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Barnstorming Days

By J. E. BATTERSON, M.E. 2

BARNSTORMING, for the benefit of the uninitiated, means traveling about the country and stopping at likely cities, towns, or villages for the purpose of making money (an essential commodity to carry on the operation of an airplane) by such means as can be devised by the barnstormers. Following Lindbergh's successful flight to Paris in 1927, a great wave of "airmindedness" swept the country, causing great numbers of people to become



aware of the fact that a new era had dawned and a new mode of transportation was at hand. As a result, people were curious to know more about the fascinating and romantic subject of flight. From 1927 up until the fall of 1929, barnstorming was a highly profitable and a very enjoyable venture, for the appearance of an airplane, especially in the smaller towns and rural sections, drew large crowds, and it was an easy matter to persuade enough people to take a short flight to make the visit a profitable one.

In those days most barnstormers usually traveled alone, that is, one plane only. However, a few grouped in pairs, and others combined to form a "circus," giving elaborate programs of exhibitions. While we were still learning to fly at school, we began picking up ideas regarding barnstorming from the pilots who occasionally dropped into the field, so that by the time school was "out," the lure of traveling and living such a nomadic life was too much for the gypsy blood in our veins. Consequently, with the partnership of a schoolmate, we purchased an airplane and proceeded to make plans for our future. Because of the general levelness of the terrain and the fact that it contained a great proportion of rural districts, we decided to confine our activities to the Mississippi Valley. Level ground is a distinct asset to the inexperienced flyer in case of emergency landings, and from the barnstormers we learned that rural districts were by far the most profitable, hence our decision. We soon completed our plans, and took off with high hopes and with the good wishes of school-formed friends.

Our general method of attack was first to select a likely looking landing field as near as possible to the town we wished to visit. We rarely chose a town of over five

thousand inhabitants because of the nature of our work, and hence there were no well laid out airports waiting for us then as there would be today. The field chosen had to be, first of all, large enough and suitable for taking off and landing passengers. (Level pasture land was our usual airport.) The next consideration was that it should be on a good road, preferably a main highway, distinguished by the fact that it was paved and by the volume of traffic. This insured easy access to the field and a means of attracting the attention of passers-by. The last and most important factor was the consent of the landowner to operate from his property, which, of course, could not be obtained until after we had landed. Fortunately, with few exceptions, we had little trouble obtaining this. Most owners graciously granted us the use of their land without charge or return favor. Our usual payment was in the form of giving rides to the owner and his family. In some places we shared a percentage of our receipts, and in others we paid a flat sum. One event comes to mind regarding the selection of a landing spot, where we had picked a large, level field on the edge of which was situated a filling station. Upon landing, the irate owner of the field and operator of the station descended upon us with invectives to depart. He refused to consider permitting us to use his land until we mentioned the fact that we used his brand of gas and would probably need a hundred gallons or so as well as a large quantity of oil. A suggestion as to the number of



automobiles that would be attracted by our activities swung him over to giving his consent. Indeed, there was a large crowd attracted over the week-end and we both did a landslide business.

Having secured a landing field, our next concern was to get a crowd at the field. Of course, quite a few people gathered as soon as we had landed, but it was always necessary to advertise in some manner in order to secure a large enough group to make the visit a profitable one. Our method of attracting attention differed from the general procedure followed by other barnstormers in that we never stunted—that is, performed loops, tailspins, or

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other forms of aerial acrobatics while in sight of the town we were working. Our theory was that the majority of people did not care to be in the plane when any such maneuvers were performed and the sight of any undue motion of the ship created fear in their subconscious minds that we might perform such stunts while they were riding as passengers. Consequently we achieved the reputation of being safe and conservative flyers, which benefited us considerably in many ways, and thus proved our contention. Of course, we were asked by the "sporting bloods" to perform acrobatics for exhibition and for passengers. We always refused the exhibition stunts, but those who demanded a stunt ride were usually satisfied by a few steep banks and turns. Our usual practice was to have handbills printed, which we distributed over the town from the plane after attracting attention by flying about and circling over the central business sections. We also would put up hand-made signs in various prominent places advertising our location. Our advertising "theme" was to stress the beauty of the view and the comfort of the trip rather than the thrill of being off the ground. The small boys who inevitably collected around the plane made excellent advertisers and ticket salesmen.

There was little business during the morning and we usually spent the time repairing the engine, inspecting the plane, advertising, or in other occupations that barnstorming demands. Afternoons, evenings, and week-ends

were the best times for passenger carrying. One always met a number of definite types of people among the crowd. Usually there was the pseudo-war veteran who claimed to have served in the air corps. He was easily distinguished by a few minutes of conversation revealing his ignorance of aircraft. These talks furnished us with many humorous ideas of what a person will do to get a free airplane ride. There was also the young embryo engineer or pilot who wanted to know everything about the plane. We always enjoyed talking to these fellows because they were sincere and ambitious. Then there was always the fellow who already knew everything about the plane and proceeded to inform others of the fact. Another predominant type was the meek married man accompanied by the wife who firmly put a damper on whatever desire he had to ride in an airplane. Too, the older persons were usually there, stoutly maintaining that aviation was a wonderful thing and soon everybody would be flying, but they would personally "keep one foot on the ground."

We would like very much to relate the many experiences undergone while barnstorming, many humorous, some sad, and others that still make our hair stand up when recalled, but lack of space forbids. It was a profitable venture financially, but the real advantage was derived from the education obtained from meeting so many people and the opportunity to observe, that only travel affords. Like college training "it is something no one can take away from you." Today, however, with the increase in planes and airports throughout the country, barnstorming, like the old medicine show, has faded away as a means of living, and only memories remain.
