Bendix Air Races Collection - 1933 International Air Races (Chicago), Gordon Bennett Balloon Race, Official Program

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History of the James Gordon Bennett Balloon Race

THE first international balloon race for the Gordon Bennett trophy was started from Paris in 1906, with entries representing Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, and the United States. The race was witnessed by more than 250,000 people and was won by the single American entry, Frank P. Lahm, representing the United States Army. His victory over the more experienced European pilots was somewhat of a surprise.

For the second race, 300,000 people assembled at St. Louis, where balloons were entered by France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. The race was promoted by the Aero Club of America. Osker Erbsloh piloted the balloon "Pommern" into first place, giving the race to Germany. Erbsloh travelled 872 miles and broke the American distance record, which had stood since 1895.

The third race started from Berlin in 1908 and Colonel Schaeck of Switzerland won. He made the distance of 753 miles, after remaining in the air 73 hours. his flight set a new world's endurance record.

In 1909 the fourth race was started from Zurich, Switzerland, and was won by the single entry of the United States, Edgar Mix.

The 1910 race was held in St. Louis and A. R. Hawley, with Augustus Post as aide, piloted the America II to victory. He travelled 1,172.9 miles in 46 hours, which set the present distance record for America. For more than a week Hawley and his aide were given up as lost, but finally were located near Quebec by trappers.

The 1911 race, starting at Kansas City, became unusually interesting because of the attempt of Americans to gain permanent ownership of the Gordon Bennett trophy by winning for the third successive time. No effort was spared to make this a big event. However, Hans Gericke of Germany was returned the victor, after the balloonists had battled their way through severe storms.

In the 1912 race from Stuttgart, Germany, Maurice Bienaime of France established a new world's record for distance, making 1,334 miles, landing at Rjasan, Russia. The record still stands as the greatest distance ever flown in a Bennett competition. Captain Honeywell, piloting an American balloon, finished third.

More than half a million people witnessed the Gordon Bennett race in France in 1913. Ralph Upson of Detroit won. He crossed the English Channel and landed in England, winning world fame for daring and efficient flying. All of the other balloonists remained in France.

From 1914 to 1919, inclusive, the Gordon Bennett race was discontinued, owing to the war.

In 1920 the trophy was contested for at Birmingham, Alabama. There were entries from the United States, France, Italy and Belgium. Belgium won for the first time with Ernest Demuyter as navigator.

Paul Armbruster of Switzerland was the winner in the flight from

Brussels in 1921.

Demuyter won the 1922, 1923, and 1924 races, giving Belgium permanent possession of the Gordon Bennett cup and establishing himself as one of the greatest balloonists of all time.

The Gordon Bennett trophy being out of competition, the Belgium Aero Club in 1925 donated a second Gordon Bennett trophy for the race, which was held at Brussels for the third successive time. A. Veenstra, a Belgium pilot, won the race.

In 1926 the race was started from Antwerp, and Ward T. Van Orman won, giving the United States its first victory since 1913.

This victory brought the 1927 race to Detroit and Edward J. Hill, an American won, covering 745 miles.

Again, in 1928, the race came to Detroit and was won by Captain W. E. Kepner, an American, who made 460 miles. Three successive citories gave the United States permanent possession of the second Gordon Bennett trophy.

The 1929 race was started from St. Louis and was the first contest for the third trophy, given by the Detroit Board of Commerce and won by Ward T. Van Orman. This victory again made the United States the center of activities in 1930, giving Cleveland its first opportunity to stage the race.

Ward T. Van Orman in "Goodyear VIII" won the 1930 competition, flying 542 miles from Cleveland to Norfolk County, Mass.

Though the rules stipulate that the race each year is to be held in the country represented by the winner of the preceding event, it was decided at a conference of leading American balloonists to recommend cancellation of the 1931 competition and the holding of the 1932 event in Europe. This action was endorsed by the N.A.A. and approved by the F.A.I., the world governing body for air sports.

General financial conditions throughout the world, combined with the fact that a greater knowledge of local meteorological conditions gave a definite advantage to the American team, is said to have contributed to the decision to omit the 1931 contest, since the race gace promise of being a walk-away for the United States.

Lieutenant Commander T. G. W. Settle, U.S.N. was pilot of the United States Navy balloon that won the 1932 race at Basle, Switzerland. He landed his craft on the Polish-Russian border, near Vilna, 921 miles away. This gave the United States permanent possession of the third Gordon Bennett trophy and because of the victory the United States is host to the classic this year. The fourth trophy will be presented by The Chicago Daily News.

In previous years contenders in the Gordon Bennett race have been qualified by a national elimination race, but this event was not held this year and instead, the National Aeronautic Association decided American entrants would be by nomination. Lieutenant Commander Settle, as last

year's winner, automatically qualified as the trophy defender.

The James Gordon Bennett Trophy

James Gordon Bennett, donor of the first international balloon race trophy, was famous as a publisher and sportsman. He was born in 1841, a native of New York. At the death of his father in 1872, he assumed control of The New York Herald, which his father had founded, and directed its policies largely by cable from his residence in Paris. He also established editions in London and Paris.

With John W. Mackay, Mr. Bennett founded the Commercial Cable Company. He was keenly interested in exploration and sent Henry M. Stanley to Africa in 1874-1877 to find Livingstone. In 1879 he outfitted the Jeannette Polar Expedition. For more than half a century he was an enthusiastic yachtsman. When twenty-five years old he won a race from Sandy Hook to the Isle of Wight. In 1906 he became enthused about balloon racing and gave to the Aero Club of France the now famous Gordon Bennett trophy. Thus he founded international balloon racing and made possible the event you are now witnessing.

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Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Archives

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