

FRAMINGHAM AIRPORT HISTORY I

Yes, Virginia, Framingham did have an airport once, in fact, at one time the town had two landing fields operating concurrently. These were far from today's modern jet ports to be sure, but they were places to takeoff from and land on. The story begins, for our purposes, in the Spring of 1929 when a group of citizens proposed the town's purchase of the State-owned Musterfield for use as a municipal airport. This proposal, put in the form of House Bill 1203, was reported on favorably by the Ways and Means Committee of the State Legislature on April 3, 1929. Three days later a delegation from Framingham visited Lowell Airport to inspect the Moth Aircraft Corp., a DeHavilland airplane manufacturer which, but for lack of a suitable airfield, had first considered locating in Framingham. A member of that delegation, Mr. Howard I. Sanger, penned a letter to the Framingham News editor stating that, in his opinion, the Gould Farm out on Western Avenue was a much superior location for an airport than was the Musterfield. So began a controversy which threatened, at times, to leave Framingham with no airport at all.

The warring factions were split into three groups; those who favored the Musterfield site, those who proposed instead the Gould Farm and lastly, those preferring no airport at all. The last mentioned group won a skirmish when the Framingham Airport Bill was killed in the State Senate, opponents claiming that the proposed purchase price of \$65,000 for the 113 acre Musterfield tract was much too low. The State had originally paid \$10,000 for the land. Among the Musterfield advocates were Captain Chris Ford, Commander of the Boston Airport and former Lafayette Escadrille flyer, members of the Framingham Aero Club and James Laneri, pilot of a Challenger biplane, who landed at the Musterfield and took many town officials for sight-seeing rides in an obvious attempt to promote aviation here.

In the second, or Gould's Farm category, along with Mr. Sanger, was the Bay State Flying Service which literally put its money where its mouth was by leasing the Gould Farm on May 16th for the avowed purpose of operating it as a flying field. However, on June 8th, Ray W. Krout, the first flying business man to visit Framingham, arrived at the Musterfield in his own plane to transact business with Dennison Manufacturing Company. Nevertheless, Bay State Flying Service announced on July 19th that operations would commence on Saturday, the 20th with American Eagle OX-5 powered biplanes being used for passenger flights. The first two braving the wild blue yonder with Lieutenant Perrara, pilot, were Framingham residents, William Piazza and James Fledt, Jr., Fledt subsequently learning to fly at the field and purchasing an airplane which he kept there. Thirty-seven years later Mr. Piazza remarked that although the flight was very pleasant and enjoyable, he had not flown since. Mrs. Piazza was astonished to find that her husband had ever been in an airplane.

August of 1929 was quite eventful in various ways insofar as Framingham aviation was concerned. The "Independence", Monarch Food Products' Ford Trimotor, landed at Gould's Farm; William Boyd, later to gain fame as Hopalong Cassidy, was starring in "The Flying Fool" at the Gorman Theater and the Navy's dirigible "Los Angeles" passed over Framingham twice on the 16th, once at 3:30 A.M. and again at 11:00 A.M. For those who were fortunate to have witnessed these majestic ships of the sky there has been nothing to equal them since the holocaust which reduced the mighty "Hindenburg" to scrap metal at Lakehurst, New Jersey in 1937.

On the 19th of August, the Registry of Motor Vehicles, speaking through the State Aviation Inspector, Robert L. O'Brien, banned the use of Gould's Farm for flying, high tension lines running east and west at the south end of the field being cited as the prime objection. Leroy F. "Teddy" Gould immediately stated that work would start on tree and rock removal and that negotiations were underway to have the power lines relocated so that the field could again be operational.

September passed quietly, the Musterfield hosting two visitors, J.A. McCarthy, salesman for Baker Supply Company, landing in a Curtiss Robin and Charles Wright, pilot for Colonial Airways, bringing his Challenger biplane down for an oil pressure check. On the 19th of October, and ad appeared on the front page of the Framingham News which stated: "Fly over your home town of Framingham anytime from Marlboro Airport, \$5.00 per person." This seemed to be "rubbing it in" a bit for those who were trying so hard to establish a flying operation in the town. On the plus side of the ledger however, was the Framingham Aero Club which voted to continue its efforts toward securing a municipal airport for the town. The Musterfield had been its first choice, however the door was left open for selection of another location if this proved necessary.

Two names were prominent in the October, 1929 Framingham News pages, Captain Arthur Raymond Brooks and Harlan F. Banks. Brooks had flown over Framingham enroute to Boston from New York in the Bell Telephone Laboratories "Flying Telephone Exchange"; while Banks was busying himself with plans for an Armistice Day Weekend Monster Air Meet to be held in Framingham. The backgrounds of these two men are interesting, therefore we would like to digress a bit to familiarize the reader with them.

Captain Arthur "Ray" Brooks was born in Framingham on November 1, 1895, the son of Frank E. Brooks and the former Josephine Levasseur. Ray attended Framingham schools and graduated from M.I.T. with a B.S. degree. The year of his graduation was 1917 and so, instead of pursuing his intended business career, Ray enlisted in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps in which he was commissioned a second Lieutenant on February 25, 1918. By the end of the following month, Brooks was at the front in the Toul sector. He then proceeded to become Framingham's first Ace with six confirmed victories.

Harlan F. Banks was born in Kentville, Nova Scotia but came to Framingham during his youth. After attending Framingham High School, he graduated from Wentworth Institute, continuing on to graduate work at Lowell Institute. A 1917 enlistee in the Royal Canadian Air Force, Banks graduated from the School of Military Aeronautics at Toronto University, being commissioned a Lieutenant in the R.C.A.F. in 1918. A five month's stay in France earned him a Croix de Guerre, also credit for destroying an enemy observation balloon.

In 1920 these two men, Banks and Brooks, in partnership with Charles O. Smith, a World War flying veteran of the R.A.F., formed an aviation service to operate from the Musterfield. The fact that neither Framingham nor any other community was ready for such an advanced venture at the time proved to be a formidable stumbling block. With the failure of their dream the three had gone their separate ways.

Harlan Banks, who remained in Framingham, was head of Air Pageants Association and in this capacity was planning the air meet for Framingham. His plans for this extravaganza included engaging the services of Lieutenant Billy Leonard, former U.S.A.A.C., acclaimed for his masterful execution of the dangerous outside loop and test pilot/salesman for the Alliance Aircraft Company, builders of the Argo biplanes used by Leonard in his performances. Although the Registry of Motor Vehicles, then the controlling body for aeronautics in Massachusetts, had imposed a ban on flying at the Gould Farm, Banks surmised that if he suspended any commercial activities such as passenger flights, etc., there would be no objection to use of the site for his show. Such was not the case however, and on the Thursday prior to the event, scheduled for the long Armistice Day weekend, Banks found himself with an airshow and no place to hold it.

Rising to the occasion, Harold Robbins, manager of the nearby Marlboro Airport, offered his facilities and Banks eagerly accepted. Framingham's first air show was destined to be held at another time. Appearing at the show were James Desjardin with his Stearman, Fred Desjardin with a Waco, Captain Guy "Gus" Ham flying a Davis V-3, Frank Crowley of Air Mail fame, John Duggan and Lieutenant George Watkins. While demonstrating combat maneuvers with the last mentioned Watkins, Billy Leonard, shortly after 4:00 on the 11th, lost control of his Argo which dove straight into the ground from less than 1000 feet killing him instantly. Marlboro had gained the show but fell heir also to the tragedy.

In January of 1930 a measure for the sale of the Musterfield was once more introduced in the State Legislature with opposition voiced by one L.F. Gould. On the 30th, Melbourne Dorr, purchasing agent for Raymond's and son of Frank I. Dorr, President of the company, made a quick flying trip to Framingham from Boston and back to pick up luggage for a flight to Florida in a Travel Air 6000 monoplane piloted by Russell Boardman. On April 1st, the Musterfield Bill was reported on favorably by the Senate Committee and Teddy Gould's application to construct a hangar for storage of five planes at 75 Western Avenue was given a public hearing, said hearing being continued to April 8th due to a lack of either opponents or proponents. On April 8th the Framingham Airport Bill was once again defeated in the State Senate by a vote of 12 to 8 and later that evening Mr. Frank W. Meserve appeared at the second public hearing on the Gould hangar application in opposition to the measure.

On the 27th of April the first night take-off was made from the Musterfield as Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Dawson and pilot Henry Olden of New Bedford left at 1:30 A.M. in their Travel Air 6000 after visiting Harlan Banks and Alfred and Ernest Svenson. As if an aftermath to the fireworks of the 4th of July performances, fire, believed to have been started by lightning, on the 20th of that month destroyed the barn and water tower at Gould's Farm. In September Richard Barthelmess was starring in "The Dawn Patrol" at the St. George Theater and Leroy F. Gould tossed his rather large hat into the political ring, entering the primaries for State Representative. He was subsequently defeated.

Most of the year 1930, however, passed quietly aviation-wise in Framingham, a year which saw Teddy Gould making efforts to improve conditions at his farm so that the Registry-imposed restriction might be lifted. It was noted that the power company possessed a 99 year lease on the property over which the line passed and an estimate of \$50,000 negated a proposal to put said lines underground. The reader should remember that in the year 1930 this sum was tantamount to being prohibitive. The eventual solution to the problem was the displacement of a number of the towers forming a jog approximately 200 feet deep toward the south to allow a better landing and takeoff angle, however this was not accomplished for several years. Nevertheless, with many trees and rocks removed, use of fill in some of the lower areas and work started on a 60 X 70 foot steel hangar at the northeast end of the field, things began to look a bit brighter for Framingham Airport.

A recommendation in October by Marshall C. Hoppin, airport specialist, Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce, Washington, proposed piping the Beaver Dam Brook and filling its existing area which averaged about 20 feet lower than the portion then in use, so that an overall grade of but 2% would exist. This modification was never made, however the field at that time had usable dimensions of 2000 feet north and south by 1200 feet east and west and, along with the other improvements, finally won approval of the authorities.

On October 1st the airship (blimp) Neponset landed at the Musterfield with intentions of carrying passengers for hire over the community but the crew was soon discouraged by officials objecting to commercial use of the State owned field. A second attempt was made at the Gould Farm and was successful with many townspeople enjoying sight-seeing rides in the craft.

The Gould Farm Airport was opened formally on November 8th and 9th, 1930. The program featured appearances by some of the top airmen (and women) of the area. Mrs. Cecil "Teddy" Kenyon, chosen by the National American Legion Convention held earlier that year in Boston as "Miss America of Aviation", attended with her husband, a pilot for Colonial Airways, flying the New York to Boston flight. Both Russell Boardman and Lowell Bayles were present and, ironically, both were to lose their lives in the stubby GeeBee Super Sportster racers, Bayles crashing in December of 1931 and Boardman in 1933 during the Bendix Trophy Race. George "Pop" Watkins, a veteran of flying since 1911, who had hopped passengers from the Musterfield in 1920, was present with his Ryan Brougham. Others attending were Captain Gordon R. Berry with a 5 place open biplane New Standard D-25, Miss Olivia "Keet" Mathews, 18, flying her Gipsy Moth and Mrs. Guy "Gus" Ham in a Davis high wing open monoplane. A feature for spectators aside from the flying events was a Model T Ford backwards race, the first three winners receiving free airplane rides.

In the air one speed race ended in a dead heat between Lowell Bayles and Gordon Berry, Roscoe Brinton coming in third. Bayles was flying one of the well-known GeeBee Sportsters in the event. Mrs. Teddy Kenyon and Olivia Mathews won a bomb dropping contest while flying in the little side by side Arrow Sport. Stunts performed by Sandy Sanborn, Dick Hollihan and Al Desjardins were evaluated by the judges with Desjardins emerging the winner. This trio was joined in the deadstick landing contest by Lowell Bayles who cut his motor at 2000 feet and did aerobatics on the way down. Another speed race was won by Danny Duggan in a Travel Air, second was taken by Roscoe Brinton in a Waco and third, Gus Ham in a Curtiss Robin. Alfred Engle of the South Natick Glider Club performed in a gliding exhibition, James Whittall, Manager of the Worcester (North Grafton) Airport, demonstrated a wheels-up pass in his Savoia Marchetti Amphibian and Lewis "Swede" Parker broke a prop when he taxied his little American Eaglet into a hole.