

BILLY PARKER | BARNSTORMER AND INVENTOR



Courtesy of the Tulsa Air and Space Museum

Will D. "Billy" Parker barnstormed across the western United States before World War I, earning as much as \$35,000 during a three-month tour.

State's 'Boy Aviator' becomes aviation pioneer for the world

By D.R. STEWART
World Staff Writer

Will D. "Billy" Parker, the pioneering Oklahoma aviator, was born in Oklahoma City before the Wright Brothers' first flight, and he lived to see U.S. astronauts walk on the moon.

During his adventurous 82 years (1899-1981), he built half a dozen airplanes from scratch, flew every aircraft of his era and barnstormed across America to promote aviation. Parker also organized flying schools and aircraft factories, led Phillips Petroleum Co.'s aviation division for 45 years and worked with Wiley Post, another early aviator, to develop the first spacesuit and aviation fuels for Post's high-altitude flights.

Parker's inspiration was Lincoln Beachey, aviation's greatest stunt pilot. Parker saw him at age 9 when his mother took him to a flying exhibition, and Parker said that was the moment when he knew he wanted to fly.

In high school in Fort Collins, Colo., he built a glider that flew 300 feet into the air — but only after he replaced the wheels with skis and coasted down a

snow-covered mountainside.

After the glider, he built a pusher-type aircraft like the one flown by the Wright Brothers, with a motorcycle engine powering a propeller at the rear. The craft barely flew at 5,000 feet because it lacked power to overcome the thin air, so he built a second model.

At that point, his mother took interest in the pusher-aircraft project and bought him a 50-horsepower French Gnome engine. It made Parker a professional pilot.

While he was in college at Colorado A&M — now Colorado State at Fort Collins — Parker flew demonstrations at state and county fairs and performed stunts.

He became known as "the Boy Aviator."

The airplane, he told interviewers years later, would fly about 60 mph, taking off at about 30 mph and landing at the same speed.

With his two pusher aircraft, Parker barnstormed across the western United States before World War I, earning as much as \$35,000 during a three-month tour of giving rides and putting on air shows.

Using various calculations devised by Lawrence H. Officer, professor of economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago, \$35,000 in 1916 dollars would be worth more than \$456,173 today.

In interviews with Phillips Petroleum officials, Parker recounted the barnstorming era.

"We would fly over a town, do some loops, make lots of noise, then land in a pasture at the edge of town. The crowds would usually come out. One chance to get a few riders was to get the farmers daring each other to fly. One would fly if the other would."

"Business was good almost every day and especially on weekends. We would stay around a town as long as there was some business. . . ."

In 1917, as World War I raged in Europe, Parker joined the British Royal Flying Corps as a test pilot and engineer. The British flyers were having trouble with some of their aircraft, which wouldn't come out of a spin.

Parker experimented with the British planes, including the Sopwith Camel, the Snipe and the Bristol monoplane. He found that by making the fin and rudder

larger, the spin problem was eliminated.

In 1918, Parker returned to the United States, where he met and married Elenor Read, an aviatrix of accomplishment who flew an OX-5 Travel Air.

He also met Joe Bartles, whose father had established Bartlesville.

Parker and Bartles ended up building a hangar and flight school at Dewey, four miles from Bartlesville. They also constructed an aircraft factory and built airplanes under the name of the Dewey Airplane Co.

Parker also began piloting charter flights for Phillips Petroleum, flying executives and engineers to leases and well sites.

In 1926, he went to work for Phillips. Aircraft engines were being developed with more horsepower and needed higher-octane fuels, which Parker helped formulate.

Parker, who held the 44th pilot's license issued in the U.S., continued his work on aircraft and aviation fuels through World War II and until his retirement from Phillips in 1966.

Parker's mother alluded to the changes aviation made to American society and the advances

her son helped develop in a 1927 letter to him. She wrote it after Parker flew her to her hometown near Centralia, Ill.:

"From the air, she saw the beautiful park where in childhood on a Fourth of July she listened to the band playing martial music. She saw the schoolyard where she had played tag with her little school mates. She saw the church where the bell in the belfry rang out so merrily on Christmas eve . . . or again tolling softly to tell some friend had passed away."

"Just as her pilot so skillfully and gracefully brought the ship to earth, the sun dropped below the horizon. When the moon appeared, it cast its beams across the graves of her forefathers sleeping peacefully in the graveyard, but carrying on are their sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters."

"Whispering through the giant maple trees the wind seemed to say, 'All is sweetened by hallowed memories.' A half a century! How long and yet how short!"

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TRANSPORTATION: 'AUTO TRAILS' TO ROUTE 66

Road to highways was bumpy

By ANGEL RIGGS
World Capitol Bureau

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma celebrated statehood with a plan — but not much priority — for state highways.

It was an ironic beginning for a state that not only would produce the "Father of Route 66," but also provide a crucial link in a little highway that would forever change travel across the American West.

Though the Oklahoma Constitution called for the creation of a State Highway Department, the Legislature didn't fund the agency or appoint anyone to run it until about four years later, according to the Oklahoma Department of Transportation's archives.

However, in 1911, the state began charging a \$1 registration fee per Oklahoma vehicle, which generated \$2,700 for the agency, according to ODOT.

It was a small budget, but it helped that Oklahoma's residents pitched in. They jump-started the highway system by volunteering to maintain the state's "auto trails," while private donors often provided markers for the roads.

However, with an increasing need for better roads in the state, lawmakers decided in 1924 to align Oklahoma's highway system with the Federal Aid Highway Act passed in Congress three years earlier. That move helped to fund the state's highways and also organized the system by

designating the roads by number, according to ODOT.

In 1926, officials pieced together several auto trails, plus Oklahoma 3, 7 and 39, to form a diagonal route through Oklahoma. That year, the piecemeal route was commissioned by the U.S. government as part of Route 66.

And, according to ODOT, signs designating the route were put up in April 1927.

In fact, an April 10, 1927, edition of the Tulsa World heralded the road as the only route that could take travelers from Chicago to Los Angeles during any season.

Vacationers, the paper then said, were being lured to Florida and southern states by the "won-

derful highways" in that region.

The Southwest needed such a road, the paper said, "that will assure the owners of fine cars a complete concrete highway" taking them through 13 states.

Cyrus Avery, a Tulsan who became chairman of the federal highway marking committee and was later known as the Father of Route 66, told the World that the country especially needed the road for military reasons.

Route 66 was shorter than any railroad and 200 miles shorter than any other highway from Chicago to the West Coast, he said.

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Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Oklahoma highways and trails were pieced together to become part of Route 66.