

Those Daring Young Men in Their Flying... Boats

History of Flight Over Conesus Lake

By Vince Disalvo,

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Looking west at the flying school at McPherson's Point at Conesus Lake NY circa 1914

Although I have lived most of my 68 years in Livingston County, I have only recently begun to appreciate the rich history we have in this very special part of New York. What I have come to cherish even more are the very unique moments when I am actually able to stand in the places where a historical event was captured in photographs or in writing. Just such an experience came with the opportunity to meet and befriend a very special person. Under directions from my wife, I was sent to the home of a Mr. John Woodruff, who lives on McPherson Point, to borrow some old pictures he had that she wanted to add to her "collection". As if her ever growing collection of photographs

associated with Long Point weren't enough, she had begun to expand her collection to include Conesus Lake in general. What I ended up with that day was not only some rare photographs of McPherson Point but the opportunity to spend many future hours with a very special and generous gentleman with a wealth of knowledge about McPherson Point and so much more.

This is where researching history can really be fun. As it so happens, John and his sons were very much into building and flying remote controlled model airplanes. Even though he had an interest in airplanes, John was not aware of the connection to early flight that his home on Conesus Lake was until Eric Kraft moved in next door. Eric says his interest in the history



Looking west from the flying school at McPherson's Point at Conesus Lake circa 1914

of McPherson Point was prompted by his conversations with John and, after some researching, he shared with John a picture and a story of the flying school that he found in 2013. When John shared this information with my wife, it didn't take long for her to find, first pictures and then newspaper articles, about the school. As can be seen in the pictures my wife found, the "Flying Boats" of that school were actually parked on the very beach where John grew up and now lives. Whenever I now visit John, the image of those Flying Boats, parked on that very beach, instantly comes to mind. As I was to find out shortly after my first visit with John, his beach and Conesus Lake are an integral part of the history of flight in this country. But how, you may ask?



A Thomas plane at the flying school at McPherson's Point at Conesus Lake NY circa 1914

Well, most people are familiar with the name Glenn Curtiss and his contribution to manned flight. But, as it turns out, he was just one of many men of that period who were driven by the desire to fly and built machines that would. Although the hub of this activity seemed to center around the Bath-Hammondsport area, it eventually found its way to Conesus Lake. The lake that became a vacation haven for so many people in the late 1800's and 1900's, also became a destination for the "brave of heart" who wished to experience the thrill of flying in 1913 and 1914.

their way into structures that had wings, as well as those that had two wheels, the skies over western New York were never the same again. Like the Wright brothers, Glenn Curtiss ran a bicycle shop where he sold and repaired bicycles. But Curtiss, unlike the Wright Brothers, had a growing interest in motorcycles and gas powered engines and in 1902 he began manufacturing motorcycles with his own single-cylinder engines. His pursuit of more power and speed drove his engine development and in 1907 he actually became known as the "fastest man on earth" when he rode his self-built, V-8 engined motorcycle to a speed of 136.36 miles per hour. And, as his engines became larger, so did his reputation. After being recruited by Alexander Graham Bell in 1907 to build a heavier-than-air machine, and then experiencing flight for himself in what they built, his life's passion turned to building and flying aircraft.

When Glenn Curtiss began using and then building engines that were finding



Looking south-east at McPherson's Point at Conesus Lake circa 1914.

In the scene are the steamer J. A. Ritz, a plane from the flying school and the Livingston Inn.

Not long after Curtiss started manufacturing aircraft in

Hammondsport, two brothers by the name of William and Oliver Thomas, also began manufacturing aircraft, first in Hammondsport, then Hornell, Bath and finally in Ithaca in 1914. William Thomas immigrated to the United States from England in 1908 and went to work for Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company. After building a successful "pusher" biplane in a barn, William left Curtiss' company and was joined by his brother in 1910 to form their own company called the Thomas Brothers Aeroplane Company. Competition between the early pioneers of manned flight resulted in "records" being set and touted by companies such as Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company and the Thomas Brothers Aeroplane Company who were advancing their technologies with every new design. Two such records were established by the Thomas Brothers while their operation was in Bath. An American endurance record for a flight with a passenger of 3 hours and 51 minutes was set by a Thomas Brothers biplane in 1912 and then that same test pilot, Walter E. Johnson, set an altitude record of 13,000 feet in 1913.

During these early years, attending events such as fairs, where they could actually see the exhibition of a "flying machine", fed the curiosity of thousands around the country, Western New York included. The persistent dream of man's desire to fly was now an exploding reality. Recording the growth, activities

and technological milestones of early manned flight at this time was “Aero and Hydro”, the first weekly aeronautical publication in America. Other publications would soon follow as early pilots would perform “demonstration flights” all over the United States. The huge crowds of people that were known to gather at Long Point proved to be an ideal venue for such an event. A newspaper article from July 17th, 1912 announced that the Annual Livingston County Picnic at Long Point, Conesus Lake on August 8th, would include the “first hydro-aeroplane flight in the county”. And, so what do you do once you’ve captured their curiosity? On the front page of “Aero and Hydro” dated June 28th, 1913, the article titled “NEW YORK Conesus Lake” states, “The Thomas Brothers Aeroplane Company has established a branch aero-hydroplane school at Conesus Lake which is an ideal location for over-water flying. The school here is in charge of F. G. Eells, who has a number of students for instruction in hydro and flying boat operation.” Teach them to fly and they’ll buy your aero-hydroplane.



A crowd enjoys a closer look at a plane at the flying school at McPherson's Point on Conesus Lake NY circa 1914

Seeing the business potential in building and selling airplanes, William and Oliver started the Thomas Brothers School of Aviation, the first such school to be chartered by the New York State Board of Regents. It's not exactly known why they chose to operate their school on Conesus Lake but it could easily be assumed that being aware of the large number of people who came to the lake from as far away as Buffalo, Rochester and the New York City area, the Thomas brothers must have seen the future sales potential of such a venture. The cove and

accommodations of McPherson Point offered the perfect place to operate their school. Summer vacationers now shared their beach on Conesus Lake with flying boats.

In an article in the July 4th, 1914 “Aero and Hydro” titled “NEW YORK Conesus Lake”, the author wrote, “The first of June instruction was begun in earnest and Geo. Haringx, Tim Brennan, Harry Bronson, Dan Galbraith and Matthew Tooley, the well-known Conesus Lake sportsman, are progressing rapidly, all handling the machines on the strait- a-ways and making landings. Last Sunday Tooley did quite a large ferry business from McPherson Point to Long Point and return. Two young laddies are expected the early part of next week to begin taking instruction in flying so as to be machines are housed within a hundred feet of the Livingston Inn, where good accommodations can be had by pupils at a special rate.”

The attraction of manned flight was so strong that “it took off like a rocket”, as they would say. After the Wright Brothers first flight on December 17th, 1903, the enthusiasm to fly could not be contained and the skies over Western New York became a key entry in the history of flight. Glenn Curtiss took to the skies in 1907 and begins to manufacture aeroplanes in Hammondsport. The Thomas Brothers begin building aeroplanes in 1910. An article in the Naples Record dated September 23rd, 1910 reported that “Fred Eells, the aviator who made aeroplane flights at the Naples fair last week, had a four-mile race with an Erie express train at Bath; he left the train far behind.” October 31st, 1912, Walter Johnson, sets a new American Endurance Record for flight with a passenger. Fred G. Eells, a native of Bath, made flights over the city of Rochester with a camera in 1910 and took the first aerial photographs ever made. And in June of 1913, the Thomas Brothers open the first accredited flying school at McPherson Point.

The history of aeroplanes and Conesus Lake is both fascinating and rich. Often though, the most unexpected connections will be like “icing on the cake” when they appear. This “icing” is how I will

conclude this story. As I wrote earlier, John Woodruff and his sons were very involved in flying model airplanes. The history of flight and the role of McPherson Point, is fascinating in itself. But, upon researching the history of the Thomas Brothers, it so happens that during his retirement years in Daytona Beach, William T. Thomas was very involved with the building and flying of model airplanes. Now, when I see the model planes hanging in John's garage or shop, I can only imagine the conversations these two men would have had, had they ever met.

Thank you John for sharing your knowledge of McPherson Point... and your friendship.



*John Woodruff at McPherson's Point on Conesus Lake NY
in August of 2015*

Editor's note: Vince DiSalvo writes historical articles about Conesus Lake NY which appear in the Livingston County News. The photos shown here are courtesy of John Woodruff and Andy and Nancy Anderson.

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news@livingstonnews.com