

A Lifetime Love Affair with Aviation

I was incredibly fortunate in finding a direction for my life at an early age and, with the help of many people along the way, was able to pursue it.

I saw Charles Lindberg's famous 'Spirit of St. Louis' as he flew over our home in Los Angeles.

I saw the German dirigible "Graf Zeppelin" in flight over our home in Hermosa Beach.

I worked as an usher in the grandstands at the 1936 National Air Races at Mines Field.

I met the famous Amelia Earhart just prior to her second attempt to fly around the world. She disappeared in the Pacific just two months later.

Plus many other highlights.

But my story starts much earlier.

My twin sister and I were born on the day after Christmas, 1920, in a small wooden house that my mother and father had built with their own hands on an open field in Arcadia, California, not far from where Santa Anita Race Track is today. No close neighbors. No paved roads. My older brother, Baxter, was just three years old. My father was skilled as a carpenter and as a commercial artist. His carpentry was done with hand tools and lots of muscle. As an artist, he used poster paints and cardboard to make posters and show-cards for window displays in the major department stores in downtown Los Angeles. We had no car. He rode the Big Red Cars of the Pacific Electric Railway to get to work. My younger brother, Bobbie, was born when my sister and I were two.

My first love wasn't an airplane. It was a gray cast-iron Ford tractor with large red wheels. I was three. With dirt everywhere, I was happy.

By my fourth birthday, we had moved into a larger rented house in Monrovia, California, still out in the open spaces, but with a neighbor across a driveway from us.

Three incidents stand out in my memory at this house:

First: A delivery man had left a large bottle of water next to a stack of newspapers on our neighbors' porch. The bright sun was shining on the bottle which acted like a giant magnifying glass concentrating the sun's rays onto a small spot on the newspapers and starting a fire. Mother saw it and screamed, "FIRE". Dad doused it with a bucket of water. Very scary! That was my first lesson in general science.

Second: We had a goat which provided fresh milk for this family of six. She was gentle and let us children play with her. One day there was a big fuss with the goat. Mother kept us children away. A little later, we saw a funny looking, shiny, wiggling glob on the ground near the goat. That glob soon turned out to be a wobbly baby goat! A cute little kid. That first lesson in biology was pretty scary, too! Another lesson for us was: the word, "kid", means a goat; not a child; and don't forget it.

Third: When Grandmothers come to visit, they bring little treasures for their grandchildren. My Mother's Mother, we called her "Mima", always carried a small leather satchel. We waited impatiently until she could "find" something in it for each of us. One day, she "found" two yellow wooden wheels, about two inches in diameter, for me. I was only four, but I already knew how to use some of Dad's smaller tools. "Careful, Junior, those tools are sharp". Using those two wheels, odd pieces of wood, a few shingle nails and a bit of yarn, I made a small boy's version of a horse pulling a cart. No, not a small boy's version; it *was* a horse pulling a cart. The first in a lifetime of making things. Many years later, I discovered that Mother had packed it away to save. I still have it!

Our next house was the first in a series of four in the Highland Park section of Los Angeles, much closer to Dad's work in Los Angeles.

Soon it was the Fourth of July. Fireworks had been a big deal when Dad was growing up. He had lost none of it. The louder, the better. Using a smoldering punk, we children were permitted to light firecrackers that were lying on the ground. The fun stopped when my twin sister accidentally poked herself in the eye with the punk. A lesson for all of us.

Our second Highland Park house was only a few blocks from the school where my sister and I started kindergarten. In our home-made look-a-like outfits, we would occasionally be stopped on the way to school and asked "Are you twins? What are your names?" She'd say; "He's Junior." I'd say; "She's Cruller Wees." Who could say Clara Louise?

There were more life lessons to learn. One evening, it was my turn to feed our small dog. He started eating before I could finish putting his plate down. He bit me. Blood was everywhere! I still have the scar on my right forearm. Dad was mad at me, the dog, and the person who gave us the dog.

We moved again, this time to an old two-story frame house with space for Dad to do his art work. There was a small creek close behind the back yard. Pollywogs for us and watercress for Mother. The stairs on the back of the house were those scary open ones. I was playing with a short piece of water pipe partway up the stairs. It slipped from my hands and hit my twin

sister on the head. I had been called "dummkopf" many times before, and spanked many times, but this was serious punishment! We both survived.

When my twin and I were in the first grade, we moved again. This time to a wood-frame house built over four garages on a hill opposite a City Playground with a large wading pool. Dad used one of the garages for his art studio and workshop. There was an open balcony at one end of the house, like being on a ship. I recall making two toy boats on that balcony:

The first was a twelve inch length of 2x4 red wood, pointed on the front with Dad's big saw, the bottom edges rounded off with his jackplane, and much of the interior hollowed out with his chisel and mallet. I placed it in the wading pool. It tilted to one side. I learned about the need for a keel.

The second boat was simplicity itself: A short length of wood lath, pointed on the front, a round sucker stick for a mast, two nails in the bottom for a keel, and a square piece of wax paper, pierced near the top and bottom edges and threaded over the mast. A very crude, single-mast "square-rigger". I entered this unusual boat in a race of home-made boats at the playground. Compared to the other entries, mine was a joke. We lined up, and on signal, released our boats. The breeze blew all of them to one side of the pool. The ones with the deepest keels ran aground in the shallow water. The breeze held the others against the side of the pool. One boat broke loose and started to move. It snagged the wax paper sail on mine and freed it. Mine was faster and crossed the finish line first. I ran home with my Blue Ribbon.

In my opening to this story, I said that I had seen Charles Lindberg's Famous "Spirit of St. Louis" flying over our house in Los Angeles. This was **that** house. He flew quite low and slow. We all whooped and hollered. He was *the* hero of that time. A very exciting day for us.

There were other exciting days, too; like the day my Dad discovered that our second grade teacher was trying to get his left-handed son, me, to write with my right hand. It was even more exciting when he found they were teaching us "Hell, Fire and Damnation" at the local Sunday school.

That summer we got our first car, a used 1922 Chevrolet touring car, a tall, black, open-sided car with a cloth top and a small engine. We made several day-trips to Hermosa Beach to play in the sand and shallow water.

Why Hermosa? Years later, Mother told us that when she was fifteen, her parents had brought her from Denver to Redondo Beach to celebrate her birthday. (Redondo and Hermosa are side-by-side.) She had loved the beach at fifteen, and now, she was here again, with her own family on the beach with sand in our bathing suits, sand our hair and sand in our food.

Mother and Dad must have been really caught up in Hermosa, for they soon packed up everything we owned and moved there. Hermosa was small,

only three miles along the beach and less than two miles in from the beach. There were far more vacant lots than houses. Our new home was a stucco house on a hill at the north end of town. Schools were close-by. The beach was only three short blocks away. Groceries came from a neighborhood store. We walked everywhere. Dad rode the Big Red cars of the Pacific Electric Railway to work in Los Angeles.

Within a year, we moved to a large, two-story, wood-frame house on the same street, a block closer to the beach. It had room for all of us, space for Dad's "studio" and for occasional company. That old '22 Chevy sat mostly idle in the garage until Dad sold it to a neighbor teen-age boy.

In my introduction to this story, I wrote about having seen the German dirigible, "Graf Zeppelin" fly over our house in Hermosa Beach. This was **that** house. The Graf Zeppelin was huge, and slow and low. It was in our view for many minutes. What a thrill! A once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Again, we moved. This time to a smaller, single-story house, less than a block from the ocean. The beach became our backyard. This house was a magnet for friends and relatives from as far away as Denver.

About this time, Dad started to work at Metlox Neon Sign Company in nearby Manhattan Beach. It was regular work, but unfortunately, it didn't last. Neon signs were new and exciting, but very expensive. Times turned tough. Metlox ended up using their facilities to make pottery. Dad was out, but it wasn't all bad. He had been able to buy another used car, a 1923 Studebaker "Big-Six" four-door touring car; a giant step up from that Chevy.

And yet again, we moved; this time to an old frame house on a sandy hill facing away from the ocean. Mother's brother, Uncle Tom used to tease Dad, saying, "It must be cheaper to move than to pay rent."

This car is important to my overall aviation story because Dad would occasionally take the family on a ride to Mines Field, a privately-owned airport, about five miles north of our home. Some years later it would be called Los Angeles Municipal Airport, and many years later it would grow to become LAX. In those early days, it consisted of one paved runway and a few round-top wooden hangars, one with a tile-roofed control tower, which may still be visible from Imperial Boulevard. Mines Field was used by privately owned airplanes. There was no regular air service. The vast majority of this one-mile square piece of land was devoted to agriculture. Lima beans, anyone?

Using Dad's tools and scrap wood, I made a series of solid model airplanes. In my imagination, I was flying a real plane as I held my model out in the steady wind as Dad drove along.

Mother's photo album includes a picture of my twin sister and me standing by a sleek molded-plywood, single-engine, Lockheed Vega cabin monoplane, a sharp contrast to the fabric-covered biplanes of the day.

Our rides took us to other places, too. Once, at an open field where the Long Beach Airport is now located, we saw several Army pursuit planes chasing each other, and Barling Bombers, huge lumbering, noisy, twin-engine biplanes left over from the World War.

Another time, we drove to the Long Beach Harbor, and toured the battleship, U.S.S. Pennsylvania, the flagship of the Pacific Fleet. We saw its sturdy observation biplanes in place on their catapults.

Our longest trip was to Santa Barbara to visit our Uncle Tom. As we approached Carpinteria, we saw an airplane landing at a small field beside the highway. There was a single hangar at the west end. It is still there.

Closer to home, we saw various types of gliders flying from the gentle, barren slopes between Redondo Beach and the hills of Palos Verdes, some of them soaring back and forth on the rising air along the surfside bluffs. Each trip was an adventure and inexpensive. Gas cost about twenty cents.

Work-wise, Dad was having a tough time. Not much art work for him in Los Angeles, even less in Hermosa. No one was building houses. He replaced a lot of termite-damaged wood on our house in lieu of rent. In one attempt to find steady work, Dad sought to be elected to the office of City Clerk of Hermosa Beach. He didn't come close. Another lesson.

Back to aviation: It was early in 1932. The father of a girl in our class at school owned an airplane, a sturdy, single-engine Fairchild cabin monoplane, which he was overhauling and outfitting with skis for use in transporting all kinds of material in Alaska. His plane was in a hangar at Clover Field in Santa Monica, close to the hangar where Douglas was building their twin-engine amphibians for San Pedro-to-Catalina service.

This friend knew of Dad's carpentry skills and of his hungry family, so He hired Dad to help him. I rode over there several times. I saw many planes and was up close to several. The rules were simple: "don't touch".

At the completion of this work, this kind man took our family up in his plane in two short rides; Mother with two of us on one flight; Dad with the other two on the second. It was new feeling and a bit scary, but I loved it.

Another big event in this house was the birth of our sister, Carol Ann, on September seventh that year. Another lesson; a big one.

A few months later, we moved again. This time to a very tall and drafty old two-story frame house on the main street, Hermosa Avenue, just two blocks from the center of town. Dad built and opened a very small waffle shop close-by in the heart of town. The shop took all of Dad's time, plus a

lot of Mother's time at home, cooking for the shop. Older brother Baxter and I spent many hours washing dishes and running errands.

Aviation-wise, there was yet another adventure. It was the Fourth of July and as part of the celebration the Navy had anchored an aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Saratoga, about a mile off the end of the Hermosa pier. The Navy offered free rides to the ship in their low-profile, totally-open, crew tenders. The only cost was the time it took to wait in line on the pier. Without either Mother or Dad's permission, younger brother Bobbie and I got in line. We were soon on our way. The feeling of being down in the troughs between the large swells and a few moments later being high on the crest of a swell was petrifying. Another lesson, but worth the risk. From the shore we could see that this was a big ship, but looking up at it from that small tender, it was enormous! Our tour ended with a freshly baked cookie in the Crew Mess.

There was just one airplane on board; a large, open-cockpit, single-engine, Loehning biplane amphibian, with a long nose on its otherwise tall and boxy fuselage. It was securely tied down on the flight deck. We walked right up to it. Another thrill. Mother and Dad were surprised when they found out where we had been, but didn't scold us. Lucky for us.

The good times of summer gave way to fall and school; then Christmas, and the start of the New Year; 1933. Winter-time at the beach was cool and foggy. There wasn't much going on, until one day in March, when Mother Nature got our attention with a major earthquake in Long Beach. Its center may have been over there, but the ground was doing a dance over here in Hermosa. Our big frame house and our sturdy waffle shop both escaped serious damage, but many of the brick buildings in town, including the newest and largest parts of the main school were heavily damaged. This wasn't aviation, but things were certainly flying around. Our baby sister rode out the quake in her buggy, parked outside the door of Dad's waffle shop.

In the summertime, his business was reasonably brisk, but short of what it took to support a family of seven. Things were tough, with little hope of getting better. In the middle of the fall semester of school, Dad closed his waffle shop and we moved into a single-story, wood-frame house at the north end of the business section of Glendale, close to the Pacific Electric Railway to Los Angeles and within walking distance of our schools. Bobbie was in the fifth grade, we twins in the eighth grade in Junior High and Baxter, a junior in Hoover High School.

I knew nothing about Glendale, but for a thirteen-year-old interested in aviation, I would learn that it must be close to heaven. My love affair with aviation was starting in earnest.

Late each afternoon, a huge, red and blue American Airways Curtiss Condor, a twin-engine, fabric-covered biplane, yes, a biplane, flew almost over our house, coming from Tucson, Arizona, the last leg of a long, slow flight from New York. It was preparing to land at Grand Central Air Terminal, about two miles away. It was a sight! A little later each evening, a small, sleek, red and white, Varney Speed Lanes Lockheed Orion, a single-engine, low-wing cabin monoplane with retractable landing gear, would dart past after a quick two hour and twenty minute flight from Oakland.

In those days, Grand Central was **the** airport for Los Angeles. American and TWA were both there, plus several regional airlines. United was flying out of its own airport in Burbank, but the main action was at Grand Central. Movie stars, would-be stars, and dignitaries could be on any of the flights. They had to walk right through the terminal lobby, close to whoever was there. The Press photographers loved it. The public loved it. I loved it.

At that moment, I couldn't possibly have imagined the opportunities that would come to me through living this close to Grand Central. My career in Aeronautical Engineering was waiting.

Maybe we can talk about it some time.