



ILLINOIS AVIATION HALL OF FAME NEWSLETTER

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Preserving Illinois Aviation since 1970

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INTERVIEW WITH CLARENCE "CLANCY" HESS OF LOCKPORT, IL., AT OSHKOSH EXPERIMENTAL AIRCRAFT ASSOCIATION JULY 30, 2009. CLANCY, A RECENT INDUCTEE OF THE ILLINOIS AVIATION HALL OF FAME, WAS ACQUAINTED WITH BILLIE SOMERVILLE AND MUCH OF WHAT HE REPORTED WAS TOLD TO HIM BY BILLIE SOMERVILLE.

WILLIAM E. SOMERVILLE OF COAL CITY ILLINOIS 1870-1950

William E. Somerville was born in Scotland in 1870 where he attended Glasgow Technical College and became an electrician and marine engineer. He came to America in 1892. After various employment in engineer related jobs he went to work for General Electric and traveled extensively for them as an electrician.

Billie arrived in Coal City Illinois in 1895 to attend his brothers funeral, who was killed in a mining accident and he never left. Coal City supplied much of the coal production consumed by Chicago in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

He became superintendent of the new Macomber Whyte Company, manufacturers of hand woven hemp rope. Billie soon developed new hemp rope making machinery and also wire rope machinery. He also held many patents and eventually became owner of the company. He was elected Mayor of Coal City in 1905.

Before the turn of the century he turned his attention to aviation and Billie found himself flying gliders with Octave Chanute off the Sand Dunes near Gary, Indiana.

In 1908 he developed a biplane and also held patents on many aviations inventions.

He cut back on his work load at Macomber Whyte in 1911 and devoted more time to his aviation endeavors. He leased 160 acres on the south side of town for a landing field and built a hangar. He later organized the Illinois Aero Construction Company with some local businessmen. Billie built seven of his aircraft in an abandoned church on the airfield while the Wright brothers were still in Europe. In 1910 he built a biplane that held 7 people including the pilot. Many feel this was the very first tractor type aircraft ever built.

In December of 1912, a mysterious fire destroyed all the company buildings, five completed airplanes and all the designs, patents, and tools. It was said that Billie's competitors were responsible for setting the fire. Everything was rebuilt.

Clancy's conversations with Billie revealed many historical facts the public has never heard about.

Billie flew gliders with Octave Chanute before the Wright Brothers.

In addition to the patent court fights with Glenn Curtiss, the Wrights also went to court against Billie for patent infringements. The judge threw out the Wrights claims against Billie, as he had stronger patents. One of the patents Billie held was for Winglets which he patented in 1910. At an air meet in Chicago in 1911, a Bleriot was in a mid-air collision with a Wright B Flyer and the pilot of the Wright aircraft was killed. Billie bought the Bleriot at an auction and subsequently installed the Winglets.

Today, Winglets are on many modern day private, business and commercial aircraft.

Clancy knew Billie in the 30's, before World War II and Billie gave him many photo's of his aircraft, hangar, airfield and the engines he built, including the aircraft with the Winglets.

Billie hired Earl Doherty from California to be his pilot in the mid-west area. Earl competed with the Lockheed brothers who were barnstorming the area before moving to California. Earl eventually dismantled the Bleriot and trucked it back to California. In 1928 Earl along with two others, died in a mid-air with a flock of sea gulls. Earl's wife passed away about 15 years ago and the Bleriot is now in a museum in Canada. Dennis Trone, (now deceased) also purchased aircraft and artifacts from Earl's estate.

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Some claim Billie flew before the Wright Brothers and no one will really ever know if the very first airfield was in Coal City, on the 160 acres that Billie leased back in 1911.

Can anyone make claim to having the very first airfield in the world?

Clancy claims he has the documentation that proves Coal City was the home of the first airfield in the world.

In 1914, discouraged by the aviation business down turn, Billie Somerville went back to full time work in the wire rope business.

Billie Somerville passed away September 25, 1950 at the age of 81. He is buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Wilmington, Illinois.

Clancy Hess celebrated his 88th birthday yesterday, September 3, 2009. HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CLANCY !

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BILLIE SOMERVILLE, COAL CITY AIRFIELD

