

Memories of a Pilot's First Flight in L.A.

I drove back through Hyde Park the other day. It has been many years since I last saw the area. As I drove along the streets, I thought back to the years when I first came to the area as a small child. My parents had built a small two-room house near the corner of what is now 10th Avenue and 74th Street. The nearest houses to us were a block away. South of 77th was open fields. The ground rose gradually and was covered with wild oats.

It was spring. The billowing clouds seemed to accentuate the deep blue skies. The new blades of wild oats seemed like green velvet. Near the top of the hill stood a rather clumsy looking craft, according to its builders, it was to be an airplane. It was constructed with 1x12 redwood. The fuselage and wingspan were about 12 feet long. The widest part of the plane was at the cockpit and that was only a foot wide. A long rope "veed" out from the front of the plane, which was to be used to pull the craft down the hill. At what is now 76th Street, there was a drop-off of about 6 feet. That was where the plane was to be launched.

It was an afternoon to be remembered. The boys who built the plane had thought of everything. They remembered to have a landing gear—the wheels from a doll buggy. Rope to launch it. They even painted the control panel in the cockpit. They only forgot one thing. A pilot! Because of the size of the cockpit, they needed someone with certain prerequisites: (1) he must be small, (2) he must be either young enough or stupid enough to get into the cockpit for the flight. The smallest person near the craft was a very small freckled-faced redhead, who seemed to fit perfectly.

The pilot looked to the north and

saw the familiar sign off in the distance, HOLLYWOODLAND. Just below and to the east was the city of Los Angeles. Fast approaching a population of 800,000, it seemed to shine in the afternoon sun. It would be many years before the city would be built out as far as Hyde Park. Just below the Baldwin Hills to the north were the two airports of Rogers Airport and Burdette Airport, several years later to be the western terminus of coast-to-coast air travel.

The time came for the first flight of that historic aircraft. Everything was ready. The boys were manning the tow ropes, the pilot was in the cockpit and the word was given to "Pull."

Down the hill came the craft, its buggy wheels jumping up and down. As it approached the drop-off where it was to take wing, the "pullers" gave a mighty heave. Off the small cliff went the plane. The pulling rope slackened, the plane seemed to stand still in the air. Then, disaster! The craft seemed to stand on its head for just a moment and then crashed into the ground.

The wings broke off, the tail assembly disintegrated, the pilot went down with his plane and was crying from the pain of the many slivers in his bottom. The builders decided to go back to the drawing board, the pilot, to his mother, to have the slivers removed, and historians to try to forget the happenings of that day in 1923.

The names of the builders are remembered by the pilot, the place where this momentous event took place is not remembered by a bronze plaque or any other thing, but the pilot remembers every second of that first flight.

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"Doc" and I liked this!