

## William H. Martin Glider



Had William H. Martin of Canton, Ohio, been able to finance the installation of a motor in an airplane he built in 1909 the world would probably have flocked to his farm on the Harrisburg Rd. when he died in March, 1937. For this monoplane was the first of its type in the world, and made many successful flights when towed by a horse or a Ford car. The inventor knew his aerodynamics, and his plane embodied principles of safety that have been generally adopted in plane construction. Yet no previous history of Stark County has recorded the flights or the invention. John Lehman, in his History of Stark County published in 1916, has a detailed biography of William H. Martin, but not a word about his chief claim to fame. Twenty years after the plane was built, patented and successfully flown, Mr. Martin offered it to the Smithsonian Institution. After long and careful investigation the Smithsonian institution accepted it as being the first plane of its type, and put it on display next to Lindbergh's "Spirit of St. Louis."

When Harry Renkert organized the Canton Aviation Co. in 1938, and acquired the land for the airport, he named it Martin Field in honor of William H. Martin, whose farm adjoined the field. At the time Mr. Martin died, Dennis R. Smith wrote a feature story for the Repository Sunday issue of March 28, 1937, which gave an excellent and full

account of the flights. This has been supplemented in the following account with information from the son, Charles C. Martin, Ray Miller at the Martin Airport, and checked with Harry Renkert, Leon Sherrick and others.

## **The Early Days**

William H. Martin was born January 22, 1855, on the present site of the Canton Post Office where his father was engaged in the rope making business. Later his father bought a farm outside of the corporate limits, but in the Union School District, which William attended. One of the teachers was Anna McKinley (sister of President William McKinley). The story has been handed down in the family that one day Miss McKinley called William to the front of the room. There was a chair in the aisle, which he leap-frogged on the way up. Miss McKinley told him to go back and come up again. On his second trip he likewise leap-frogged the chair. Then Miss McKinley smilingly said that she meant to come up "right". The third time he came up without leap-frogging. He graduated from high school in the class of 1872.

William assisted his father on the farm and in rope-making. His family antecedents had been rope-makers for generations, ever since coming to the United States in 1745, and even before that in Germany. His father, Charles C. Martin, was the first to give up rope-making for farming, but still kept rope-making as a sideline.



William H. Martin was inventive and started "making things" at 8 years of age. Among other things, he invented a rope-spinning machine which was a valuable aid to his father in his rope-making business. At about 14 years of age he began experimenting with toy planes, flying them with rubber bands. He continued this experimenting for 22 years. When William

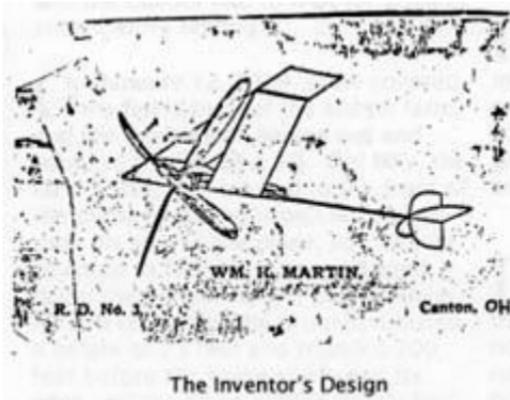
was 17 his father bought the Colbeck farm of 78 acres north of present 30th St. and east of Martindale Road, the latter road later being named in honor of the family. William and his parents attended the Methodist Church and Sunday school.

At the age of 24 William married Mary E. Pontius and located on a farm in the same section (No. 27) with his father. By his marriage to

Mary Pontius, three pioneer Stark County families were united: the Pontius family settling in Stark County in 1816; the Essig family with which the Pontius family had intermarried in 1806; and the Martin family, 1831.

During his spare time, William studied Engineering and Surveying. He was painstaking and accurate, and the Plain Township school board commissioned him to draw up a map of the township which was placed on a board at Center Schoolhouse. The map was so well done that the publishers of the county atlas in 1896 used it for the township map. Martin was elected county surveyor in 1883, holding that position for three years.

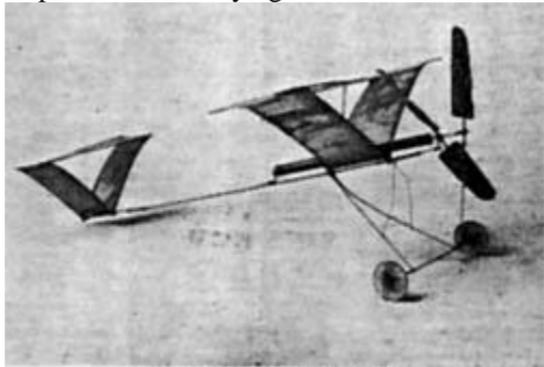
### "Resolved That Man Will Fly"



Mr. Martin joined a debating society at Brush College, near Canton. When asked to suggest a subject for debate he proposed. "Resolved that man will fly." Everyone laughed. No one else would take the affirmative. Not discouraged, Mr. Martin debated alone against three on the negative. He

won against the three. The study he put into the debate gave him an inspiration and belief in the possibilities of flying that never weakened.

On April 22, 1900, Mr. Martin appeared before the New York Aeronautic Society and demonstrated a small model of his plane which made several flights powered by rubber bands. It is believed that this may have been the first demonstration of a practical miniature



The Martin Monoplane Model  
1886

flying model and the forerunner of a sport which has become a favorite with boys throughout the world.

Meanwhile he became a successful and up-to-date farmer. He adopted the latest agricultural methods and was the owner of the first grain reaper and binder used in Plain Township. He acquired half of the farm (62 acres) that belonged to John Pontius, his father-in-law, on the Harrisburg Road. His farm home was the hip-shaped building, still standing, which was sold to Herman J. Moore in 1945, and was later purchased by Blaine M. Davidson. Holtz, was second cousin to Mrs. Grover Cleveland. By the second marriage there were three children...James H., Charles C., and Eudora (who died in August, 1998 at the age of 94).

During William H. Martin's long continued aeronautical experiments, others about the country began similar experiments. On December 17, 1903, Orville Wright made the first successful flight in a heavier than air mechanically propelled biplane, rising from the base of Kill Devil Hill four miles south of Kitty Hawk, N.C. He flew 120 feet in 12 seconds in a 27 mile an hour wind. The fourth flight the same day was made by Wilbur Wright...a distance of 852 feet in 59 seconds. Their plane was patented May 22, 1906

### **Experiments Pay Off**

Martin's experimenting reached the stage of a patent on a toy flying machine January 3, 1908. But he could not find a manufacturer. The toy never went into production. Later that year, Mr. Martin built his full-sized monoplane. He struck out boldly from the biplane designs in use by other inventors and adopted the monoplane form, with balancing wings forming a "V" below the main wing to give stability and safety. The materials used were light wood and English broadcloth.



After his first wife died, William married Almina Pontius Martin, who was an enthusiastic supporter of her husband's flying projects. The plane was completed just at the turn of the year. It had sled runners in

place of wheels, and the builder had to wait for a fall of snow before testing it.

On January 12, 1909, snow covered the fields back of the Martin farm, and the device was hauled out and taken to the top of a hill. Old Billy, the farm horse, was hitched to the front of the plane by a long rope. Mr. Martin took his seat in the plane, son George whistled to Billy. The horse started down the hill pulling the plane behind him. It rose from the ground, reached a height of 25 feet and traveled 200 feet before the horse slackened its pace and the plane settled gently back to earth.

Mrs. Martin then took her seat in the plane and made several successful flights, being the first woman ever to fly in a heavier than air machine. Another son, Charles C. Martin, (who was still living when this article was first published in 1952) also went up and said that it came down like a feather. When he shut his eyes, he didn't know when it struck snow.

Mr. Martin's experiments had been kept secret, but the trial flights could not be hidden. Neighbors flocked to the field to see for the first time in their lives a human being sustained in the air by a heavier than air machine. Cousin Glenn L. Martin had not yet built the first plane in California. The U.S. Army had not yet purchased its first airplane. In fact, the first test flight by Orville Wright before Army officials was not made until the following July, at which President Taft was a spectator.

### **First Flights**

Canton's aeronautical interest in 1908 and 1909 was still completely absorbed in the balloon flights of the Aero Club to witness which Orville Wright paid a visit to Canton, January 23, 1909.

It was thus at an extremely early period of airplane pioneering, that William H. Martin made his first flights. A photographer came out to take pictures of the flights but became so excited that he failed to operate his photographic apparatus properly and all the plates were ruined!

During successive days more than 100 flights were made. All the members of the family, including the pet dog enjoyed the novel experience. One day one of the sled runners struck a bare spot on the ground and swerved the plane against a fence, damaging it slightly. The flights were suspended for a time.

William H. Martin had his eye on more than the local scene and wanted to get his plane demonstrated in the East, but was handicapped by lack of funds. William A. Hoberdier, who, with his brother, L.A. Hoberdier operated Lyric Amusement Co. of Canton, is credited with having helped finance trips to New York in the Spring of 1909.

### **Hudson-Fulton Celebration**

In May 1909, Mr. Martin returned to New York...this time with his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Martin demonstrated their plane successfully at the Hudson-Fulton Celebration which sponsored an air meet in Morris Park, N. Y.



under the auspices of the New York Aeronautic Society. A New York newspaper gave this account of the exhibition:

"George Thompson, an ex-jockey, traveled around the old Morris Park race track twice yesterday in the Martin aeroplane, just arrived from Canton, Ohio. The aeroplane is bereft of motor so the motive power was supplied by an automobile. The flying machine was hitched to the motor car by a rope about 150 feet long and towed around the mile long track at a speed of 30 miles an hour. The following is an account of a flight witnessed by a reporter present at Morris Park...

"When going against the wind the monoplane rose to a height of between 15 and 75 feet, depending on the speed of the car. Whenever the automobile increased its speed the aircraft would receive such momentum that it would attempt to dash ahead of its guide.

"The Martin aeroplane is one of the most curious contrivances...among the 14 machines at Morris Park. It is 30 feet wide and about 30 feet long. Instead of consisting of the usual rigid planes top and bottom (biplane), it has one wide top plane and two planes inclined toward the bottom in the shape of a "V." These planes (monoplanes) constitute

what is known as the dihedral principle and give the apparatus stability while in flight.

"It is mounted on small wheels for starting purposes and carries a rear rudder practically of the same construction as the main plane. The elevating is done by means of a plane in front.

"Yesterday's experiments were the first that Mr. Martin has made in New York. He did not fly in the contrivance himself because he wanted to see how it would act above the track in Morris Park...

"While the machine was in flight yesterday with Thompson aboard, it gave good indications of maintaining its equilibrium while going at high speed.

"As it swooped around the track behind Oral A. Parker's automobile it swayed from side to side. (The driver of the car was, at times driving faster than Mr. Martin had intended.) The airplane narrowly missed collision with an obstructing tree, but it showed very clearly that it would always right itself before coming to the upsetting point."



In the Sunday Repository of June 5, 1927, a feature story gave another slant on the Morris Park Exhibition as told by Mr. Martin, relating an accident that might have been fatal to the inventor.

"The wind was high that day, so high that I would not allow my wife to fly. Other men who were scheduled to perform refused to go up and the crowds began to grow impatient. When 50,000 people grow impatient, something has to be done, so I finally agreed to fly myself. The plane swept along like a bird until we reached the end of one of the grandstands when a terrific gale of wind struck it.

"Had the rope held, I would have been safe, for my machine is so constructed that it cannot nose dive, but the rope broke, and we started down. I had two chances, either to land on the fence or guide the machine through the rails, which were fairly wide apart. "I chose the latter. For a moment it seemed we would be dashed to pieces, but my plane responded to my efforts to guide it and we crashed through the opening and stopped. I escaped without a scratch." The disc landing wheels used on his plane were an invention of Mr. Martin's, which, however, he never had patented. His plane was one of the few actually to get into the air at Morris Park.

Another milestone was established September 21, 1909, when Mr. Martin's eight-year-old granddaughter, Blanche Martin, made several solo flights in the machine, thus demonstrating its safety. Her hops were 75 feet in length, and it was the first time a child of such age had ever taken to the air in a "heavier than air" machine. Blanche became Mrs. Chester Roth on Waynesburg Road (as of the date of the Sunday Repository article).

### **Smithsonian Exhibition**

Mr. Martin sought to obtain a motor for his plane and wrote to F.S. Lahm, noted Canton balloonist, then living in Paris. In a letter from Paris, dated March 15, 1909, Mr. Lahm told him that the only successful motor then on the market was exorbitantly priced and advised that a smaller one was to be produced soon. Some used motors were obtainable, but were unreliable.

In 1936 Dennis R. Smith, when returning from a marble tournament, stopped in at the Smithsonian Institution and saw the Martin plane on display beside Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis.



When he returned to Canton he met William H. Martin on the street and reported seeing his plane at the Smithsonian. Mr. Martin, then an old man of 81, with long white whiskers, and gentle and quiet spoken in manner, had the happiest moment of his life when he knew that his contributions to air pioneering had been memorialized by the preservation of his machine. His patent had run out in 1926, and he took additional satisfaction in knowing that the invention which he had patented was

free for the use of all mankind.

When he died, Mr. Martin's funeral had to be postponed, as international travelers wished to pay their respects to this gentleman who had the courage to stay with his convictions...

"Resolved that man will fly." And indeed he did, and so do we because of our aeronautical pioneers.

William H. Martin's funeral caravan stretched for five miles...