canada-powered flight was born on a Saanich farm near Mount Tolmie.

In the early morning of Sept. 8, 1910, a genius named William Wallace Gibson and two helpers took a wagon-load of kite-like parts to Dean's farm, now school grounds and subdivisions along Richmond Road.

There the flimsy pieces were assembled for the first flight of Gibson's Twin Plane, a self-designed craft powered by the first aero engine of its kind, also designed by Gibson.

A monument to this feat stands today on the Lansdowne slope, but Gibson goes largely unheralded otherwise.

Dave Marryatt, a private pilot building a plane in his basement, thinks Gibson deserves all the recognition he can get.

Marryatt is a former president of the Experimental Aircraft Association in Victoria, and is a member of the EAA's successor, the Vancouver Island Aviation Society, which promotes aviation, especially innovative work, and the teaching and enjoyment of flying.

The way commercial aviation is going, with its tight airport security and mass movement of passengers, he thinks the business has become too serious.

"The fun is in general aviation." And that includes private flyers and home-builders — like Gibson was.

Scoffed at and ridiculed by contemporary Victorians, Gibson put his Twin Plane to its test flight between the dawn and rising time for most people in order to escape critics, especially if the test were to fail.

But the short flight was a huge success considering the infancy of flying, marred only by crunching the wheels on landing.

Apparently there were no witnesses and it was two days before the historical flight made the papers.

Sixteen days later, after repairs to Twin Plane's undercarriage, reporters and bystanders gathered to see the craft fly again, this time 200 feet before a cross-wind forced Gibson to land.

The brakeless plane then crashed into a nearby stand of oaks and while the inventor-pilot was unhurt, the plane was smashed.

Gibson would go on to build a larger aircraft, the Multi-plane, using the same successful engine but with only one propeller instead of the original two.

Fittingly, the six-cyclinder Gibson engine is preserved in the National Air Museum in Ottawa.

Gibson worked mostly in isolation, unaware of the achievements being made in the U.S. and Europe by other aviation pioneers.

"Every metal part of the (Twin) Plane I made myself," he wrote in the 1959 volume of *Saskatchewan History*, which commemorated his early life at Balgonie, just east of Regina, where as a farm boy he flew kites and model aircraft of his own design.

"When I began my experimenting again in Victoria it was a heartbreaking struggle. I got encouragement from no one and people held me in ridicule.

"I remember one man who always held out both arms and flapped them whenever he saw me. Another would point to the sky, then cover his face.

"When I look back to that day I undertook to build a complete airplane with power plant, I realize that I had a lot more nerve than I have today."
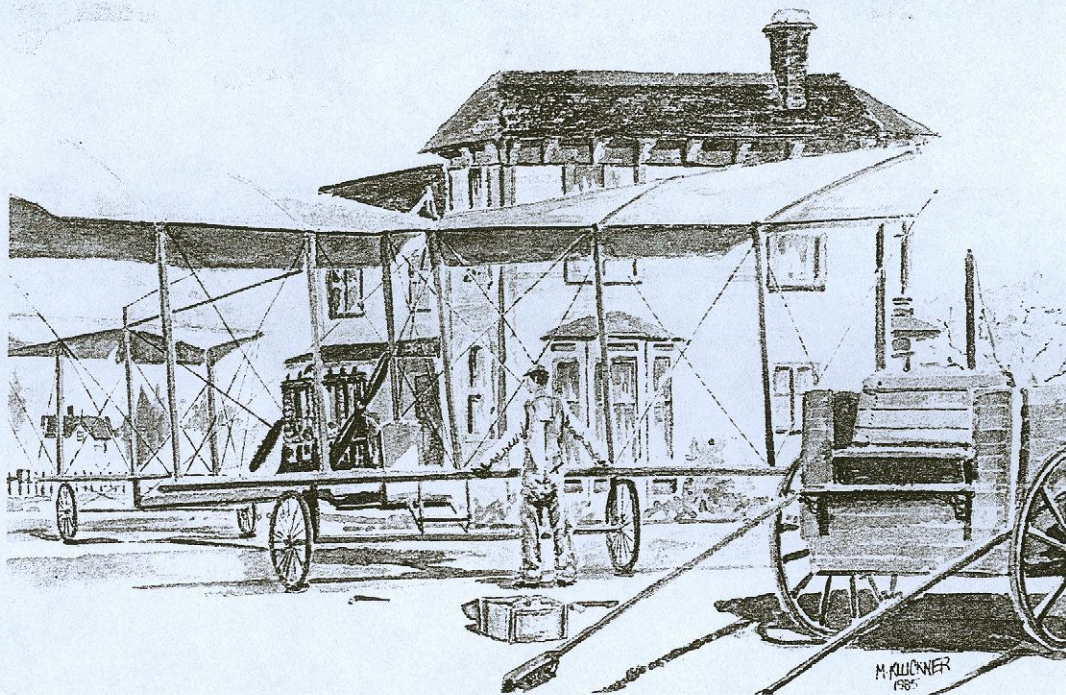

John McKay

■ MODEL of first Canadian powered plane, built by a Victoria genius, is examined by Clive Wright

Sept 8/90   William Gibson House 146 Clarence St

W.W. Gibson

The first all-Canadian airplane was built by William Gibson in the coach house behind 146 Clarence Street in 1910. He disassembled it, loaded it onto a wagon, and pulled it by horsepower to a grassy meadow on the Dean Farm near Mount Tolmie, later part of the Lansdowne airport, for its maiden flight.

The first successful all-Canadian airplane was built in Victoria, in the coach house behind 146 Clarence Street in James Bay. The spruce wings and airframe were designed by 35-year-old William Wallace Gibson, who had arrived in Victoria in 1907 to work in real estate, but tinkered with airplanes in his spare time. Fred Jeune on Johnson Street provided the silk for the wings, Tom Plimley built the undercarriage with four bicycle wheels, and the Hutchinson brothers designed and built the engine at their Bay Street shop near the Victoria Machinery Depot. A western stock saddle strapped to the airframe in front of the engine was the pilot's seat.
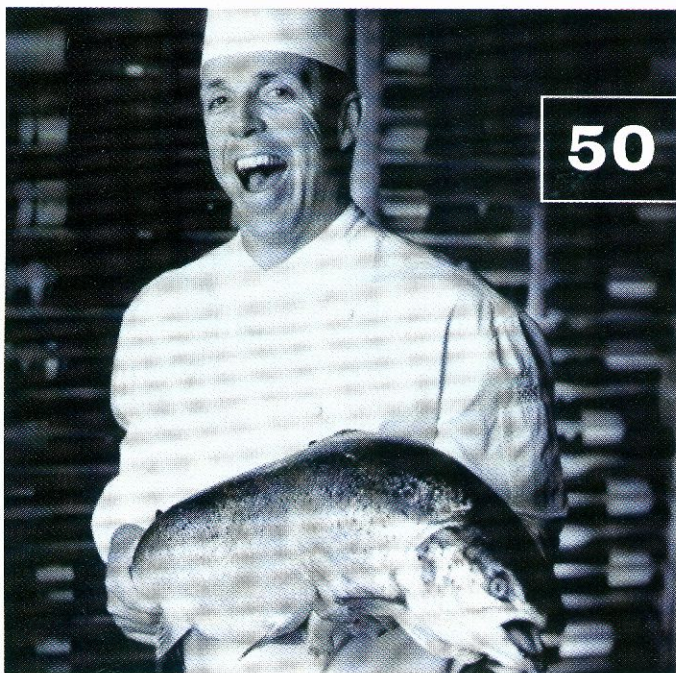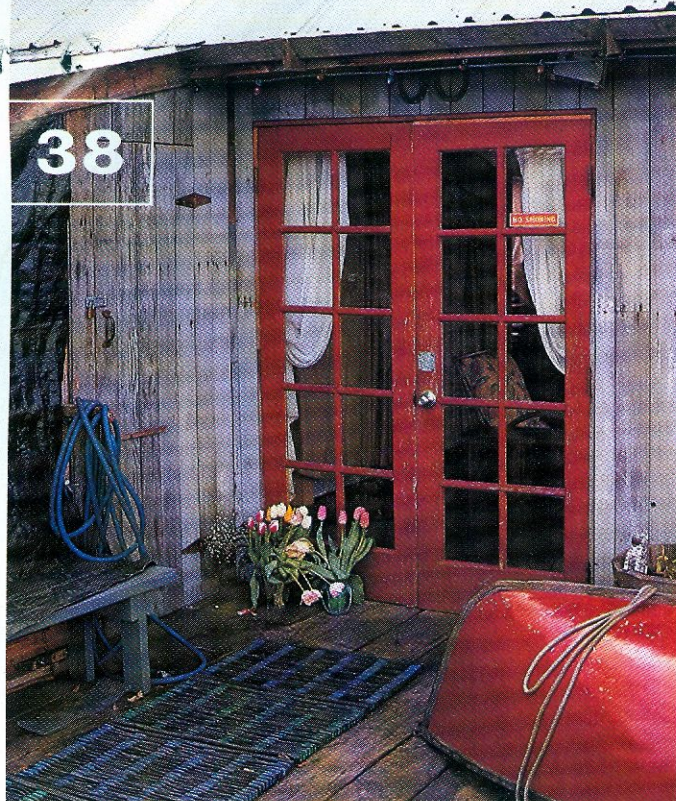
Gibson worked on the plane through the summer of 1910, then hauled it to a flat, grassy field north of Richmond Street, between Shelbourne and Lansdowne. On September 8, 1910, he managed a takeoff and flew the plane 200 feet. It was the first flight in British Columbia. The engine—distinctive for the two counter-rotating propellers at opposite ends of the crankshaft—is now on display at the National Aeronautical Museum in Ottawa. The engine's configuration gave Gibson's contraption the nickname "The Twin Plane." Gibson went to the United States to pursue his aviation interests, and after a long career died in Oakland, California in November, 1965, aged 91.

westernliving

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Prairie schooner:
The Dontianen 1, which was built to be captained down the Saskatchewan River and across the Atlantic to Finland.

DONTIANEN

WATER LINE

travel

DANNY BOYER

WHAT IS WESTERN Canada's most interesting road? Some would nominate the Sea to Sky highway between Whistler and Vancouver, so beloved by directors of Pontiac commercials. Others will favour the eye candy offered by the Banff-Jasper highway, with its peaks and glaciers and lakes of impossible green. But let us not forget a third route, one whose appeal is so straightforward it defies easy description. I speak, of course, of the Trans-Canada Highway as it passes through the eastern half of Saskatchewan.

What? Dubious that four divided lanes pointing directly at the horizon could rival two-lane routes more closely resembling a drunken ant's passage across Pamela Anderson? Sceptical that a journey beginning in Moose Jaw and ending in Moosomin could be of interest to anyone other than antler-bearing ruminants? Unaware that here lies a blend of history and anecdote so colourful that the only way to do it justice is through the use of animatronic characters? Clearly you have some reading to do.

Our trail begins a few kilometres south of Moose Jaw, at the Sukanen Ship Museum, an appropriately rough-hewn shrine to one of the saddest stories in Canadian history. The year was 1931, the prairies were a dust-

living on boiled wheat and the meat of his horses as, one by one, they died. By 1941 the *Dontianen 1* was finally ready to sail but Sukanen, unfortunately, was not. He was committed to a mental hospital, where shortly after he died.

The Sukanen epic took place some 200 kilometres northwest of this spot, but it seemed only too appropriate that his ship, symbol of hopeless desperation that it is, ultimately landed in Moose Jaw. Here was a city that as late as 1906 reigned as Saskatchewan's largest, a serious rival to Calgary and Edmonton as the biggest metropolis between Winnipeg and the Pacific. But a year earlier, Regina had been named capital of the new province, and in years to follow Saskatoon would get the university, Prince Albert the penitentiary and, as if that weren't bad enough, Weyburn and North Battleford the big mental hospitals. So many battles were lost that, after a succession of floods forced the bulldozing of a choice residential area in the 1970s, there were fears that Moose Jaw would become, at best, a low-cost bedroom suburb for burgeoning Regina, 45 minutes to the east.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the 21st century. Whereas pretty much every other western Canadian downtown

suddenly seemed interesting.

No one quite remembers when the light bulb went on, but about a decade ago Moose Jaw suddenly realized that something could be made of its unseemly past. Al Capone and his boozin' buddies may or may not have laid low there between gangland slayings, and Chinese immigrants may or may not have hidden from uncaring officialdom in tunnels that, when it comes to that, may or may not have honeycombed the subterrain. But there's no disputing that a well-travelled journalist of the day described the downtown quarter as resembling New Orleans for the liveliness of its street life or that a long-serving police chief was as skillful as any Huey Long crony when it came to looking the other way.

A modest tunnels tour was already up and running when a Moose Jaw native named Danny Guilhume returned from Vancouver for a visit and recognized the potential. By the summer of 2000, his company had elevated The Tunnels of Moose Jaw to a very different level, complete with actors and animatronic characters playing coolies, gangsters and honky-tonk piano players. Eyebrows were raised here and there about the sudden extent of the hitherto barely detected underground labyrinth, but in its

The Highway LESS TRAVELLED

Sometimes there is less to a road than meets the eye. The same can definitely not be said of the Trans-Canada between Moose Jaw and Moosomin. *By Jim Sutherland*

bowl, and all around Finnish homesteader Tom Sukanen people were packing up their steamer trunks and taking the first train out. Sukanen decided to leave as well, but his mode of transportation was going to be somewhat different. In a secluded coulee more than a thousand kilometres from the nearest tidewater, he began to build a ship, which he intended to captain down the Saskatchewan, through to Hudson Bay, out into the Arctic and across the Atlantic to his homeland. For 10 years he laboured on it,

was torn down and rebuilt in various shades of precast concrete, poor forgotten Moose Jaw had to make do with edifices dating back to its turn-of-the-century heyday. Meanwhile, deeply suppressed memories were beginning to surface about what that heyday had been like. Moose Jaw, it turned out, once had a nasty case of split personality. Proper and upright on the hill, it was a major-league party town down on River Street. And, in a province that had never lacked for sanctity, it was River Street that

first full year the operation attracted more than 100,000 patrons from around the world.

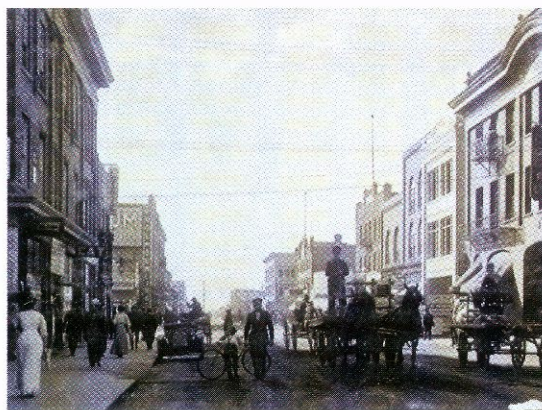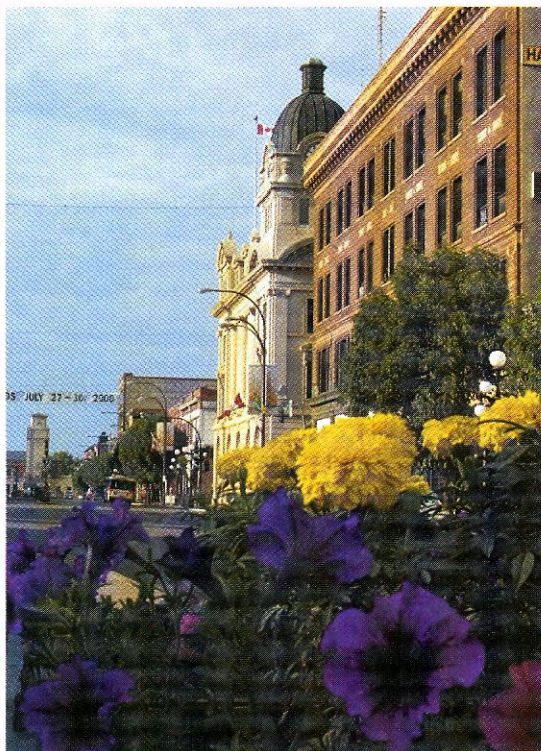Vice can be nice, but it was far from the only thing Moose Jaw discovered it had going for it. At one time a market-going farmer's Saturday on the town might have involved a swim in the naturally heated mineral waters of the Natatorium followed by dancing at Temple Gardens, a splendid downtown hall. Over the years, the Nat had sprung a leak and the Gardens had been torn down, but the water source—accidentally discovered while

drilling for oil—remained, and there was nothing wrong with the Temple Gardens name. More light bulbs went on, and today the six-year-old Temple Gardens Mineral Spa lends the city an unexpected touch of luxe. As for those flooded-out neighbourhoods, they've become Wakamow Park, a charming and unquestionably unique prairie ecosystem in that it is vegetated by block upon block of perennial beds and landscaping material gone wild. Back downtown, construction crews are busy on a casino of Vegas-like proportions and—yikes—architectural restraint to open later this year, while the old Army & Navy store and adjacent Capital Theatre are on their way to becoming a $7.4 million arts centre. When completed, it will become the home of, among other things, the province's writers' festival, the Saskatchewan Festival of Words, which runs for the sixth time this summer from July 25 to 28. All this in overlooked and outmanoeuvred Moose Jaw, population 33,000 and holding just fine, thank you.

On the highway again, you can't make the drive to Regina without thinking about Saskatchewan's most infamous murder, that of JoAnn Wilson. Colin Thatcher, a cabinet minister and the son of a former premier, was ultimately found guilty of the crime and still languishes in jail. But the outcome of the trial that transfixed the province in the fall of 1984 was too close to call, and to send Thatcher away, the jury had to convince itself that he managed the drive from Regina at speeds approaching 160 kph. Could he possibly have driven that fast? Stare down those unobstructed four lanes and you'll probably agree with the jury that he could have.

From Regina, it is perhaps a half-hour to Balgonie and the first example of what will become a familiar type—the small town resembling those idealized visions of rural Ontario or the American Midwest once found in grade-school readers: here a church and steeple, there veranda-clad homes on elm-treed byways, here a main street lined with brick façades. And perhaps there's a

Moose Jaw now and then: *Top: The downtown is rather like Victoria. Above: In 1912, New Orleans was the apt comparison.*

story lurking behind one of those storefronts that also should have been in our Grade 5 readers. After all, it was from a rooftop here that experiments were launched that led to the first ever flight of a Canadian-built plane.

The Bird Man of Balgonie, as William Wallace Gibson would later call himself, came to the prairies early—so early that a good part of his childhood was spent with the only other children in the area, the boys from the nearby camp of the Cree chief Piapot. Later, he recalled wishing he had been born an Indian, so favourably did the happy hunting-ground anticipated by his playmates

compare to the Presbyterian Hell his parents promised him.

Still, Gibson was essentially an upward-looking lad. At an early age he began to experiment with kites, often attaching to them baskets manned with gophers snared for the occasion. A careful observer, he noted that he could keep the rodents up only about an hour, "because some of them became deathly sick, and when I brought them down they sat on the grass with their eyes half closed for about two minutes before they scampered off to find their holes." Inevitably, these experiments led to accident—the plunge of a kite from high altitude, with the attendant loss of nine gopher passengers. "I believe that was the first air casualty in Canada," recorded Gibson.

In 1903, after hearing of the Wright brothers' successful flight, and with little more to draw upon than the technology he had developed flying his kites, Gibson set out to build an airplane of his own, restricting his experiments to night lest people think he was crazy. By the summer of 1904, having already flown a scale model successfully, he started work on his airplane, only to set it aside for a contract helping to construct the new Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. That enterprise cost him three years and $40,000, ultimately chasing him to Victoria for a fresh start. It was there, in 1910, that he made his short but triumphant flight.

Heading east from Balgonie, you'll have a decision to make: barrel on through via the Trans-Canada or veer north to link up with the Qu'Appelle Scenic Tour. If the latter, perhaps this is the time to take off the John Deere cap and replace it with a beret, as for more than a century the Qu'Appelle has been a well-spring of prairie culture. At the bottom of this deep valley lie the waters that inspired the poet Pauline Johnson; also that the first Saskatchewan painters of note retreated to, their old-country training having proved unequal to the task of representing the flat plains above. More recently, the water colourists have been replaced by people such as Métis multimedia artist Edward Poitras, who in March was one of

TOP: COURTESY MOOSE JAW TOURISM   BOTTOM: MOOSE JAW PUBLIC LIBRARY

seven Canadian artists awarded a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. If the poet Johnson has a 21st-century equivalent, it may be Trevor Herriot, who in 2000's *River in a Dry Land* addressed the ecology of the valley in such depth and with such unprosaic style that he was a finalist for a Governor General's Award. As it happens, Herriot and Poitras are mainstays of an important new exhibition, Qu'Appelle: Tales of Two Valleys, which in June moves to Saskatoon's Mendel Gallery (and from there to Regina's MacKenzie) after opening at the McMichael in Coburg, Ontario.

Back on the Trans-Canada, the town of Wolseley, with its brick storefronts, second-Empire architecture and pretty little lake, is an appropriate setting for Banbury House, a bed and breakfast contained within an impressive 19th-century mansion. Until two years ago, it was paired with Le Parisien, which for 18 years served up fine French cooking. Over the years many have wondered how the food of the French aris-

tocracy landed in these parts. The answer is that, at least the first time around, it came with the French aristocracy. In fact, a large group of nobles settled near Whitewood, another 70 kilometres along the Trans-
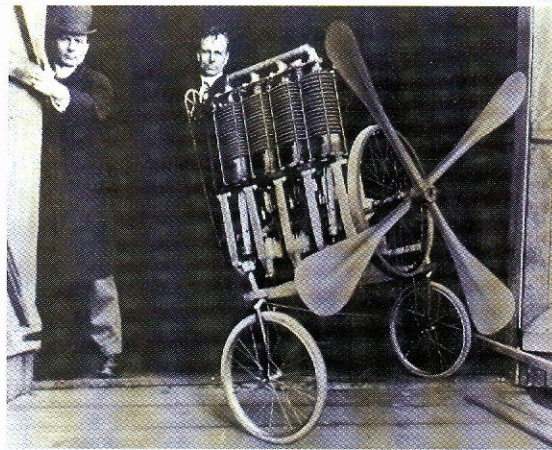
Air travel, take one: *William Gibson and top-hatted friend with an early model of what, surprisingly enough, later became a successful flying machine.*

Canada in 1886. Eastern Saskatchewan might benefit from their worldy charm today had leadership not passed in 1889 to Count Yves de Roffignac, who demonstrated a spectac-

ular talent for mismanagement. A partial list of disasters during his watch included the raising of sheep by the well-bred principals of the Maison Pleyel and Wolf piano-manufacturing firm, the establishment of a gruyère cheese factory by a partnership consisting of a viscount and the son of a wealthy champagne-maker, and the cultivation of chicory by two Belgian brothers. Twice the Van Brabants introduced chicory/coffee blends onto the market, only to fail after the drink proved all but unpotable due to their reluctance to dilute the chicory (which thrived) with sufficient amounts of expensive coffee. By the turn of the century the nobles were gone, and the huge settlement, which extended at one point some 65 kilometres from north to south, had passed into other hands.

Grand failure though La Rolanderie was, the joie de vivre it lent the areas is remembered with affection. Several counts were important members of Whitewood's accomplished town band. Count Henri de Soras was known for his

beautiful flower garden, and Count de Beaulincourt for his paintings. Magnificent balls at the Whitewood Hotel (which is still in use) brought prestige to the town.

But the true highlights of the social season revolved around horses and horse racing, and regular meets at La Rolanderie attracted a colourful crowd. An early observer describes Indians in festive attire on one side, racially mixed groups of settlers nearby, and then, a bit farther on, the French aristocrats in "faultless riding attire, ensemble complete to crop and martingale."

Left unmentioned, but no doubt present on such a jolly occasion, were the British counterparts of the French aristocrats, the gentry of nearby Cannington Manor, who easily matched the French in extravagance. Cannington began as the scheme of one Captain Edward Michell Pierce, who, following a ruinous bank failure, emigrated to Canada in the candid hope of living a life of ease on very little money. A word in the ear of Prime Minister Macdonald

secured for Pierce a large tract of land near Moose Mountain, south of Moosomin. There he conceived the idea of an agricultural college, to which young men of good breeding but troublesome demeanour could
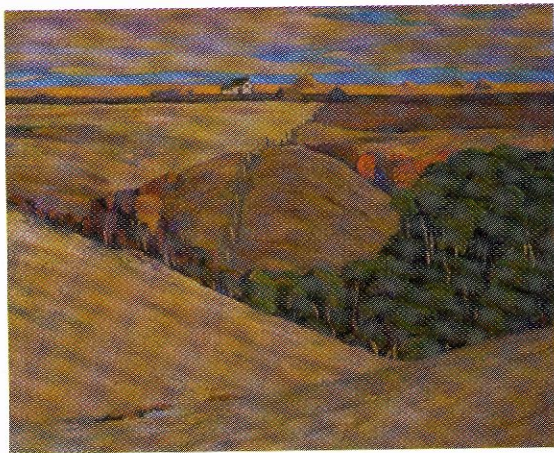
Across the Coulee: *The Illingworth Kerr painting is part of a Qu'Appelle show opening June 14 at Saskatoon's Mendel and later at Regina's MacKenzie.*

be sent for 100 pounds a year.

In this enterprise Pierce did a brisk but not always profitable business, owing to the disinclination of the pupils to do the work

expected of them. "I was glad when the young gentlemen took to tennis," said their Scottish instructor, "so that I could get on with the work."

The tone of Cannington Manor improved markedly when the discovery of a rich new vein of ore in an old iron mine abruptly changed the circumstances of former pupils Ernest and Billie Beckton and their brother Bertie. Ernest immediately married one of Pierce's many daughters, then built a 22-room stone mansion complete with ballroom and billiards hall for his new bride. Meanwhile, Billie set out to create a first-class racing stable, a quest that was quickly accomplished following the purchase of a string of American thoroughbreds, including a stud with two Kentucky Derby winners in its pedigree.

Although hospitality at Cannington Manor was of a more raucous nature than that of La Rolanderie, the settlement did not lack for distinguished visitors. Well thought of was a young Whitewood lawyer

named David Lloyd George, who went on to make something of a name for himself as a British prime minister. Cultural life was stimulated by visits from the poet Tennyson—Bert Tennyson, nephew of the poet laureate and a resident of Moosomin. Could Bert be looked back upon as perhaps the poet laureate of eastern Assiniboia Territory? The following example of Tennyson's art is addressed to a friend in England:

The world is fair in this new land,
   and yet I envy you,
For we have not the primrose fair,
   and though 'tis just as blue
The violet in exile here throws out
   a scentless bloom,
The rose is fair as England's rose,
   but has not it's perfume.

Remittance men like those at Cannington Manor clearly formed an important social class during the 1880s. Back in the Qu'Appelle Valley, north of Grenfell, yet another unlikely village was founded on the regular remittance cheques of one George

Audley Edward Hyde. At its largest, Hyde's personal village housed several dozen inhabitants and included a hotel, a store, a post office and several other businesses. When the cheques suddenly stopped arriving, Hyde tore

French horns: *Counts from La Rolanderie gave the Whitewood band a certain je ne sais quoi.*

everything down in order to build a toboggan slide—the beginnings, he apparently expected, of a lucrative winter resort. Hyde's village has disappeared virtually without a trace, but remnants of La Rolanderie may be

found a few kilometres south of Whitewood; ask directions in town. Cannington Manor, about an hour's drive south of Moosomin or Whitewood, is preserved as a provincial historical park.

With the car set on cruise control, you will have time to wonder how it was that this countryside, pleasant though it may be, became such a magnet for Europe's monied classes. Probably, as Saskatchewan farmers have long been wont to do, the answer is to blame the CPR. When the transcontinental railway was pushed through in 1885, settlement quickly followed, especially in the comparatively verdant lands of southern Manitoba and southeastern Saskatchewan. But within a year or two, a recession slowed the migration dramatically, leaving much of the expanse between Regina and the coast as wild frontier. So, while large blocks of land were available throughout the west in the years leading up to the turn of the century, taking up residence in most of them would have involved considerable risk and deprivation,

whereas the countryside east of Regina seemed almost cosy. Now, which option would the useless son of a banker or champagne merchant be more likely to choose?

A short detour north of Moosomin along Highway 8 will bring you to Spy Hill and another phenomenon that arose out of a historical disconnect. By the 1930s, cars were ubiquitous and Saskatchewan already possessed more miles of road than any other province. Unfortunately, for four months of the year, snowfall rendered most roads unreliable at best, and people had to leave behind the automobile age they thought they lived in and revert to their horses. In Quebec the same situation led to the development of tracked Bombardier snow machines and, ultimately, Canada's most successful industrial concern. We can only wonder what might have happened in Saskatchewan if similarly budding industrialists such as Spy Hill's Karl Lorch and Robert Fudge back in Moosomin had not chosen to use technology that was far more advanced.

A tracked vehicle? Lorch tried that but rejected it as too ponderous. Instead, the made-in-Saskatchewan solution was to mount airplane propellors on the backs of sophisticated, aerodynamic sleighs. Capable
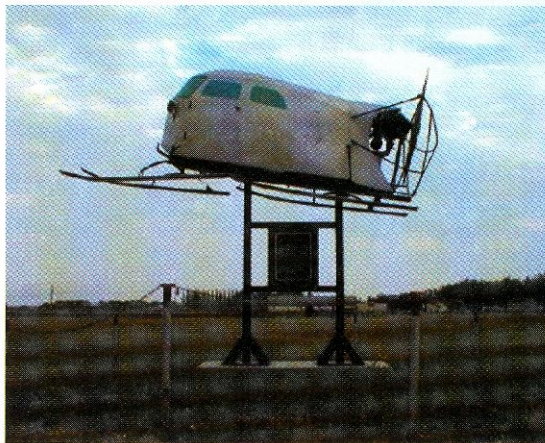
Bombardier beater: *Snow planes such as this Lorch in Spy Hill were much faster than the Quebec company's tracked vehicles.*

of 60 miles an hour, and in some cases even convertible to wheeled use come spring, these snow planes were in many ways superior to their Quebec competitors. Then again, they were noisy, dangerous and considerably slowed by warmer temperatures. While Fudge and Lorch each produced and sold several hundred vehicles, and other local companies pitched in with a few hundred more, all were forced to cease production after good winter roads became widespread in the 1950s.

At Spy Hill, citizens have mounted one of Lorch's snow planes atop a stand. Like a certain Moose Jaw ship, it speaks of a past that is all but unimaginable, even if, unlike that ship, its message has nothing to do with despair and madness but rather is a symbol of progress and optimism. As it happens, Karl Lorch had already begun to build his snow planes in 1931, when Tom Sukenan set to work on his boat. Imagine if the Finn had got hold of a Lorch and pointed it northeast, through the boreal forest, out onto the tundra and over the ice. It would have been a wild ride, and no doubt a fatal one, but it's hard to imagine that the ending could have been any more tragic. **wl**

First in the Air in British Columbia

by Peter Corley-Smith

"As gradual and graceful as the rise of an unstartled pheasant."
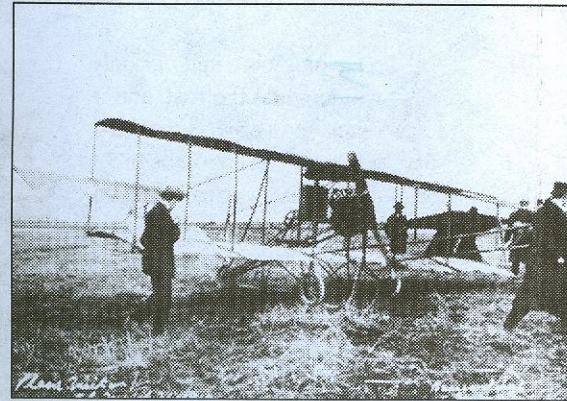
- Vancouver Province, March 26, 1910

The first manned "flight" recorded in British Columbia was an ascension in an unpowered hot-air balloon by Professor LeClaire. On June 9, 1880, LeClaire rose from the Skinner Street show grounds in Nanaimo and landed in the harbour less than two kilometers away. Nearly 30 years passed before the first controlled flight occurred when, on October 14, 1909, Harry Ginter flew a Strobel dirigible at the Provincial Exhibition grounds in Queen's Park, New Westminster.

The dirigible was a powered and controllable sausage-shaped balloon filled with hydrogen. Its gas bag was covered by a net. Cords from this net supported a triangular frame of spruce. This frame, typically 11 m (36 ft) long and 76 cm (30 in) high was hung apex up about 1.5 m (five ft) below the bag. A five-horsepower engine was mounted on the frame about a third of the way from the front and connected to a front propeller by a long hollow steel shaft.

The rudder, mounted aft, was built of bamboo fish poles covered with unbleached muslin and operated by a long, endless line of sash cord. When ready, the pilot sat astride the three centimeter (inch-and-a-quarter) spruce pole of the frame, his feet on two similar poles. The bag was filled with just enough hydrogen for buoyancy. The pilot started the engine and, when it was running smoothly, slid back along the frame, told the handlers to let go and the propeller would pull the dirigible up until it was high enough for the pilot to
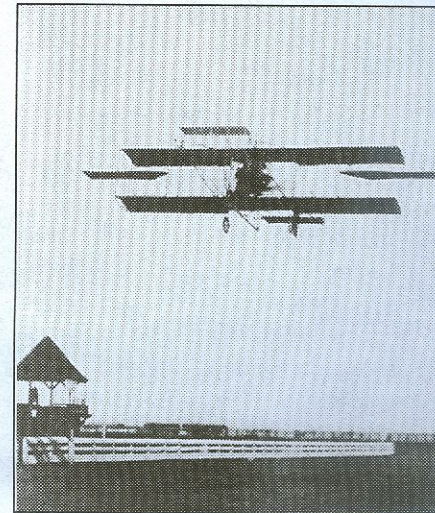

Harry Ginter flying his Strobel dirigible over Queen's Park, New Westminster, October 14, 1909.

slide forward again, level off and use the rudder to steer. To land, he reversed the process until low enough, shut off the engine, and reached up to pull a rope attached to a valve to vent gas and settle to the ground.

These exhibitions provoked a good deal of local interest, but it was the advent of the aeroplane that brought a genuine hope of fulfilling the enduring dream of flying like a bird. And although on December 17, 1903, the Wright brothers made what is generally conceded to be the first controlled, powered flight of a heavier-than-air machine, it took more time for the news to spread before people realized that this was the real thing. But when they did, they were genuinely excited and seized by the desire to see this magic for themselves.

In British Columbia, they had to wait until an early spring day in 1910. On March 25, an American pilot, Charles K. Hamilton, demonstrated in a small Curtiss pusher biplane – state of the art for the times – that the dream really had come true. Hamilton had learned to fly at the Glenn Curtiss flying school in Hammondsport, New York, leased a machine from Curtiss and joined the exhibition circuit.

In his Canadian debut, he took off from a race track: the Minoru Park track in Richmond. Finding a surface smooth

Preparing for the first flight in BC, March 25, 1910.

enough for the unsprung, bicycle-wheel undercarriages of those days was not easy, and a race track usually provided an acceptable surface – besides which, it invariably had a grandstand from which spectators could marvel in comfort and, no doubt, secretly hope for something as dramatic as a crash.

By this time, many in the United States had grown tired of just watching aircraft fly. Charlie responded with what was then daredevil stuff. People were convinced that if the engine stopped, the machine would crash; the idea of gliding was still only vaguely comprehended. One of Hamilton's first and very successful stunts was to climb to some 460 m (1,500 ft) above the exhibition ground and cut his engine. Then he would dive steeply, pull out – as the newspapers invariably claimed – at the last possible moment and then land. Spectators, convinced that he was diving to destruction, displayed gratifying reactions. Strong men shouted in dismay and, all over the grounds, if the newspapers are to be believed, young women fainted. On some occasions, pilots emulating Hamilton did fail to pull out, but there were ample incentives to take risks because exhibitions were very rewarding financially. A pilot could earn as much

Charles Hamilton over Minoru Park, on his March 26, 1910 flight.

as $10,000 for two or three flights of 10 or 15 minutes duration – a great deal of money in 1910 dollars.

Hamilton gave two demonstrations on the first day, the first ending in slight damage to his undercarriage which was repaired in two hours, after which, according to the *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser,* "...the aviator justified his reputation for courage of the kind seen only in men who play with the clouds. Vaulting into his seat, Hamilton gave the front planes the slant which could catch the air, and then like a giant sea gull the machine rose to the accompaniment of deafening cheers."

On the day after this account was published, Hamilton made a much more significant flight. He took off and followed the north shore of the Fraser River until he reached New Westminster, 16 km (10 mi) away, returning safely to the race track after 30 minutes in the air – a considerable accomplishment for those days. Later, he took on a racehorse, a local favourite called Prince Brutus in a 1.6-kilometer (one-mile) race. Unfortunately, he spotted the horse too much of a handicap, allowing it and its rider, Curley Lewis, a start of five-eighths of the course. Hamilton lost, much one suspects, to the delight of the

Charles Hamilton, centre, flanked by his mechanic and his manager.

reactionaries in the audience.

In any event, the exhibition was a resounding success. To transport the several thousand spectators who attended from Vancouver, the BC Electric Railway added to its normal schedule a number of flat cars equipped with seats, as well as several observation cars borrowed from the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was front page news in all the Vancouver newspapers and the prose verged on the purple: "Like a huge bird with outstretched wings, rushing to the defence of her brood, the biplane came sweeping down the track upon its tiny wheels and in front of the grandstand the aviator caused it to rise. When the amber-colored machine stands upon the ground with its power shut off, it looks benign in a cumbersome sort of way, but as soon as it leaves the earth it seems to have entered its natural element. Its ascent, as controlled by Mr. Hamilton, is as gradual and graceful as the rise of an unstartled pheasant and its every move is marked by flashing swiftness and by beautiful design."

For the pilots who survived those early years, it was a heady experience. Apart from the financial rewards, they enjoyed the sort of adulation now only bestowed on pop music stars. Screaming

young women tried to break down fences to get at them; and, if they succeeded, to tear off parts of their clothing – even hanks of hair – for souvenirs. There were numerous, sometimes snide comments in the press that pilots never lacked for young and attractive female companions in the evenings.

Sadly, these conditions no longer prevailed when I became a pilot. ■

About Peter Corely-Smith
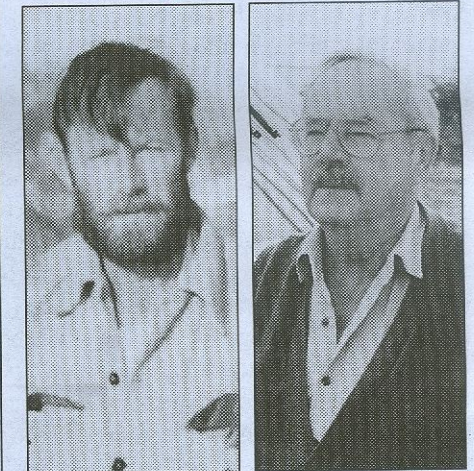
Peter Corely-Smith: helicopter pilot in 1955 and today.

Peter Corely-Smith, a man who studies the past, has an interesting history of his own. He has had careers as a Special Operations Executive (parachuting equipment and agents to the resistance movement in Europe during WWII), a miner and surveyor along the Gold Coast, a commercial helicopter pilot and an English instructor at BCIT. For 12 years, he was history curator at the then-BC Provincial Museum and is currently an RBCM research associate.

Corely-Smith has also written eight books – five of them on aviation history, including *Barnstorming to Bush Flying: British Columbia's Aviation Pioneers, 1910-1930; Bush Flying to Blind Flying: British Columbia's Aviation Pioneers, 1930-1940* and *Helicopters in the High Country* (co-authored with D. Parker) to be reprinted this winter. ■

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By David Lassner

*For nature's plan was ne'er intended
That man through space should be suspended
And naught but fool, a bird would make
Or nature's secrets try to take.*

— **William Wallace Gibson**

ODD WORDS for a man who, ironically, would go on to become one of British Columbia's aviation pioneers. But William Wallace Gibson did in fact "a bird make" when he flew the first Canadian designed and built aircraft over a field that is now part of Lansdowne Junior Secondary School east of downtown Victoria.

The flight was the culmination of a dream years in the making.

Gibson started his aviation career in a modest way at the tender age of eight. When he wasn't doing chores around his family's Saskatchewan farm he was building and flying kites. As he grew older his designs became more sophisticated and he graduated from kites to model gliders, all the time modifying and improving his designs to make his aircraft more stable.

While Gibson continued to experiment with flying, less lofty goals also occupied much of his time. By 1905, he had established himself as a successful businessman with three hardware stores, been married and started a family. About this time, much of Saskatchewan was caught in the throes of railroad fever and Gibson, thinking he could cash in on the windfall, signed a contract to lay 40 miles of track for the Grand Trunk Railway. But when he failed to meet his deadlines and ran into construction overruns, he was forced to sell his stores to cover the deficit.

While the experience took a heavy toll on his finances, it also helped reignite his interest in flying. Not long after, he and his family were on their way to Victoria.

While trying to establish himself on the West Coast, Gibson met Locky Grant, a down-on-his-luck miner who wanted to sell his gold claim at Elk River. Gibson decided gold speculation might be the answer to his financial prayers. After a hair-raising 17-day boat trip to inspect the claim, Gibson offered Grant $500. The pair worked the claim all summer and mined enough gold for Gibson to persuade a Victoria mining syndicate to buy it.

Gibson's passion for aviation was unflagging and continued to exert its own particular kind of pressure and now, armed with his $10,000 windfall from selling the
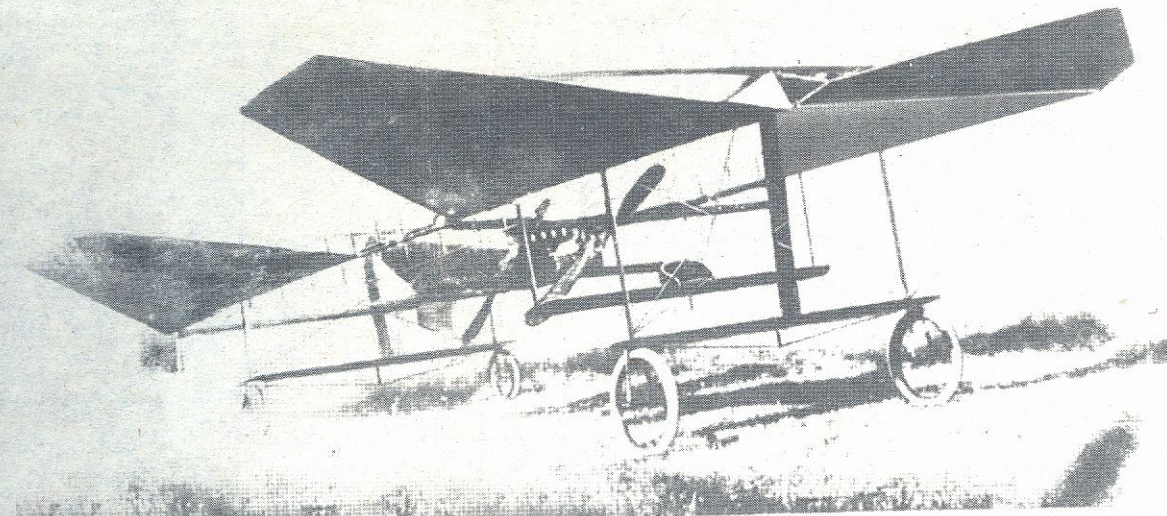
MUSEUM OF AVIATION PHOTO

First flight was here

gold claim, he turned his full attention to the business of flying.

With no formal training in engineering or drafting, Gibson's creativity took flight and it wasn't long before he was testing large-scale models off the crest of Beacon Hill Park.

Few others at the time shared Gibson's dream and derision greeted him at almost every turn. According to some historical accounts, acquaintances would walk up to him on the street and flap their arms like wings. His friends were openly skeptical.

When Gibson took his design for an engine to the Hutchinson Brothers, a Victoria machine shop, they also scoffed, claiming the engine would never work. But persistence and an unwavering commitment finally won the Hutchinsons over and Gibson persuaded them to build it.

An innovative design of his own making, Gibson's 50 horse power engine called for a six-cylinder, two-stroke, air-cooled engine — unheard of at the time. It drove two propellers, one at either end of the engine block, with opposite pitches so they both propelled the plane.

Once the engine was completed, Gibson attached it to the airframe which he manufactured himself. He patterned his
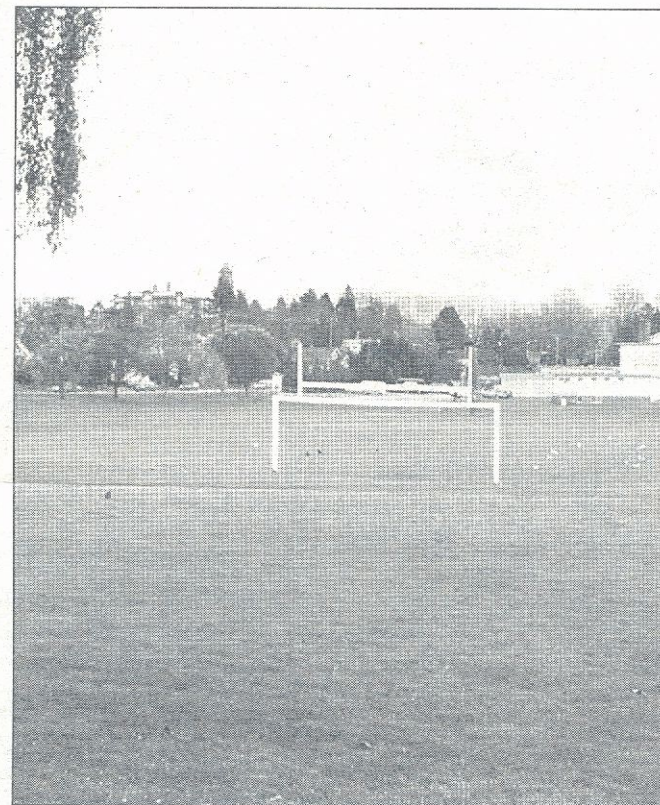
IAN McKAIN PHOTO

airship after a bird in flight — a design that would later become known as the "gull wing." Its two wings, one in front of the pilot and the other behind, sloped down about three feet from where they attached to the frame and rose again at the tips. Each spanned 20 feet and tapered from eight feet in the centre to about four feet. The wings were also adjustable through a series of wires and turnbuckles. The plane's height was controlled by use of a stick which operated the elevator and two shoulder straps that controlled the rudder.

After more than 20 years of looking up, Gibson's life-long dream to look down was about to come true.

Gibson secretly moved the aircraft to a field on the Dean farm near Mount Tolmie where he'd erected a large tent. Wanting to perfect the machine before

He had no training in engineering, but William Wallace Gibson used the money he made off a gold claim to build the plane at left to his own design, powered by an engine also of his own design. On Sept. 24, 1910, he ushered British Columbia into the aviation age when he lifted off from the field now attached to Lansdowne School, left, and flew some 200 feet before hitting an oak tree.

public unveiling, Gibson made a number of test flights, most in the early hours of the morning when most people were still asleep. On one of Gibson's test flights, one of the bicycle tires he used for landing gear buckled on touch down. It took him two weeks to repair the damage.

On Sept. 24, 1910, with reporters and spectators watching, William Wallace Gibson, sitting in a modified saddle, gently ushered in British Columbia's aviation age. His flight lasted less than five minutes, climbed to 25 feet, flew for a distance of 200 feet, and ended in a collision with an oak tree.

A bad ending, but a good beginning to an industry that today pumps millions of dollars into Vancouver Island's economy.

David Lassner is a Victoria writer who loves flying.