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Harold E. Morehouse Flying Pioneers Biographies Collection - Baldwin, Thomas S.

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THOMAS S. BALDWIN

Pioneer Aeronaut - Plane builder - Aviator

Thomas S. Baldwin was born in Decatur, Illinois, June 30, 1854, the son of a physician. He started school in 1862, and during his early boyhood both parents died.

As a result, he ran away from school to make his own way in the world. In succession he became a newsboy, gaslighter, book canvasser, and gymnast.

At Hot Springs, Arkansas, a circus performer taught him tightwire walking, then Baldwin joined the circus and remained a tightwire and trapeze artist for several years. After this, he devised a new attraction by going up in a hot air balloon and performing on a trapeze during the ascension.

In 1885 Baldwin stretched a wire 700 feet long between the Cliff House and Seal Rocks at San Francisco, California, and made Sunday afternoon exhibitions by walking this wire back and forth, 90 to 100 feet above the waves in the gorge below. From this act he went to captive ballooning and this led to his interest in developing a parachute so that he could jump from a balloon.

After much experimenting and careful testing, Baldwin made the first parachute jump ever made in the United States. He jumped from the balloon "Eclipse," owned by A. Van Tassell, at Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, on January 30, 1887, and landed in the front yard of a small house. Following this he immediately began traveling with his parachute, giving exhibitions about the country.

At Minneapolis, Minnesota, he met "Buffalo Bill" Cody who urged him to make a foreign tour. The following year he took his jumping act to Europe, where he was a sensation and was presented with a gold medal by the Balloon Society of Great Britain.

In 1882, Baldwin attempted his first airship, a combination balloon, bicycle and propeller, but soon found he was unable to pedal it with his own power. That year he also toured Mexico and Central America with his balloon and parachute.

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