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Sharon Dillon is a freelance writer who lives in Williamsburg. She has nine years experience writing for newspapers and regional magazines. Her love of aviation was boosted dramatically during the seven years she worked for the Wisconsin Bureau of Aeronautics as an aviation education outreach coordinator. Her story on VAHS member Buz Rich was featured in the Jan/Feb/March 2005 issue of the *Eagles*.

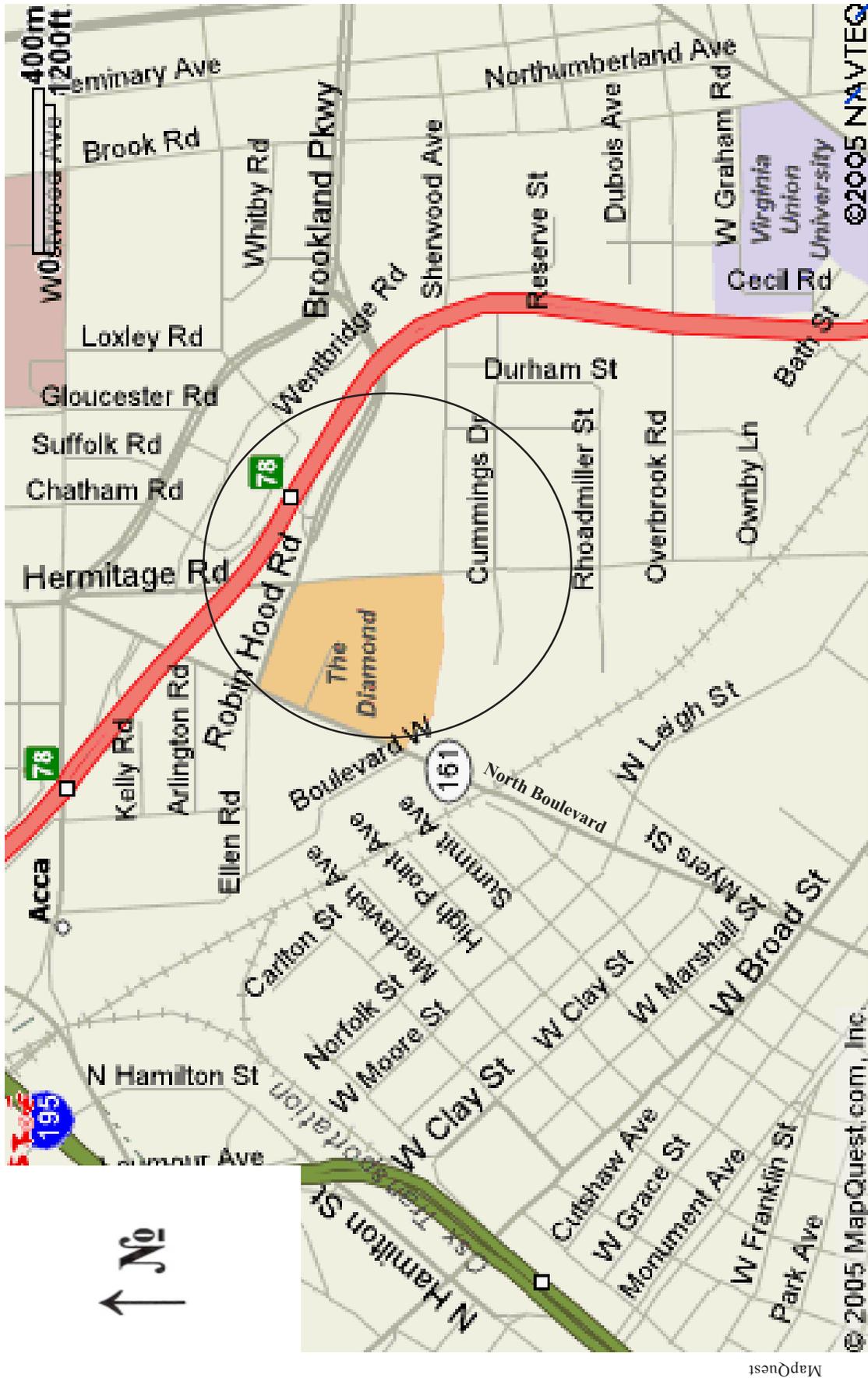


Richmond Fairgrounds

by Linda Burdette

In the very early days of aviation, flying was viewed by the majority of the population as an oddity – something undertaken by the most adventurous or fool-hardy of folk. It is no surprise that people decided that airplanes and aviators were most appropriately viewed at State fairs and fairgrounds. Such was the case with Richmond. The first flights in the Richmond area occurred at the grounds of the State Fair of Virginia, what is now North Boulevard and Hermitage Road/Sherwood Avenue. The State Fairgrounds encompassed a large area and had one large public exhibition hall, originally called the Administration Building and later the Richmond Arena. For aviation related events, the fairgrounds, racetrack, and grounds surrounding the arena were used as runways and the building was used for a hangar and maintenance. See map on the next page.

In 1909, the city fathers in Richmond apparently saw the potential in aviation and the Mayor approved aerial demonstrations from the State Fairgrounds. The State Fair officials began a campaign to have demonstrations by all of the aircraft manufacturers of the time. During the next three years, they managed to persuade three manufacturers to perform to the delight of the local population. Since they always managed to schedule these “demonstrations” during the State Fair, the question remains whether their goal was entertainment or the promotion of aviation, but in the end they accomplished two goals - free entertainment for the crowds and promoting aviation in the hearts and minds of future aviators.



Modern map showing where the Fairgrounds operation was

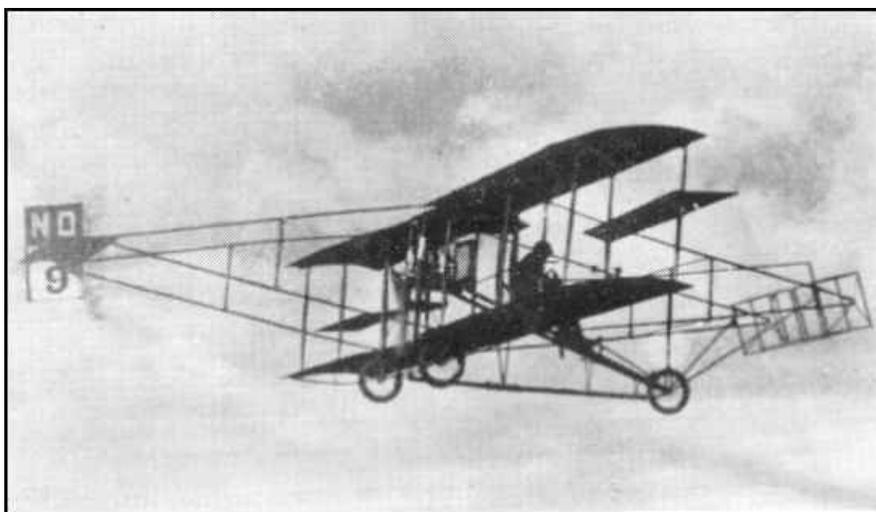
The first of these State Fair flight demonstrations occurred on October 4, 1909 when Charles F. Willard flew a Curtiss “Golden Flyer” biplane. The Golden Flyer was built by Glenn Curtiss, an aviation pioneer often called the Father of Naval Aviation. Curtiss built the first plane to make a takeoff and landing on the deck of a ship (in 1911) and went on to found his own aircraft company, The Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company, which was the largest aircraft manufacturer in the world during World War I. But in 1909, the pride of the Curtiss fleet was the Golden Flyer. On August 22, flying a Golden Flyer, Curtiss won the Gordon Bennett Trophy at the Rheims Air Meet in France with the best speed in a two-lap triangular 6.2-mile course, averaging 47 miles per hour. The Golden Flyer which appeared in Richmond was not the same one that appeared in Rheims. It was the first commercial airplane ever sold, having been sold by Curtiss to the New York Aeronautic Society at their flying field on the old abandoned Morris Park race track in the Bronx. The most amazing thing about Mr. Willard’s appearance is that he had made his first solo flight (also on the Golden Flyer) only two months before on July 30, 1909 at Mineola, Long Island. When Glenn Curtiss delivered it, Charles F. Willard was the first person he taught to fly.

On that sunny October day in Richmond, thousands packed the fairgrounds to see the spectacle and even more lined the streets of the surrounding community. The Golden Flyer took off in 300 feet and soared at an elevation of 12 feet. The flight lasted about 30 seconds and covered about 200 yards. The next day Mr. Willard made three flights and on the last one attained his highest altitude of the day - 40 feet.

Unfortunately, on that last flight, he overshot the runway and damaged the rudder. Mr. Willard repaired the rudder overnight (oh, for the days when rudder repair was so simple!) and made four trips the third day, ranging from 45 seconds to a minute.

The next year during the State Fair in October, 1910 Ralph Johnstone flew a plane built by the Wright Brothers company, a Model A. Johnstone was contracted “to fly for at least 10 minutes every day” during the fair. Before becoming an aviator, Johnstone had been active in vaudeville, performing as a trick cyclist. His act included such feats as jumping from a springboard to a bicycle, an exercise so dangerous that a friend advised to him to choose a less risky trade. Johnstone, after reflection, launched out in aviation. Johnstone was a star member of the Wright brothers’ exhibition team. The Wright brothers had formed an exhibition group in the spring of 1910. These young men competed to see who could fly the fastest, farthest, and highest at a time when designers were struggling to solve some of the most basic aeronautical engineering problems. Other members of the team included Walter Brookings, Frank Coffyn, Duval LaChapelle, and Arch Hoxsey. Hoxsey and Johnstone were known in the popular press as either the “Stardust Twins” or the “Heavenly Twins.” They often competed against each other in speed and/or altitude contests, to the delight of the crowds.

From *The Early Birds of Aviation CHIRP*,
June 1960, Number 63



The famous Golden Flyer with Charles F. Willard at the controls

Like most early airplanes, the Model A's controls were exposed to the elements and operated by hand and foot. It had two propellers which turned in opposite directions even though they were operated by one motor and the takeoff was made from a monorail placed on the ground. Newspaper accounts of the day said that Johnstone's flight achieved an amazing height of a thousand feet. One goal of the visits by both the Curtiss pilots the year before and by Johnstone in 1910 were to convince local celebrities to ride in the airplanes, both to demonstrate safety and to garner local interest. Johnstone achieved a coup of sorts when Richmond Mayor David C. Richardson declared that he would like to fly. The Mayor was actually 30 pounds over the aircraft weight limit, but Mr. Johnstone agreed to take him up and on Wednesday, the pair accomplished the first passenger flight in Richmond history. Mayor Richardson was strapped in tightly beside the pilot and told not to touch the controls or any other part of the machine. After a take-off roll of about 200 feet, the plane lifted off and the crowd of 60,000 onlookers broke into a cheer. Ever the politician, the Mayor smiled broadly and waved at the crowd. Unfortunately his hand hit a cord which controlled the ignition; the motor went dead at 50 feet of altitude. Mr. Johnstone managed to glide the plane to earth. Neither he

<http://richmondthenandnow.com/Historic-Richmond-4.html>



**Ralph Johnstone, pilot / Wright Brothers Plane,
State Fair, Richmond, Virginia - 1910**

nor the Mayor were injured but the plane was badly damaged. It was repaired in a couple of days, but bad weather foiled plans for further aerial demonstrations. Johnstone tried to make one farewell flight on the last day of the fair but had to cancel when the same cord that had caused the earlier incident malfunctioned again and caused the motor to again stop in mid-flight.

Sadly, Ralph Johnstone's appearance in Richmond was one of his last. After leaving Richmond, Johnstone won an altitude contest at the Belmont Air Show when he achieved an altitude of 9,714 feet, only 200 feet short of the world's record. From there he went to Denver, Colorado, where, on November 17, 1910 Johnstone, 24, died during a flight demonstration. The plane was descending in a controlled spiral when it suddenly fell out of control, turning somersaults as Johnstone hauled vainly at the levers. He was the first of the Wright team to die and illustrates for us today the grave danger faced daily by the earliest aviators. The Wright Team itself was disbanded in November 1911 after a number of crashes and the deaths of several pilots.

In 1911, A. Blenner flew a 1911 Martin Pusher, the first aircraft designed and manufactured by Glenn L. Martin. Glenn Martin had begun building airplanes in 1909 and 1910, operating in partnership with mechanics from his auto shop, and by 1911 he numbered among the most famous of the aircraft pioneers. He went on to found the Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company which in later years produced aircraft bombers by the thousands. There are few surviving accounts of Blenner's flight demonstration and none that give any details of the flights themselves.

By the time Art Smith introduced the Richmond Fair-goers to stunt flying in 1915, he had already made his eventful appearance in Oklahoma where it is said that he inspired Wiley Post to a life of aviation. Mr. Smith began his performance with standard flight, swooping and curving the airplane. Suddenly at 1,000 feet, the airplane halted and flew end over end in a somersault. Spectators gasped in horror, believing that the pilot had lost control of the plane. By the time they realized that the airplane was righting itself with the pilot still in control, the airplane was entering the second of nine consecutive loops. That evening he performed the first after-dark aerial performance in Richmond. If seeing him do loops in the daytime was amazing to Richmonders, imagine their reaction when he flew over with continuous “streams of flame” coming from the rear of the airplane. He did loops and side rolls, flew upside down, and performed downward “death spirals” all with phosphorus fireworks attached to the wings of his plane.

Photo from Edith Dodd Culver's *The Day The Airmail Began*



Katharine Stinson
Richmond, Virginia
October 15, 1916

In October 15, 1916 Katherine Stinson was the main attraction at the State Fair at Richmond. Stinson took her first flight lesson in 1912 with Max Lillie and by 1916 had become the world’s best-known woman pilot, touring the world with her Laird biplane. Stinson is repeatedly described as petite and dainty “a brunette version of Mary Pickford with long chestnut curls fringing her checkered cap.... She was America’s sweetheart of the airways at that time as surely as Mary Pickford was America’s sweetheart of the silent screen.” In 1916 her mechanic was Rudolph “Shorty” Schroeder, later to become one of America’s most well known aviators. In addition to her daytime stunt flights, Stinson also performed at night by fitting Roman candles on the wings of her airplane. The airplane had an open cockpit and the flares on the wings drew shimmering figure eights against the dark sky as she circled above the race track. The performance lasted about ten minutes and when she made her final approach for landing, she cut the engine. This was the signal to persons tending bonfires along the edge of the runway to throw a small can of gasoline on the fires so they would flare up to guide her in.

Despite the keenness that the Richmond crowds showed for air shows, aviation events at the State Fairgrounds were discontinued during the first World War. However after the war, it seemed that the public’s enthusiasm had only increased. More aviators were flying faster and more capable airplanes than ever. It was only natural that the State Fair officials began to book aviation acts as soon as they could.

From October 6-9, 1924 Mabel Cody’s Flying Circus made its second annual appearance at the Richmond Fair. At the age of 23, Mabel Cody was billed as the “Greatest Aerialist” and “Greatest Transfer Artist” in the world. She is purported by various sources to have been either the daughter or the niece of “Wild West” Buffalo Bill Cody, although the Cody family flatly denied any relationship with the young lady. Her specialty was transferring from plane to plane, plane to car or plane to motorcycle! The Mabel Cody Flying Circus offered the following stunts: night flying, wing walking, auto to plane transfers both with and without the use of ladders, single and double parachute drops, wing walking while the plane looped, changing planes without the use of a ladder, and what was at that time the world’s only illuminated night wing walk act. The night act was illuminated from sparkler flares carried in metal boxes suspended under the lower wings away from the surface of the fabric. This air show was unique in that it featured three “sky rings” where the various acts would be

performed. Ms. Cody never learned to fly, but was very strict with her pilots – every pilot had to be able to perform every act in the circus. The Circus included some aviators that we still admire today: A.B. McMullen, the first Flying Farmer ; Barney Rowe, a renowned aerial comic and formerly a clown with the Barnum & Bailey Circus; Alfred Williams, the famous Marine Corps Pilot; and Dexter Martin, who was to become the first director of the South Carolina Aeronautics Commission and helped develop many of the state’s important aviation centers, including Columbia Metropolitan Airport and Shaw, McEntire and Myrtle Beach Air Force bases. Sadly one pilot’s legacy was cut short because he met his untimely end at the Richmond Fairgrounds. Russell Simmon was only 21 and was new to Mabel Cody’s Flying Circus in the fall of 1924.

In October 1924 the Flying Circus was booked at the Virginia State Fair for both day and night performances. This was the first year that the Flying Circus had featured the night wing walking act and excitement was so high that record crowds were watching the afternoon performances on October 9. However the festive mood of the fair was about to change abruptly. In the center sky ring, the performers were attempting a transfer from airplane to airplane. Barney Rowe was aboard a J1 Standard flown by A.B. McMullen, and was attempting a transfer to a JN4 Jenny flown by Russell Simon. The plan was for the two planes to get near enough for him to transfer to the JN4 by a ladder hanging from that plane. There was a stiff breeze blowing, but neither pilot appeared concerned. As the two planes entered the ring, Rowe stood on the wing of the JN4. His first attempt to grab the J1’s ladder was unsuccessful and the two planes moved even closer together – witnesses indicated that the JN4 was directly under the J1. Rowe immediately grabbed the ladder and transferred to the other plane. The crowd was cheering gleefully as the planes began to pull away from one another. Suddenly the rudder of the JN4 impacted the trailing edge of the right lower wing of the J1. The impact sheared the JN4’s rudder away and the plane began a slow spiraling descent earthward. Keep in mind that this was during the State Fair and that crowds were everywhere on the Fairgrounds. People crowded the Arena to see the displays. Russell Simon seemed to consider all this as he frantically tried to control the stricken aircraft. Despite his attempts to avoid both the Arena and the outside crowds, the airplane impacted the roof, the wings and fuselage remained in the rafters while the engine and nose section fell to the floor below. Firemen stationed on the grounds reached Simon via a hook and ladder and extracted him from the wreckage on the roof. He died a few minutes after reaching the ground; the suspected cause of death was a fractured skull although his body was badly crushed. Six bystanders were injured, although only one required serious medical attention. The Richmond Times Dispatch reported that “persons in the crowd as the body of Simon was being removed said that the mother of the pilot and the young woman to whom he was engaged were among the spectators when the daring airman met his death.”

Photo: Florida State Archives



Mabel (Mable?) Cody’s JN4

Barnstormers continued to perform on an annual basis for several years although the tragedy of October 1924 seems to have dimmed the local enthusiasm. Byrd Field (now Richmond International Airport) was constructed in 1927 and was preferred by pilots since it was one of the best air fields in the country. Aviation events at the

Fairgrounds didn't stop formally; they just tapered off over time. The Fairgrounds and especially the Arena continued until the late 1970's although they deteriorated steadily and their venues changed from the State Fair to hosting car shows and finally to the occasional wrestling match held in the Arena. In 1947, the race track was moved Strawberry Hill (on which was built Richmond International Raceway) and the old track was demolished in 1954, and replaced by the Parker Field Baseball Park. The Arena no longer stands and the whine of airplane engines is only a memory, but the activities there established the foundation for aviation in Richmond and guaranteed wide acceptance of flying by the people of Richmond.

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Linda Burdette hated studying history in school, but enjoys it immensely as an adult. An attorney by trade, this is her first attempt at writing for publication and she could not have found a more agreeable subject than aviation in Virginia. She and her husband, Randall, live at Dogwood Air Park in Fredericksburg and take pleasure in flying around the state in their Cessna 206.