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Century of Flight – Part II

No comments [Dave Rasdal](#)

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

Any drive to The Eastern Iowa Airport takes you along Wright Brothers Boulevard, a reminder that the first men to fly a heavier-than-air craft once lived in Cedar Rapids. But that road and others nearby — Cessna, Collins and Lippisch — also offer a glimpse at Iowa's rich aviation history.

While Orville and Wilbur Wright were but 10 and 14 years old in 1881 when their family moved from Cedar Rapids to Dayton, Ohio, they took with them a fascination for flight. For it was, in Cedar Rapids, the boys played with a rubber band powered "helicopter." They built replicas that also flew, but became frustrated and temporarily shelved the idea of flying themselves when a large model faltered.

But plenty of other people in Iowa experimented with flight and equipment associated with it — Clyde Cessna who was born in Hawthorne and in 1927 brought flying to the masses with Cessna Aircraft Corporation in Kansas; Arthur Collins of Cedar Rapids who loved to fly and pioneered aircraft radio communication; Alexander Lippisch, whom Collins brought to Iowa after he had perfected the Delta Wing in Germany.

But let's turn the clock back to the days after Art Hartman flew the first powered airplane from Iowa soil on May 10, 1910, in Burlington. It is this achievement that has Iowa aviation buffs celebrating a century of flight in Iowa this year and why I'm writing about it each Monday through Sept. 6.



A single wing 1909 Bleriot XI (left) that closely resembles Hartman's home built plane hangs in the atrium of the State Historical Museum in Des Moines.

Also among the rafters are a 1911 Curtiss Pusher biplane that became the most popular flying machine of its era and a more modern 1917 Solbrig-Benoist built by Oscar Solbrig (right) in Davenport who tested the engine in his kitchen.



This Curtiss Pusher was built from a kit by brothers Arthur and Ben Klein in Treynor who flew it from 1911 to 1915.

"They flew it a few times," says Michael O. Smith, museum curator. "The only problem was that every time they flew it something would break."

The plane was disassembled, stored and rediscovered in the 1960s.

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At the adjacent State Historical Society of Iowa Library and Archives Reading Room, a display of photographs and clippings

honors the state's first 100 years of flight.

One story describes the 1916 death of Billy Robinson of Grinnell. His plane spiraled out of control and crashed after he attempted to break the altitude record of 17,000 feet. In 1914 he established a long-distance flying record of 390 miles from Des Moines to Kentland, Ind., after inclement weather prevented him from landing in Chicago.

Early fliers often changed plans, including Charles Lindbergh, who on a foggy day in 1923 was forced to land his Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" near Robins, just north of Cedar Rapids. He would later deliver the plane to Francis Stimson in Oelwein.

Lindbergh, of course, became the first man to fly non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927.

But, did you know that two weeks later Clarence Duncan Chamberlin of Denison became the first to fly nonstop from New York to Berlin? He set an endurance record of 51 hours, 11 minutes in the air and took the first paying passenger across the Atlantic.



By then Amelia Earhart, the most famous early woman aviator, had been taught to fly by Neta Snook who grew up in Ames and learned to fly in Davenport. The lessons took place in 1921 at Kinner Field in Los Angeles.

Most folks who had the money and wanted to fly could learn at a flying school. Not so J. Herman Banning of Oklahoma. He was black.

Banning, however, wouldn't stay grounded. He studied engineering at Iowa State College in Ames and in 1924 found non-prejudicial former Army pilot Ray Fisher in Des Moines to give him lessons.

Banning, who named a plane "Miss Ames" and teamed up with another black pilot to fly coast-to-coast in 42 hours flying time in 1932, would die a year later as a passenger in a Los Angeles area plane crash.

But, after learning to fly in Iowa, Banning earned pilot's license No. 1324, the first ever issued to a black man.

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