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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Flying Machine Built By Islander In 1890

By NEIL A. MATHESON
Provincial-Farm Editor

IT WAS not until 1903 that the Wright Brothers, Orville and Wilbur, first got their heavier-than-air machine to fly – Orville flew it at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina on December 17 according to the Encyclopedia Britannica – but an Island man, Patrick Peters, had flown in a heavier-than-air machine some 13 years previously.

I have to thank Will Mountain, Alma, and Mrs. Robert Murphy of Clermont for the details on the story I've been researching now since early last summer. Mr. Mountain gave me a clipping last October that indicated Patrick Peters – he came from the Palmer Road in the St. Louis area – had flown the machine on his farm and once had flown over his barn. The Mountain clipping also said that Mr. Peters was going to fly to Tignish the following week.

MRS. MURPHY is the former Edna Fitzgerald who was born in the Palmer Road area and I understand that Patrick Peters, who was sometimes called "Pat Felix" by his neighbours, lived near the Palmer Road church. Mrs. Murphy actually knew the man who built the flying machine.

The old clipping Mrs. Murphy found in an old scrap book indicated that Peters had gone to Portland, Maine to give flying demonstrations.

The Island man had made up his mind in 1885 that "he was going to build a machine that would navigate the air", the old story said.

Peters said he objected to balloons "because they are too far beyond the control of those who risk their lives in them". He believed a machine could be built, "capable of being under the management of the flier, as much as a horse rake". And that's a homely illustration, for horse rakes were simple machines that were used by every farmer who could afford to buy one.

Birds' Wings Used For His Model

THE OLD story says "he took the wings and motion of a bird" for a model, believing that if he could fly like a bird it would be enough. Nowhere does either of the old stories describe in detail just how the "flying machine" Mr. Peters built was powered, though I suspect the Palmer Road man had to supply the motive power himself.

From head to tail the machine was 16 feet, and it was three feet from the body to the end of each wing. Depending on the width of "the body" the machine could have been anywhere from eight feet to 10 feet wide, perhaps.

Powered Detail Is Not Described

"THE SEAT" was in the body", and here's the only reference to power:

“The motive power used in propelling the machine was obtained by a combination of wheels”.

Mrs. Murphy remembers the reference to “the wheels” but nobody to whom I talked could describe just how the power was applied. She believes he would take off from a platform, or the top of a flat building.

But it’s fairly clear that it was a powered flight. It’s my impression that the “wings” were probably used as wings to fly, though it’s only a guess, made after carefully studying the old story.

“His first flight” – the reference is obviously to Portland, Maine – “passed over a forest, making about two miles in four minutes”. And that would be moving rapidly in those far off days.

“From Peter’s description of the way things looked below, it would appear that he went at least 2,000 feet up in the air, and perhaps to twice that height”, the story of 75 years ago suggested.

Peters told the newsman that he “went up and down at will, managing his 38-pound machine without the least degree of trouble.”

Having gone to Portland to make some money by giving public exhibitions of his machine, he was willing “to give any desired test and can go any distance desired.” He could “keep a few feet above the ground, or can go up in mid air . . . It’s a perfectly easy thing to fly with one of those machines,” he emphasized.

Spectators Were Still Skeptical

BUT ALL the information I could dig up indicated that Mr. Peters didn’t succeed in impressing many people with his flying machine of 75 years ago. One writer said, almost in a defensive vein, apparently, that “Portland people who know Peters best say that he is honest, and he acts that way,” but even the people who saw him fly apparently didn’t quite believe it.

And who could blame them. This was probably the first time the people had heard of anyone claiming to fly since the mythical Greek architect and sculptor, Daedalus, who was said to have built the labyrinth for Minos of Crete. Later, the old story said, he fell under the displeasure of Minos and fashioned wings for himself and his son Icarus and escaped to Sicily, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, though an old school book said the son flew too high and the heat of the Sun melted the wax which held the wings to his body, and he fell into the sea and drowned.

There was the difference that Patrick Peters actually lived, and he did build a “flying machine” in which he could fly. But if many people were unwilling to take him seriously 75 years ago, perhaps it’s not so surprising.

My one regret is that I’ve forgotten the man who suggested I look for this story in the first place. If you will refresh my memory, I’ll give you credit in a future column.

Klu Klux Klan Story Is Recalled

THE PROMINENCE given to the Klu Klux Klansmen in Alabama a few days ago reminds me of an experience I had away back in the summer of 1932. I had been out of

work from April and it was late in the summer, I believe, when I heard of an opening for a man on the City Police force and I applied.

Several days later a member of the KKK here in Charlottetown – yes they were here at the time – got in touch with me, told me they were interested in me and were going to back me for the appointment. As far as I can remember the KKKs chose me “because I was a Protestant” and they were going to put their weight behind me. The man told me they had never had a man lose out whom they had backed.

The position was not filled at the time and I was hired by The Patriot as Sports writer before it was filled, so I missed out on the police job.

I was just as happy, because I never did feel that I would have made a good policeman, though I have a great deal of respect for the men who man our police forces. And I do like newspaper work, even though I got into it more or less by the accident of the depression of the Thirties.

The man who got in touch with me has long since died. He moved from this province not long after I had met him. I was telling the story last fall to Frank VanInderstine of Charlottetown, while we were on our way to a meeting in O’Leary and he told me that he had been invited to join the KKK’s once.

He also told me that a “fiery cross” had been burned once in Montague. That’s the full extent of my knowledge of the Klan’s connection with this province.

Button Hooks For Mr. Burke

I FORGOT it last week, but it was Ronald MacGillivray who was the father of Charles MacGillivray the former Charlottetown boy who won the Congressional Medal of Honor. And only last week I noticed that I had not used the correct surname of Maurice Burke, the retired newspaperman who had gone into a local store looking for a button hook. Incidentally a lady from the Kensington area – she did not give her name – sent a couple of really fancy button hooks for Mr. Burke. I passed them on to him and he is most appreciative to the thoughtful lady who sent them, though he had no intention of asking somebody to give him any.

Another reader offered this week to give me a button hook for you, Mr. Burke, but I assured him you are now well supplied.