

Prairie Aviation Pioneers

GARVER'S FANCY FLYING CIRCUS



Due to space limitations this article is edited for brevity. It was written by James R. Greenwood for an early aviation magazine. He had a long, illustrious career in the aviation industry. A long lost friend of Rosalea Hostetter, she recognized his name when Paul Whifton (Florida) submitted the story. With the help of Jim Headberg (Florida) who had given the story to Paul, she was able to find Jim Greenwood again, now living in Arizona.

They were called the "greatest," that Garver bunch from Attica, KS. You'd believe it, too, if you had ever watched "Garver's Flying Circus" in action. The crazy things this outfit did with airplanes 45 years ago, not only defied all the laws of gravity, but adequate description as well.

Even the most imaginative copywriter on Madison Avenue would be hard put to find proper words for Karl R. Garver's gang of stunt merchants. "Extraordinary...super-sensational...The Most Thrilling and Spectacular Aerial Exhibition Ever Shown in the Middle West..." These were typical superlatives extolling the virtues of Garver's troupe in newspaper ads, handbills and colored posters. Yet even the most provocative and dynamic kind of theatrical advertising understated the true capabilities of the fancy flyers from Attica, KS, where the population total of less than 1,000 hasn't changed much since the turn of the century.

In its heyday Garver's Flying Circus appeared in scores of towns in Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Colorado, Texas, Iowa, Nebraska and the Dakotas. Individually, its pilots and parachutists won numerous trophies and awards for racing, stunting and jumping in some of the largest flying competitions of the early Twenties, including the widely-publicized "International Aviation Meet" held at St. Louis in 1923.

Along with other snowbirds, Garver's circus also toured Old Mexico in two consecutive winters. Constantly in demand for trade fairs, fund drives and various other community events, during one summer alone it performed in some eighty towns in Kansas and Nebraska. It specialized in night flying and aviation fireworks. As a result, even the secretive Kukulxukian contracted the circus for a spectacular series of nocturnal exhibitions.

"Garver was the only man in the country ever to make a financial success of a flying circus," wrote one observer. Karl Garver banked a lot of loot. Few air circuses of the time could afford to buy new airplanes. Garver could-brand new Laird-Swallows.

Somehow, though, chroniclers of aviation history have overlooked Karl Garver and his band of gypsy flyers. Perhaps it's because their activities were confined to the midlands. More probably it's because Garver's Flying Circus as a unit had a comparatively short history, even for a business characterized by high attrition. In its brief lifetime, more misfortune struck the Garver outfit than befall any other circus of its size.

Like most "flying circuses," Garver's aggregation was a product of World War I. And like all barnstorming contingents of any substance, it offered the same routine of heart-stopping stunts. Yet unlike many contemporaries, Karl Garver's little club enjoyed an enviable reputation for professional integrity and unrivalled competence. The Attica "aerobats" had style, class and élan.

Garver's circus was also unique in other ways. Except for a surplus Curtiss JN-4D "jenny" and Hisso (for Hispano-Suiza) Standard, it operated spanking new Laird-Swallows, the first postwar airplane designed expressly for commercial use. Powered by a 90-hp water-cooled Curtiss OX-5 engine, the Laird-Swallow had a speed range between 40 and about 80 mph. Pilots flying with Garver seldom repaired or overhauled an engine. When a motor balked or wore out, Garver merely installed a new one from his fine supply of crated OX-5 engines which he had acquired surplus for \$50 apiece.

Even more important, Garver's circus was run like a business, always appearing and performing on schedule with "satisfaction guaranteed." It had dual objectives; promote aviation and at the same time make a profit.

Son of well-to-do parents, Karl Garver was born in 1890 in Tippecanoe, OH, a pleasant quiet town near Dayton. Some years later, as an investment, the family bought a farm four miles south of Attica, KS. There Karl's father staked him to the cattle business.

Good dependable parachute jumpers were hard to come by and Karl Garver was always daring people to leap, hopeful that one or two, at least, might join his circus. To prove how safe it was, in 1923 he "allowed" his young son David, 10, to make his first jump, despite vigorous protests of friends and relatives.

The Horchems and Garvers were a foursome that socialized frequently at the lush 1,600 acre Lone Tree Ranch. One evening, the men urged Bertha Horchem (Cyle's childhood sweetheart) to attempt a chute drop but she was timid and refused. Ruth Garver (who worked at the drugstore in Attica and had

given up a career in pharmacy to marry Cyle) suddenly remarked that she might to like try it. Not to be outdone, Bertha decided to try it, too.

By 1920 the pet, pretty lass of 21, Bertha Horchem was almost as well known for her flying skill as her husband. Together that year they barnstormed Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, returning to Lone Tree between shows. On a warm evening, admiring a beautiful Kansas sunset, the partnership for the "Horchem-Garver Flying Circus" was formed. However, the next year Cyle Horchem agreed to drop his name for promotional purposes. He and Bertha wanted to free-lance anyway.

Two "regulars" in Garver's troupe were stunt pilot Wayne Neville of St. Louis, MO and acrobat Paul Duncan of Lincoln, NE. Neville had been an instructor at Love Field, Dallas, during the war. He excelled at racing as well as stunting. Paul Duncan hailed from a family of balloonists. He was a diminutive, wiry carefree aerobat who, for some inexplicable reason, never gained the notoriety of such delving practitioners as Milt Girtan and Aron "Duke" Krantz-billed as the "Flying Diavolo" when they worked for Ivan Garver.

Occasionally other pilots and "aerobats," most from around Wichita, would join Garver in presenting a special show. A familiar figure was a good natured pipe-smoker who loved steaks, dogs and flying, Walter Herschel Beech at the time. Walter Beech was a test and demonstration pilot for Laird-Swallow airplanes. He subsequently teamed with Clyde Cessna and Lloyd Stearnman to establish the Travel Air Company, and ultimately founded Beech Aircraft.

Except for his unassuming manner, Karl Garver reflected the stereotype image of the swashbuckling pilot, in costume and habit. He wore a tight-fitting helmet, bug-eye goggles, white scarf, and jodhpurs tucked into laced, knee-high boots or puttees. In cold weather he favored a leather jacket or fleece lined flying coat.

Lone Tree was also headquarters for the K.R. Garver School of Aviation which offered a package course in flying. It included flight and ground training, a one-way railroad ticket to Attica (Garver figured he'd sell graduates an airplane for the return trip), room and board. The school slogan: "Aviation properly conducted is safe." A poster showing Wayne Neville dead stuck landing carried it a step further: "This act proves that you don't need your motor to land."

Between out-of-town appearances the Garver bunch would stage a colossal thrill-show at the ranch, frequently interspersing the exciting aerial displays with wild auto races and full blown rodeo. At the end of an afternoon of this kind of madness, Karl and his buddies would toss a big party, a real blast. "The noise carried a mile," recalls Leonard Giggley, then a young neighbor. "My father wouldn't let me go near there."

As with any facet of entertainment, the successful Garver's Flying Circus required the talents of a live-wire, hardhitting promoter who knew how to win new customers and keep the old ones. Few exponents of the art were as effective as tall, affable, ex-vaudeville magician Henry Murray "Doc" Arrowsmith. He wasn't a pilot, nor even a doctor. But as a salesman and showman, he was top. And as the business manager he had as much to with its success as any performer. He sold contracts, handled publicity and usually announced the shows.

The incredible series of tragic events that would wipe out the Garver inner circle began March 2, 1924, with Bertha Horchem's fatal crash at San Antonio. During a series of loops, the bottom left wing of her Laird-Swallow crumpled, plunging the plane into the ground. "I'm not surprised," said Jake Moellendick, then president of the company that built her plane. "Cyle had crashed the lower wings several times in landing, and he failed to make proper repairs."

Next, the perils of parachuting caught up with Ruth Garver. On October 12, 1924 in front of 20,000 people attending the huge National Air Congress in Wichita, she fell to her death from 1,000 feet, her tangled parachute "disastrously" uselessly behind her. She had gone aloft in the same plane with Wayne Neville's wife for a spectacular double jump. The two women had exchanged chutes moments before taking off. Evidently Neville, about to make the third leap of her life, said she'd feel more comfortable with Ruth's pack.

A month later at the "Drumright Air Carnival" in Oklahoma, Cyle Horchem thrilled thousands with his own repertoire of ear-splitting, low-level aerobatics. The following day while flying a student from Drumright of Tulsa, Horchem, for some reason, suddenly climbed out on the wing. He reached for a strut, slipped and tumbled into eternity.

Still grieving the loss of his wife, Karl Garver continued to fly exhibition through 1925, but he no longer cared. He finally quit for good and sold his airplanes. On April 2, 1926, in Wichita, Graver died of alcoholic poisoning.

Wayne Neville, flying the mail out of Kansas City, ran into a storm and crashed, sustaining fatal injuries. Billy Burke was killed May 29, 1928 when he flew into a wire stretched across Spavinaw Lake in his native Oklahoma. Walter Beech died in 1954, a year after Doc Arrowsmith. Paul Duncan drifted into obscurity.

The sun still rises and sets on Lone Tree. In a way, it is a monument to all the early flyers who chased a dream.