



## Smithsonian Institution

*Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Archives*

### Fred Wiseman Scrapbook

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He Flew First Air Mail in 1911

Bay Aviation Pioneer Recalls the Good Old (Piano Wire) Days

By RUTH NEWHALL

Forty-eight years ago today the Wright brothers made the first aeroplane flight at Kittyhawk, N. C.

Seven years later they were still less than a dozen people in the U. S. who could fly.

Frederick J. Wiseman, who now is 74 and lives in Berkeley, started building an airplane in 1910 and gave up flying at the end of 1911. Last week he reviewed the early days of the flying machine – days in which he established for himself the title of the first man ever to fly air mail.

#### FOR THE MONEY

"There were a bunch of us – machinists and auto racers, mostly, who took it up for the money," he said, spreading out his scrapbooks.

"I was back in Chicago, getting my Stoddard-Dayton ready to race in the Crown Point auto races," – he turned to pages of newspaper clippings headlined "Wiseman Wins at Crown Point."

"They were putting on a celebration to welcome the Wright brothers home from France. The French had given them more onerous than they had at home, and Chicago suddenly decided they were worth a \$60,000 welcome.

"And that same year Glenn Curtis one \$10,000 for flying from Albany to New York, and a Frenchman that Billy Hearst brought over cleaned up between \$60,000 and \$80,000 barnstorming.

"There was no money in auto races, so after the races we came back home to build a plane."

#### PETALUMA OUTSKIRTS

Wiseman's home was in Santa Rosa, and a Santa Rosa butcher, Ben Noonan, put up \$10,000. He and his friends set up a tent on the outskirts of Petaluma and went to work.

"We thought all you had to do was build a kite and put a motor in it. But we found it was more complicated than that. On our first plane we didn't understand just how things worked and put the ailerons on backward. I crashed, and after that I was a little timid

[advertisement, partial]

[[image – a little girl with a ribbon in her curly hair, looks at us across a bookmarked Christmas Carols sitting on a piano music stand – three tall candles are visible behind her]]

'Daddy,' rent me one of Cline's Brand New Tom Thumb

[/advertisement]]

[[Image – photo of Fred Wiseman in three-piece suit, aviator's cap and goggles pushed up to his forehead, posing while holding the wheel of the control mechanism of his old plane; caption – FRED J. WISEMAN



"There was money in it then"]]

about turning. We stuck to straight-line flights for quite a while – take her up, fly straight ahead to a beach or pasture, and set her down and tow her back again."

The first flights were made on a ranch near Petaluma, Wiseman said.

"The thing I remember most was looking down and seeing everything running – cows, sheep, rabbits, dogs – all scared to death of this thing 40 or 50 feet above them."

#### 670 POUNDS TOTAL

The total weight of the plane, including motor, was 670 pounds, according to local news accounts, and its construction was described as "similar to the network of wires one finds in a piano."

"Being so light, it was easy to handle on the ground," Wiseman said. "The motor was behind the pilot, who sat out in front. When I hit the ground, I jump off and skid my feet, pushing back on the plane. Saved it several times that way."

Wiseman got his first taste of flying from money in the Tanforan air meet of 1911, where Glenn Curtiss, Lincoln Beachey, and other aces of the day participated.

"We found that our first plane was no good and had to build another one," Wiseman said. "It flew all right, but it wouldn't fit on a railroad car because the wings weren't demountable. And to go all the way to San Francisco, and Pismo, and Sacramento, we had to ship by train."

At Pismo Beach, where a photo shows Wiseman's plane 100 feet in the air over crowds of spectators, the group made \$4000. They set out on a barnstorming tour, shipping the plane from point to point, with an advance publicity man advertising feats of daring, marriage is in the air, and such stunts.

#### A LOT OF BUNK

"Of course that was a lot of bunk," Wiseman said. "An aviation magazine" – he pulled out a yellowed 1911 issue – "showed my wife sitting beside me on the plane with the note that we took rides before breakfast. My wife never went up in a plane until she rode in a DC-6 last year."

Wiseman's plane is now housed in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. It got there because in February, 1911, he promised his friends in Santa Rosa that he would fly home from Petaluma. The Santa Rosa paper was enthusiastic, and arranged to have Wiseman deliver letters, stamped and in an official you. S. mail sack, and Petaluma to Santa Rosa, as well as deliver papers to subscribers along the route.

"We flew it all right and that's how I became the first person to fly air mail, even though it was only a stunt. I dropped the newspapers over from time to time, but I didn't bother about seeing that they landed near any subscribers. I just wanted to finish that 16-mile flight."

#### HE LEARNED HOW

Wiseman finally learned to make a short turn when he entered a San Francisco air meet.

"We had to turn seven laps around two pylons out in San Francisco Bay," he said. "I had a Hall-Scott motor, and after the first turn it began to steam.

"Al Hall and Bert Scott stood there on the shore shouting at me every time I went by, telling me to land and not burn up their motor. But I kept going and made it."

For about a year there was money nearly in being able to fly.

"That year, 1911, was flying's big year," Wiseman said. "By the end of that year a passenger had been carried, a target had been bombed, radio communication had been made with a plane in flight, and a landing had been made on a battleship. The airplane had shows what it could do. In order to make any money you had to do stunts. I know stunt man, so I gave it up."

Wiseman did a little more auto racing. He beat Barney Oldfield at Sacramento in 1918, then went back to the quieter life of the shops. Eleven years ago he retired from the Standard Oil Co.

Now, at 74, he lives quietly with his wife and their Berkeley apartment, where a small hallway is lined with pictures of his high-wheeled racing cars, his piano-wire plane, and the shining wooden propellor that was splintered when he landed in a Sacramento vineyard in 1911.

[[Line]]

S. F. Doctors Reject Union's

[[torn off]]

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*Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Archives*

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