

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Willimantic air show was a high-flying success

Barnstorming air shows, or flying circuses, became a common feature across the United States in the years following World War I. They consisted of daredevil stunts, performed by ex-fighter pilots in front of massive crowds still not familiar with the novelty of powered air flight. The flying circus concept came to Windham in June 1929. It was staged at Weir Field on the "Windham Plains, two miles east of the business center."

The Great Willimantic Air Show, sponsored by the L. & H. Aircraft Co. of Hartford and the Willimantic Chamber of Commerce, took place on June 21-23, 1929. The Chamber of Commerce was particularly interested in getting an airport built in Windham. It organized an aviation committee consisting of Roland Jordan, Albert Smith, Harold Maine, John Frazier, Dixon Van Zandt, Alfred Eaton, Ralph Wolmer and Harry Bullard, and instructed them to produce a feasibility report regarding the building of a local airfield.

The air show was designed to



Tom
Beardsley

demonstrate the safety of powered air flight. There was much resistance to airports in the early days of aviation, because of the fear of crashes in urban areas. Flying was still considered to be a very unsafe pastime.

The chamber's air committee gave their sincerest thanks to Ella Weir, the widow of the famed American impressionist artist Julian Alden Weir (1854-1919), who spent his summers in Windham Center, and Alfred Eaton for granting permission to stage the air show on their land located on the Windham plain.

Everyone was invited to attend free of charge. The crowd was promised demonstrations of stunt flying, aerial acrobatics, aerial races, parachute

jumps and an aerial parade in formation over Willimantic. The main feature was a planned forced landing from 3,000 feet, after the pilot had shut off his engine.

A well-known local boy, Capt. Harry Generous formerly of North Windham, was also scheduled to perform stunts. Generous was deputy aviation commissioner of Connecticut, and one of the nation's most skilled stunt flyers. Generous and Lt. Carl Dixon, the chief operations officer of the L. & H. Aircraft Co. and a famed World War I Royal Flying Corp pilot, made a landing at the new airfield a couple of days before the event, and gave their official stamp of approval for the air show to go ahead.

The program for the air show was a busy one. Visitors were invited to view the passenger and stunt planes from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. each day. At 2 p.m. there was an air race for 100-horsepower planes, followed by the forced landing demonstration. At 3:15 p.m., the 200-horsepower planes raced

across the Windham skies, and at 4 p.m. a demonstration of bomb dropping took place. After the bombing, the stunt flying commenced. At 5 p.m., paying visitors were invited to take passenger rides over Willimantic. The show ended each evening at 7:30 p.m. after a demonstration of parachute jumping.

For local people, the highlight of the entire three-day show took place on Saturday. Large crowds assembled to see the demonstration of flying performed by the first citizen of Willimantic to be awarded a civilian pilot's license. His name was Harry Young of Lebanon Avenue, who had received his "wings" at a course provided at the Brainard Airfield in Hartford. Young delighted the crowd with his performance in his plane, a Challenger C-2 powered by a Curtis OX 5 engine.

The 1929 Weir Field air show was a great success. It was visited by more than 10,000 people over the three days, but it would take the rapidly approaching Depression

and the New Deal to get an airport built in Windham, but the "aviation field" would not be built on Plains Road. During 1933, the city of Willimantic worked closely with the Connecticut Works Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administration to enable the construction of Windham Airport in its present location. An award of \$75,000 in funding for the new airport was approved in January 1934, thus creating badly needed construction jobs in eastern Connecticut. It can thus be argued that Windham Airport owes its existence to the generosity of a famous artist's widow and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

If you have missed any of these local history articles, which date back to 1990, then log on to Windham's new community web site where more than 300 articles and historic photographs are being archived and displayed. It can be found at <http://www.threadcity.com>