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Knabenshue Collection - Newspaper articles, 1939-1965

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G COLUMBUS STAR OCTOBER 17, 1956
AIRSHIP PIONEER RECALLS HIS LATER CONQUESTS
'The Roy Knabenshue Story...'
Used Larger Dirigibles For Hauling Passengers
 By Mary Jose

[[6 columns]]
 [[first column]]

The big heartaches for flying men in aviation's early years were dreams that were not commensurate with their pocketbooks. They flew with bold faith in the uncharted corridors of the heavens setting the keystone for a new industrial revolution that was to accelerate the pace of a changing world. Most of them were self taught. They learned while they were aloft in untested crafts that could be loyal, capricious and petulant: and while they set man-made inventions against unknown elements they dreamed of larger ships, mightier power and quickening speed. But realization of their inventive genius was dependent on:

1. Money
2. Attitudes of a landlocked public.

In 1904 Roy Knabenshue was the first man in America to steer a powered balloon.

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[[second column]]
 He continued with airships of his own design, the Toledo I and Toledo II propelled by a four cylinder 10 hp engine with about as much drive as a medium-sized outboard motor, on the three-passenger craft carried aloft by huge collapsible gas bags and pulled by 40 hp, a little less than twice the horsepower of a Model T Ford. By 1912 Knabenshue may have had America's first airline. He was operating a fleet of 22 ten-passenger powered balloons or dirigibles. Business wasn't good, operation expensive and a man, despite his genius can't feed a growing family of four children on dreams of the future. Too Far Ahead The pioneer had shot too far ahead of public interest in the air. Realistically, he gave up. In a telephone interview this week to his home in Arcadia, Calif., the aging birdman, now 80, commented: "In 1908 and 1909 spectators were afraid to take to the air. They thought too much of their own necks. By 1912 that began to change. People were more anxious to fly, but at no time were the 10-passenger ships filled to capacity. We charged \$10 a head for a 30-minute flight. Some people thought we ought to pay them for taking the risk." The \$5000 package that Knabenshue received for his spectacular daily flights at the Ohio State Fair in 1906 may have seemed big money by the economic standards of the time but pioneer airmen like today's aircraft industries constantly re-invested in newer designs. The \$5000 was small capi

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KNABENSCHUE (left) and his assistant (right) in 1904, as pilot of the first powered dirigible, the Toledo I.

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[[third column]]

[[Image]]

FAMED airman Roy Knabenshue set a record in 1904 as pilot of the first powered balloon flown in America. Now 80 he resides in a Los Angeles suburb and is shown here with his wife, Jane. Retired after a long career in aviation he is now busy working of a book of the pioneer days of the air industry.

tal when backed against the 98-foot craft which Knabenshue designed and built for exhibition the following year only to have it go up in flames at the Iowa State Fair during a heavy storm — a week before he was to bring it to the Ohio State Fair of 1907.

The Columbus Dispatch of Sept. 2, 1907, commiserated with Knabenshue with the following:

LIFE OF AERONAUT NOT BED OF ROSES

"Knabenshue has had reverses enough to demoralize a less determined man. He is less optimistic than last year and this year refused to determine, within the hour, the time of his flights.

"All this season," he says, "the aeronaut has had bad weather. The elements have seemed against me."

"The rain and high winds all summer have prevented him from carrying out his program in full."

Freak Accident

The Iowa ship was a \$10,000-\$15,000 loss. A live wire struck the tent in which the carriage of the ship was housed and set it aflame. The gas bag anchored in another part of the field freakishly became unmoored and was blown directly into the flame.

To fulfill his Columbus engagement Knabenshue sent to Canada for one of his Toledos on display there.

Local papers described the Iowa loss thus:

"Roy Knabenshue got into

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[[fourth column]]

town Saturday afternoon and immediately started to work filling the gas bag of his airship which arrived several hours before him. He told an interested audience about the fire which destroyed his new airship and captive balloon. He is more than enthusiastic about it. It worked to perfection he says and he felt its loss deeply.

"Did you lose your captive balloon too?" he was asked.
"Did I lose it? That balloon just naturally walked across the fairgrounds to where the tent was burning, jumped on the tent and [[zooipft?]]." A wave of the hand described the explosion which followed.
"The airship he now has was one which was in an accident in Canada recently when he went up in a high wind against better judgement to satisfy the demands of the crowd. He landed on a church steeple and had to be rescued by ropes."
In mid-week of the Fair of 1907 the press listed the three top attractions: Leo Ear in a high-wire walk from the State House across Broad St., Dr. Hartman's exhibit of Arabian horses from Hartman Farms including the stallion "Khaled" which cost \$50,000 and Roy Knabenshue in daily flights.
One reporter reflected: "Probably the man most disappointed that his big ship burned and did not get to Columbus was Knabenshue himself. Others do not understand the difficulties he had to overcome to make the ship and are just about as well satisfied with the one he has at the Fair now. His first real ascension was made
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[[fifth column]]
[[Image]]
TEST PILOTS Carl Holmes and Roy Knabenshue in winterized suits ready for takeoff in wartime dirigibles designed and manufactured at the Goodyear plant in Akron in 1917. Knabenshue's early experience was a valuable asset in World War I.

Tuesday afternoon and as it happened he went up during the heat of a race. The race was forgotten as 95 per cent of the whole grandstand was watching Knabenshue."
In 1909 he and Lincoln Beachy joined forces but by 1910 financial pressure led Knabenshue to accept a two-year contract as business manager for the Wright Brothers in charge of writing all their contracts. He moved his family from Toledo to Dayton.
Even with this close contact with airplanes Knabenshue continued to cast his hopes with the dirigibility of lighter-than-air and made mental blue-prints of larger airships he would design in the future.
Costs Too High
When his fleet of 22 became a reality in 1912 the inventor was beset with the same problems that enmeshed the early commercial airlines two decades later. Cost of operations outweighed income.
"Each ship had a crew of 10," Knabenshue relates. "Two boys on the bow to hold it down before take-off. the others serving as police to protect the ship from the push of spectators and souvenir hunters. Men on the anchor ropes were sometimes lifted from the ground, but we had no serious injuries. Often in an emergency landing it was hard to get people to catch the anchor ropes. They were afraid. With a fleet we had
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[[sixth column]]

to have too many substitute flyers. It was difficult to find the men with a talent for navigation."

The public was content to watch the exhibitions and leave the conquest of the skies to the foolhardy aeronauts. Yet the song writers of the day caught the spirit and the morning glory horns of the phonographs were blaring out a rollicking number called "Come Josephine in My Flying Machine" and another that began:

"Come take a trip in my airship

Let's take a spin around Mars

No one to spy while we're spooning

No one to see but the stars!"

The thoughts of the aeronaut were less romantic as denoted by some of Knabenshue's writing in the magazines of 1905-09. He tells of a forced landing in a cornfield after an exhibition at the St. Louis Fair of 1904. "I glanced down, saw in the various roads leading in that direction automobiles tearing along loaded down with enthusiastic fellows. As I came down they burst into the field and raced across it at their best clip. They were covered with dust from head to foot, but had forgotten everything except the pleasure of the moment. The thought occurred to me that here were these dignified men holding responsible po-
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