

# A history of man's quest to soar

To fly, to enter the realm in which birds seem to move so effortless, has been a dream with us humans from the beginning, and the dream found expression in legends and religions. To be able to fly was considered a spiritual thing. Therefore the seraphs and angels of our imagination existed on a level that was higher and far more exalted than our life close to the soil and labour. They were the messengers that moved between heaven and earth.

With the development of modern science since the renaissance, an increasing body of knowledge about scientific matters became available with the result that flying became a real possibility and eventually a fact. First came the lighter than air devices, namely balloons and dirigibles, and later the heavier than air flying machines we call now airplanes.

The first flying machines invented by W.S. Henson in 1843, by Felix du Temple in 1857, by Alphonse Penaud in 1876, and by Clement Ader in 1890, to name some of the most notable, did not fly. But 100 years ago, in 1891, Otto Lillenthal became the true father of modern aviation by building a glider that actually carried him over a good distance. He was a sound experimenter and he discovered the techniques of gliding and soaring. He explained his work thus:

"When gliding in the air, the designer is confronted with a great number of phenomena that are not found elsewhere. The manner in which we will be subject to the variations of the wind



**Ideas and The Arts**  
by John Sommer

when gliding in the air can only be learned when one is actually in the air. The only way which will lead us to a rapid solution of human flight is by practising systematic and vigorous experiments on actual flight. One can fly over long distances with a simple machine with no undue effort and this sort of gliding flight gives more pleasure than any other sort of sport."

Otto Lillenthal built many gliders in bamboo and cane, covered in cotton and weighing about 45 lbs. He held on to them by his elbows and forearms. To start he ran down a hill against the wind. When he became airborne he used his body and legs to restore balance. Between 1891 and 1896, when he died after an accident during a glide, he conducted more than two thousand glides over distances of up to 330 yards. He managed to rise higher than his point of departure and he learned to turn. Many of Lillenthal's glides were recorded on photographs and these photographs made a lasting impression on fellow researchers. One of them, M.E. Veyrin, wrote this about them in 1894: "The

word 'conquest' is not exaggerated in the present case. I do not see how one can look at and reflect upon these photographs without feeling the calm enthusiasm that comes from tremendous hope in the future."

This future was only nine years away. At the turn of the century, the brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright experimented with gliders, at their camp Kitty Hawk in North Carolina, that came to look more and more like the constructions of light wood, piano wire, and fabric, that airplane designers used as models for their designs right up to the thirties.

The brothers conducted more than a thousand glides and many theoretical and laboratory experiments, using a wind tunnel to verify the work done by their predecessors. Finally, by 1903, their machine had gained the sophistication to make powered flight possible. They had constructed a petrol engine for it, and on December 17, 1903, the brothers, taking turns, made four successful test flights, the first ever with a motor powered airplane, of which the fourth lasted 59 seconds, and covered a distance of 852 feet.

This might not sound like much to us today, who are used to the most stupendous technical achievements, but what a great day this December day was, if we keep in mind what followed.

Within five years, Henry Farman, in his Voisin biplane, made the first cross-country airplane journey from Bouy to Rheims, 17 miles in 20 minutes, and in 1909, Louis Bleriot crossed the English Channel by flying from Calais to Dover. The world was kept in suspense with one sensational exploit after another, and for many years daring pilots risked their lives by finding new obstacles to overcome.

If you want to find out more about the men and women that made and flew the machines that conquered the air, get a wonderful new book from our library, the same book I got the information from for this column. It has countless articles and many fascinating pictures. It was edited by Ben Mackworth-Præd and is titled "Aviation, The Pioneer Years."

## Local museum to host festival

Looking for fun and adventure this summer? Circle August 11 on your calendar. The Kids' Pioneer Festival is back at the Halton Region Museum. A whole variety of old-time entertainment is on hand from 1 to 4 p.m. at the Museum in beautiful Kelso Conservation Area. And best of all, it's free of charge! No pre-registration is required.

Highlights of this year's festival include children's theatre presentations, face painting courtesy of the Big Brothers

of Halton, ice cream cranking and tasting, 19th century games and races, a Treasure Hunt with prizes, and woodworking contests. If that's not enough to keep the little tykes busy, the North Halton Literacy Guild will be sponsoring a reading circle.

Visitors attending the Kids' Pioneer Festival will be reimbursed for Kelso Conservation Area gate fee. Please have ticket validated at the Museum's admission desk. See you on August 11.

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