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Walter P. Fuller

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BRIEF ARTICLES

"EARLY BIRDS" OF FLORIDA

by WALTER P. FULLER

ST. PETERSBURG IS the proud and jealous owner of the title of home port of "The first regularly scheduled commercial Airline in the world." This despite the fact it acquired the title quite accidentally; the unexpected result of a rather casual and typical publicity stunt sponsored by one of its early day flamboyant "characters," one Noel A. Mitchell.

Mitchell hailed from Providence, Rhode Island. From the moment he arrived in St. Petersburg, in about 1909, until his death three decades later, he was the center of a gay and irresponsible whirl of publicity and personal promotion, usually harmless but frequently beneficial. For instance, in promoting his real estate business located at the corner of Fourth Street and Central Avenue, he placed green benches splashed with personal advertisements on the broad sidewalks of Central Avenue. These ended up as the now famous Green Benches of St. Petersburg. And fittingly enough, Mitchell was found dead on one on lower Central one gray morning after a long gay night.

Mitchell's first promotion of an airplane stunt ended in comic failure. He brought W. L. Bonney, one of the nation's first daring man birds, to St. Petersburg on February 19, 1912, for the advertised purpose of "looping the loop" and doing other stunts with his Wright biplane. A sandspit at Bayboro, the town's hopeful new harbor, was roped off, an admission of fifteen and twenty cents charged, with the plane to take off from the spit. Customers' cash totaled only \$186.75, as thousands stood outside the ropes at and on various vantage points instead of coming inside the ropes. Benney made a short tame flight, declaring he didn't propose to loop the loop at the risk of both his neck and his own money. Mitchell obligingly made up the deficit.

Naught deterred, Mitchell tried another aerial promotion almost two years later, which succeeded far beyond his original hopes.

Mitchell, enthusiastically aided by L. A. Whitney, later secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, and still later one of the

pioneer promoters of the Tamiami Trail, induced the Tom Be-noist Flying Boat Company to send two of its new ships to St. Petersburg in charge of Percy E. Fansler. The boats arrived in crates on December 31, 1913, and they were hastily assembled by Anthony Habersack Jannus, the prospective chief pilot, and Jay Dee Smith, a local mechanic. Scene of operations was on the south side of the Second Avenue North Mole, now a part of the Central yacht basin.

A native of St. Louis, Missouri, Jannus had become famous on December 28, 1912, when he had flown a plane 2,000 miles from Omaha to New Orleans in continuous but not sustained flight, then the world record. He had been assisted by his brother Roger. Colorful, friendly, ebullient; he was the star of the whole show for its duration. Smith, still alive as this is written, a resourceful, sturdy mechanic, was primarily responsible for the remarkable record of punctuality for the scheduled flights eventually maintained.

Fansler arrived December 14, and the promotion was on. Twelve local citizens were first induced to pay \$100 each to subsidize the enterprize. The Chamber of Commerce matched this sum. The first official passenger flights on January 1 were auctioned off in as gaudy and exciting a performance as the little town had ever seen. Abe C. Pheil, mayor, and phosphate miner and dredger by profession, bid in the first flight for \$400. Victim of his own enthusiasm, Mitchell paid \$175 for the second, and H. Walter Fuller, active in steamboats, street cars, electric power, hotels, real estate, got the third as a \$100 bargain. The three men were flown to Tampa and back, Pheil going over against a head wind in twenty-three minutes, back in twenty-a distance of almost exactly twenty miles each way. The plane set down at Tampa in the Hillsborough River, south of the Lafayette Street bridge.

Actually, the day before the official "first flight," the first passenger had flown for free, he being James G. Foley, old showman turned real estate agent. The flight had been for the purpose of reassuring a very skeptical crowd of potential customers that the frail little craft could actually carry two persons.

Mrs. L. A. Whitney, wife of one of the promoters, was the first woman to take an "official" flight on the line, on January 8, despite the fact that on January 2 Miss Mae Peabody, of Dubuque,

Iowa, made a regular pay flight. The first night flight was made January 19.

Daily after January first, for a period of some eleven days, flights were made irregularly as pay passengers were available, sometimes to Tampa, sometimes not, depending on the nerve and cash outlay of the passenger. But the idea was born that actually gave historical significance to the episode which resulted in validating the claim to be the first scheduled airline in history.

On January 12, 1914, Edgar Ivey, St. Petersburg agent of Swift & Co., arranged for several hams and strips of bacon to be flown for pay from the Tampa warehouse of the company in answer to a legitimate order from Hefner's Grocery for a hurry up shipment of meat to counter some unexpected competition. The pay load was twenty-two pounds of ham, eighteen of bacon. There had been a semblance of commercial use before that; the St. Petersburg *Times* not having an engraving plant at the time had begun on January 2 to send its pictures to a Tampa engraver for processing. It had also begun to send daily a bundle of twenty-five copies of its paper to Tampa, as a feeble gesture of service and competition.

So about mid-January regularly scheduled round trip flights were run from St. Petersburg to Tampa, usually four a day, but a total of eight on January 20. Business was excellent during the Gasparilla celebration in Tampa, and the De Soto celebration a bit later. The daily flights continued until May 5, 1914, by which time the tourists had departed; the novelty wore off and the enterprise was discontinued.

But sturdy efforts had been made for permanent success. Two added boats had been brought down, on January 30 a pilot's training school had been started, and exploratory and promotional trips had been made to Pass-a-Grille and even as far as Sarasota. Only on February 21, when a storm badly roughed the Bay, were the daily schedules not met. The enterprise had been incorporated as the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Company. Competition even had appeared in the form of a Curtiss plane. Tom Benoist himself had appeared on the scene and remained for several weeks.

The pilot's school attracted several students, the first graduate was Byrd M. Latham, Sr., who bought a ship, went to Conneaut Lake, Pennsylvania, for a successful summer of barnstorming, until a near fatal wreck suggested to him that the future

of the business was not too stable, whereupon he abruptly and permanently retired as a flier. He later achieved a distinguished business career that eventually included the presidency of the company owning the Gandy toll bridge connecting St. Petersburg and Tampa, and the presidency of the Florida Power Company. Mr. Latham is one of the few living survivors of the enterprise. His license was dated May 19, 1914.

As for Jannus, he eventually ended up as a flying instructor for the Russian government and was killed October 12, 1916, while testing a plane.

An amusing incident highlighted the unprecedented nature of the venture, when on January 6, a Mr. Whitney, port inspector at Tampa for the Steamboat Inspection Bureau of the Department of Commerce and Labor, demanded that the airships be equipped and licensed in accordance with the regulations for water ships. And he followed up on January 19 with a demand that the pilots be licensed and be fully equipped in accordance with water navigation laws.

The "ships" were biplanes with linen wings, 44.5 feet from tip to tip, powered with a 75 horsepower motor, pushing a single wooden propeller. Their total weight, unloaded, was 1,250 pounds.

Actually the over-water flight from St. Petersburg to Tampa even by 60 mile-an-hour airboats, had all the logic of success. The most effective competition was from the Favorite line of steamers, with two round trips a day at a dollar; trip time was about two and a half hours. The boats were practically never on schedule since they hauled freight as well as passengers. They were safe and comfortable, but a business errand to Tampa consumed a minimum of a day. By train the circuitous land route, some sixty-four miles, was slower and dirtier. The trip by automobile at that day was mostly a theory, actually tried mostly by daring sportsmen. But the time of reliability of motors and acquired flying habits by travelers was not yet, so the line died when the steam of enthusiasm ran out.

But it was eventually ruled that the line had operated long enough and with sufficient regularity to justify the title of "first," and a full-sized replica of the ship graces the Smithsonian, and a reduced replica, the St. Petersburg Historical Society.