

Airplanes Race to Spokane!

Memories of the 1927 Air Races and Derby



A prized ticket to gain access to the air show sold for 75¢. Nearly 100,000 people over several days witnessed the events.

BY DR. BRIAN SHUTE

The year was 1927, and aviation was both a curiosity and rage for spectators in Spokane and everywhere else in the country. The National Air Derby and Air Races made it to Spokane that September due to the efforts of Major John "Jack" Fancher (1892-1928). Major Fancher's legacy still abounds – a Spokane street that runs north and south from Felts Field is named after the First Commander of the 41st Division, 116 Observation Squadron of the Washington Air National Guard. What was then called

Lt. C.V. Haynes with his first place trophy for one of the many events at the National Air Derby held at Felts Field in Spokane.

Photos: Jerry Turner, Nostalgic Reflections





Local aviation hero Nick Mamer flies his Buhl AirSedan (1929) named Spokane Sun God over what is now Felts Field. Mamer made a historic nonstop flight from Spokane to New York City and back being refueled in the air by another Buhl aircraft.

the "Spokane Air Port" would witness a gathering of nearly 100,000 people over several days. A September 20, 1927, issue of the Spokane Chronicle exclaimed, "Radio, telegraph, telephone, motion pictures and every other known means to facilitate the broadcasting of news in words and pictures will be used to cover the finish of the national air derbies and the national air race at the Spokane Air Port this week." In fact, an additional nine telegraph lines were installed at

the field to dispatch sky-breaking news to "every city, town, and hamlet in the country."

Only months before, Charles A. Lindbergh (1902-1974) had made his famous trans-Atlantic flight, and all eyes were upon aviation. Interestingly, in 1925 and 1926, Los Angeles and Cleveland had unsuccessfully put on air races. Few people attended the events, and there was skepticism that such a program in Spokane would be any different. But it was. After all, Major



Charles Lindbergh addresses the crowd at the Spokane County Fair Grounds when it was located at the former Playfair Race Track on September 12, 1929. The chair directly behind Mr. Lindbergh is on display at the Nostalgic Reflections Museum in Spokane along with hundreds of items from the Air Derby.

Fancher had sponsored a popular “Air Circus” in 1925 which kept the community in awe. And with Major Fancher’s enthusiasm coupled with freshly piqued interest from Lindbergh, Spokane would be a ripe venue for a grand air race and derby. Major Fancher understood the need to get financial support and bolster the program. Accordingly, he enlisted the support of William Cowles, Louis Davenport, Harlan Peyton and a number of others who were also influential in the areas of investment, publicity, and hotels. The momentum to attract big money and large audi-

ences was further enhanced by having the very famous Charles A. Lindbergh visit Spokane in his Spirit of St. Louis on September 12 before the races began.

“The Spokane Air Port is rated as one of the best flying fields in the entire West,” explained a booklet published by the National Air Derby Association. The field was one and one half miles long by one half mile wide with prevailing winds from the west. Its prominent landmarks, consisting of the hills, hangers, and the Spokane River, made it easy for pilots to find. Known as a “fast



To open the air show, Mr. Lockwood spots his landing at Felts Field while standing on the wing of the airplane. His landing was greeted by officials.

field," it had a hard gravel base with a "fairly good grass turf." The airport was only five miles from downtown and had access by the Empire Electric Railway.

Numerous activities were to occur, but the major ones were several races that began separately from New York and San Francisco and finished in Spokane. Hefty prize money attracted aviators to compete and show off their ability to speed across the country or up the coast. An early Association flier boasted



KHQ Radio broadcasted detailed reports of the 'greatest aviation event in history.' National attention focused on Spokane during the Air Derby and Races, with media cameramen flocking to capture the sensational events.

\$28,250 cash prize money for the New York to Spokane winners, \$5000 for the San Francisco to Spokane winners, and other cash prizes to make up a total of \$60,000.

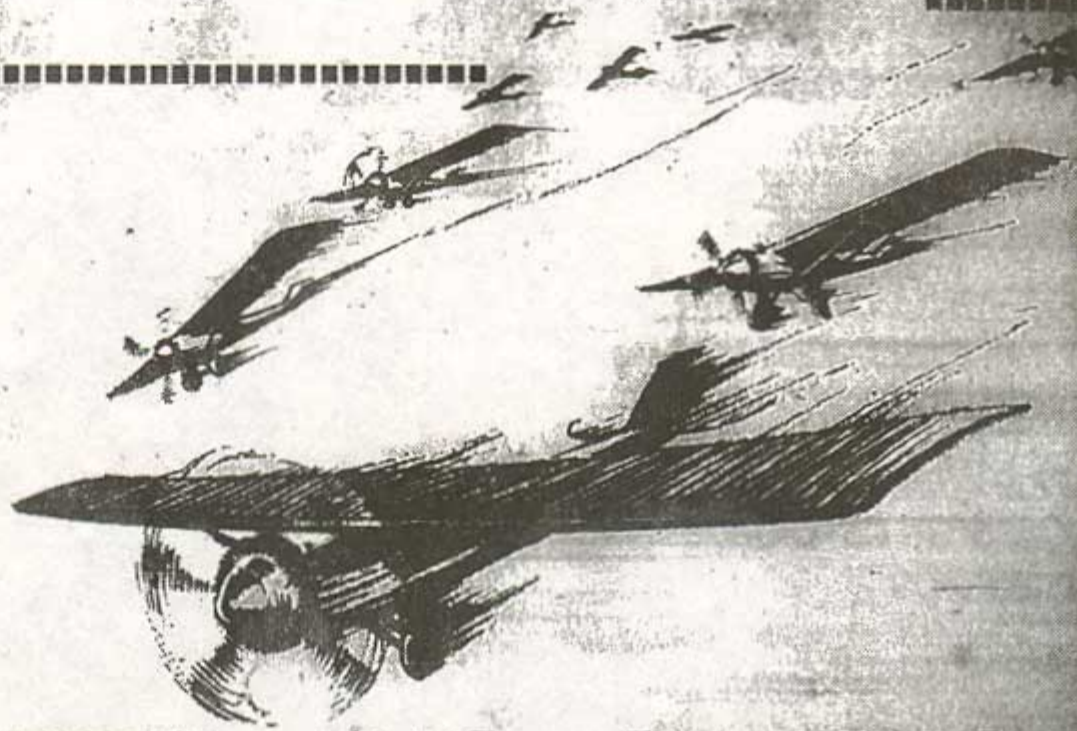
Out of 15 pilots who began the transcontinental race from New York, only eight of them would finish. The winning airplane was the National Eagle, a Laird Biplane flown by Charles "Speed" Holman and Lt. Tom Lane. Holman was an airmail pilot for the Chicago-St. Paul run. The National Eagle was classified as a "commercial airplane" because it held two people. Their winning time was 19 hours and 42 minutes. Another

contender racing from New York was John P. Wood in his Waco monoplane.

A group of 42 community men brought their resources together and purchased and equipped a Buhl Airster Biplane. Representing Spokane, pilot "Nick" Mamer and co-pilot Art Walker finished third to win a \$2000 prize. Their plane was the Sun God, and their time was 20 hours and 59 minutes. The winning time for the San Francisco-Spokane race was eight hours and 16 minutes.

A total of 41 planes completed the transcontinental and Pacific west coast races. Some pilots were not as lucky, however. Eddie Stinson, in one

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SHOW ON EARTH---IT'S YOUR DAY---SPOKANE DAY---LET'S GO!

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THE CROWNING OF THE QUEEN OF AIR
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THE FINISH OF THE NEW YORK TO SPOKANE RACES
THE FINISH OF THE CALIFORNIA TO SPOKANE RACES
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**WHAT YOU'LL SEE
TOMORROW
PROGRAM**

Wednesday, September 21, 1927

On the 21st of September, 1927, the city of Spokane will witness the greatest aviation event in its history. The program will include the official opening of the National Air Derby and the National Air Races. The program will also include the following:

- 1. The crowning of the Queen of Air.
- 2. The leap of death from dizzy heights.
- 3. The finish of the New York to Spokane races.
- 4. The finish of the California to Spokane races.
- 5. The bombing of a city from the air.
- 6. The greatest daredevils of the air.

**GET YOUR TICKETS NOW
AT 814 W. SPRAGUE AVE.**





Schools shut down at noon and downtown businesses closed at 1:00 for the Air Races and Derby. A total of 99,199 admission tickets were sold and on the biggest day, 23,000 people were in attendance. All of this was a record for Spokane... and the country.

of his Detroit-built Stinsons, along with "Duke" Schiller in a Royal Windsor, failed the nonstop race when they landed in Montana after 29 hours in the air.

Each day brought huge crowds and excitement to the airport and city. Spokane was transformed during this time. KHQ Radio broadcast detailed reports of the "greatest aviation event in history". Many spectators flew in from distant places in commercial planes or in their own airplanes. Many arrived by train and bus. The city was packed, and all the hotels were at capacity. In fact, Lindbergh stayed at the Davenport Hotel a week before the races began. Present day curator, Jerry Turner of Spokane, has Lindbergh's room receipt and pictures from his pre-event vis-

it. While Lindbergh did not have trouble finding a room at the time, 4000 others later would during the events. The derby's association bureau found accommodations in private homes for those visitors. The Bozanta Tavern, which was located in Hayden, Idaho, stayed open late to help out with the overflow. A total of 99,199 admission tickets were sold, and on the biggest day, 23,000 people were in attendance. All of this was a record for Spokane and the country.

With flocks of people coming into downtown, the Great Northern Railway used some of its new electric trains to transport people to the airfield for 25¢ a ride. Parking a car at the airfield cost 50¢. Area schools closed at noon, and downtown stores closed at 1:00. There were numerous



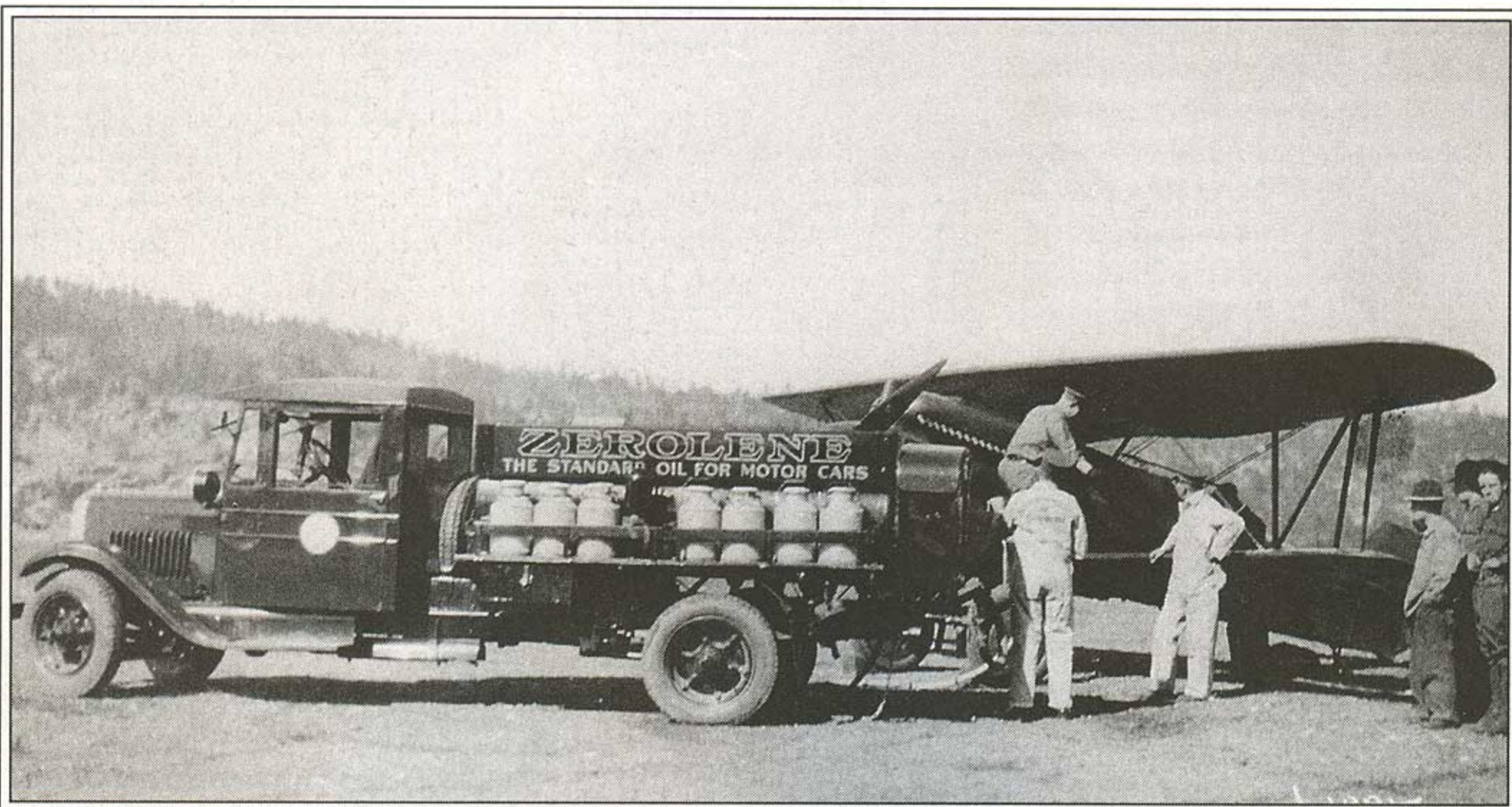
Spokane's most famous pilot, Nick Mamer seated in the front cockpit of his airplane allows the upcoming Air Derby Queen, Miss Nixon to try out the pilot seat for a photo opportunity on July 21, 1927.

social events that entertained the dashing pilots and the military brass who came to Spokane with their flying machines. A young woman named Mrs. Vera McDonald Cunningham won a ticket sales contest and became "Queen of the Air," the official hostess of the program who doled out the winning prizes. Miss Audrey Smithson, Miss Fletcher Appleton, and Miss Mary Hucking of Spokane became princesses.

The Air Derby included a ten-mile race consisting of military planes with a pylon turn located right in front of the grandstands. Army, Navy, Marine, and National Guard pilots strutted their stuff, bringing shock and awe to the crowds. The

History of Felts Field

For an upcoming issue we are researching the history of the Felts Field. If you have early pictures, oral/written histories, or memories to share with us, we welcome these in the creation of the article. Nostalgia Magazine delivers facts and memories from days gone by in the Inland Northwest. You and your memories make up Nostalgia Magazine and we thank you!



Crewmen from Zerolene Oil Company add fuel to Jimmy Doolittle's airplane on September 18, 1927.

fastest plane in this competition was a Curtiss X-P6A flown by Lt. Eugene Batten. His speed was a fantastic 201 miles per hour. There were news reports that Jimmy Doolittle and his army pilots frightened downtown shoppers by diving their Curtiss Hawks at "terrific speeds of 170 miles per hour and great noise."

Meanwhile back at the airfield, other fabulous events were taking place during the days of the program. A "huge" 6-place Douglas transported military parachute jumpers who amazed the masses below with a race to the ground. Stunt planes twisted, twirled, stalled, dove, banked, and flew upside down to everyone's astonishment. There was sky writing and formation flying as well. At night, illuminated stunt planes and lit-up parachute jumpers dashed through the sky. Aerial fireworks also highlighted the evening activities. Two bombing runs performed by pilots Capt. Harold Neely and Lt. Jack Allenburg of the local National Guard took out a fictitious village. Spokane youth had the opportunity to partake in a model airplane competition as well.

On that Wednesday, a parade starting at Mon-

roe and Riverside honored pilots Mamer, Walker, and their flight crews, along with officers of the derby and National Guard. Mamer's flight crew included R.M. Wilson and Al Coppulla, and the crowds cheered the entire bunch as they motored in open cars parade-style.

On the days of September 21 through the 25, 1927, all eyes were on the Spokane skies. The National Air Races put Spokane on the cerebral maps of Americans across the country. This was a time of dreams, competition, and skyward innovations – marked by daring people and great winged machines. What was once known as the Spokane Air Port, is now Felts Field named after John Buell Felts. Much has changed around the airfield over the last 83 years. Pavement has taken the place of green turf, and several businesses abound. There is wonderful history here along with a reminiscent eatery. Back in the 1930s, the lunch counter at the airport was called the Zoom Inn – now it's the Skyway Café. Other businesses and organizations like Western Aviation, Med Star, Moody Aviation, Valleyford Metal Crafters, and Spokane Turbine have a presence



A booth for the new "Airgram" was open for business at the 1927 Air Derby and Races . Not only were promoters encouraging the use of the new air mail service, but they were also looking for pilots to fly the new mail routes.

there now. On a historical note, I would encourage readers to drive up Fancher Road and get an enjoyable bite at the café. With a little imagination, visitors can still feel the whirlwind of energy that made history here in 1927. In another spot, museum tours by Jerry Turner are available by appointment at Nostalgic Reflections. The number to call is (509) 226-3522. ☺

Today, aviation buffs can purchase aviation gifts, avionics and supplies from Western Aviation, right, located at Felts Field in Spokane.

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