

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### FIRST AIR TRIP TO PACIFIC COAST

When in 1929 the Executive Committee of The Curtis Publishing Company suggested that a study be made of the airplane industry, Grandfather promptly volunteered to conduct the survey personally if the company would purchase a good plane, get a competent pilot and carry enough insurance on him to compensate for the invalidation in the air of his accident policies.

The company purchased a Ford tri-motored plane for \$42,600, equipped it as a flying office and obtained Lieutenant Gorton, of the United States Navy, for pilot. Lieut. Gorton was considered one of the very best pilots of the Navy, probably the best pilot in the country when it came to flying a heavy ship. The masterful manner in which Gorton landed the tri-motored Ford always elicited warm praise from competent observers.

When it was announced that Grandfather intended to fly to the Pacific Coast, some of the young men envied him - none of his own age indicated any desire to go. The plane was delivered at Detroit. Mr. Healy, the advertising director, who was enthusiastic about flying, went along for the first lap.

The start from Detroit on this first trip was not auspicious; the plane mired in the Ford field and an hour was lost in starting. As we approached Chicago, fog was coming in from the lake and we turned back to South Bend, Indiana. At this point Mr. Healy was compelled to leave us as he had an appointment early next morning in St. Louis, but later Mr. Healy took the plane through to the Pacific Coast on a trip of his own. Grandfather, together with his assistant, Mr. Bromier, flew to Los Angeles and up the Coast to Seattle. After leaving South Bend, the trip out was

without mishap, but was filled with the thrill of flying over ground made quite familiar by frequent transcontinental trips on the train.

But how different the United States looked from the air. The whole country stretched before one as a map. The Mississippi River seemed but a silver thread in a vast panoramic picture. As we went West the farms grew larger and larger - then stretches of grazing land and then desert and then the mountains, each following the other so quickly there was no time to tire of the picture.

Grandfather spent about one-third of his time looking out the window, now and then taking a picture, about one-third writing reports and about one-third, as was his wont in travel, in taking naps. It was probably his faculty of snatching refreshing sleep at odd moments that enabled him to do more than a normal amount of work.

Grandfather described to Grandmother his sensations: "Yesterday afternoon the air was bumpy. I felt it more than I do boat motion, but was not sick. I think you would not mind it unless the noise and vibration gave you a headache. I do not mind the noise and vibration much, although after a few hours it gets on my nerves a bit, but air travel is certainly a grand way to go long distances."

The appetite the big plane had for gas was impressive. "At every stop," wrote Grandfather, "we have to get gas, anywhere from \$15 to \$62 each time."

From a plane one sees clearly the three great mountain chains - first the Rockies, well named as one can see from a plane; next the Sierra Nevadas, again rightly named, for from the plane they are seen to be "saw-toothed", and finally the Coast Range. We crossed the mountains at about 12,000 feet altitude. At that height even over the hottest part of the

desert, it was very comfortable. We flew over Needles. When it was reported as more than 120 degrees in the shade and at two miles high, Grandfather wore an overcoat,

When one flew over the Coastal Range and saw the Pacific Ocean in the distance, it gave us a real thrill, and as we steered to a lower altitude and could discern the orange groves and the California cities with their green lawns, it gave us another thrill which it is difficult to describe.

Grandfather will quote a few sentences from a letter written to Grandmother in the plane. "Oh, boy! We just went over the mountain ridge - it was fine. I took a movie. In the distance a forest fire is raging. We have tree-clad hills once more and below us green cultivated fields (by the aid of irrigation). That must be San Bernardino. It looks good to see human life again. Beyond San Bernardino it looks like a relief model - I suppose there are mountains but from 12,000 feet high, they look like a papier mache model of mountainous country. San Bernardino Valley makes a most interesting picture - between the mountains and amid arid wastes.

"Another low sweep and beyond it, oh, boy! we see the ocean shining like gold in the bright sunlight. This is sure the life! Those are just runts of mountains down there - only 5,000 or 6,000 feet. From below they are a mile high. From here they are a mile below us. Now we have a full view of the ocean with Catalina Island in the distance and San Clemente Island still further out. Incidentally we are all past the bumps. The ship, except for a little vibration, is about as quiet as the floor of a room. Well, we will be at our journey's end soon. Will get off a wire as soon as possible. It is a glorious sight with sun in the West giving a golden reflection across the sea and the white surf along the beach, while

just below are mountains and desert. San Diego just ahead so I must close. It was a glorious trip - no mishaps and no illness."

At San Diego we saw the battleship Shenandoah with its huge platform for planes and thence to San Francisco. To quote again from a plane letter: "This is certainly the way to travel. We are skimming along the coast line over the ocean with the rugged landscape stretching far, on our right, and below us on the left, some fleecy clouds. As the shadow of our plane strikes the clouds, our shadow is encircled by a rainbow. I cannot get used to the idea that this is California. I did not ride for a week on the train - just floated a couple of days in the air and how can this be California?"

The morning we left San Francisco a blanket of fog, perhaps 500 feet high, completely covered the area. At the airport it was reported, however, that above the fog the sun was shining brightly. So, following the course of the Bay, to make certain to hit no mountain, we shot up through the cloud bank and as we came into the clear sky above, with an endless carpet of fleecy clouds below it, it seemed one of the most beautiful sights Grandfather had ever seen.

To quote again from his letter: "We are off again. We shot up through the fog into the bright sunlight above. It is a beautiful sight to see the sun shining brightly on the white fog bank below while mountain peaks stand up above the fog in perfect clearness. . . . Mt. Shasta has just hove in sight far ahead. . . . This is certainly a rough and rugged country we are crossing now - mountains everywhere. All of them below us except the snowy peak of Mt. Shasta. The breeze from them is surely chilly. The view of Mt. Shasta is magnificent as we go by it - grassy slope below, then a belt of forest, then just rock with snow in the crevasses - all under a bright sun - and a funny little dome-shaped mountain at the base. Shasta looks less

imposing from two miles high but it is a good sight anyway. It is the only peak higher than we are."

The trip that morning past Mt. Shasta was indeed interesting. Many times before Grandfather had looked up from the ground at its snowy peak in awe.

Now were we not hobnobbing with the great mountain on terms of equality? In one's imagination, stimulated by the high altitude at which we flew, it seemed as though we might extend a hand patronizingly and, patting the mountain on its snowy peak, say, "You are doing bully for a boy. When you grow up, you will be a real mountain" and then, as we recalled how from a mile high man-made city skyscrapers had looked hardly large enough for toys for you grandchildren and contrasted that with the majesty of Mt. Shasta and the great works of Nature round about, one could not help thinking that man's pride in building was but "Vanity of Vanities and all is Vanity" and to wonder "What is man that God should be mindful of him."

The flight over the Oregon forests was impressive - just endless trees as far as the human eye could see. On the map of airports it had looked as though there would be an airport in sight most of the way. To be sure, there were some little gaps of an inch on the map without an airport, but now as we saw the great map picture of reality and flew for a long time without anything to light upon in case of an emergency but tree tops, we could not help but feel that a few more airports along the route would add a bit to a flyer's peace of mind.

To quote again from a letter written in the air: "Shasta is now behind us and we are going into the Siskiyou Mountains. The Siskiyou Mountains are impressive - just endless mountain peaks as far as the eye can see in every direction. The tallest are not so far below us, although we are

still 11,000 feet above sea level. The trees look like shrubbery. As we pull over the mountain and begin to settle down into the valley, the air gets a little bumpy. Medford ahead!"

"We are off again. I gave the manager of the Air Mail at Medford the letter I wrote you in the air this morning. We got grand service at the airports. A young fellow saw the plane in the air - came out to the port to see who it was. He drove part of the group uptown to lunch while the rest went up in a Ford someone else offered. All no charge for transportation - no tips desired. It was not much of a restaurant, but I ate waffles and bacon and milk and berries and cantaloupe and feel much better.

"My.' this is grand going over the forest covered mountains. I don't know just where we would land if we had to, but it is grand anyway. This is just a game of leap frog we play with these mountains, but we do all the leaping. The mountains, I hope, won't get a turn.

"Later. I took a little nap. Now we are over a wide fertile valley with the snowy peak of Mt. Hood to our right and the equally snowy peak of Mt. Rainier on ahead. Here is a broad river. I declare it must be the Columbia and I guess we are at Portland. Sure enough, this is Portland and there is Vancouver across the river and we are dropping on to the airport on the island between.

"Once more we are on our way. I tried to call up Miles Smith from the airport, but he was not home. Mt. Hood, Mt. Rainier and Mt. St. Helena are clear against the sky at our right. The Columbia is below us. It is a glorious day and a fine sight. Mr. and Mrs. Eustace are sold on this method of travel. It is almost impossible to realize that we had breakfast in San Francisco and will have dinner in Seattle the same day. Here the Columbia swings away to our left and we can see it clear to where it widens greatly.

It seems as though we could see it clear to the sea, but I am not sure that that is possible.

"On land it is very warm. As soon as we get a mile or so high, I dive for my overcoat. Mt. Shasta had very little snow, but Mt. Rainier is heavily covered well down - it looks halfway down or more. We are passing over Tacoma, and Seattle is in sight in the distance. It has been a grand trip. I feel somewhat tired from the noise and vibration, but would have been more weary if I had made the trip by train. It took us about thirty-seven hours of flying time to go from Detroit to San Diego and up to Seattle."

On the return we had breakfast in Portland, lunch in San Francisco and dinner in Los Angeles, and not a late dinner either - we were ready for dinner about 6 p.m. This in comparison with the only forms of travel which Grandfather had previously used seemed marvelous.

The only bit of flying which entailed real danger, as Grandfather looks back over his experience with aviation, was on the return from the first trip from the Pacific Coast. Near Mt. Baker, on the way to Albuquerque, a severe thunderstorm was encountered. The lightning started right up where we were and plunged straight (not zigzag) into the earth. In another part of the country we could have run away from the storm, but over the desert we did not dare wander off our course for fear of getting lost, and if we were forced to land, who would ever find us?

We did not go into the storm, for the downpour of water was so great it would probably have benten us down. We tried to fly around the storm, keeping it to one side and then we found another storm on the other side. We now had storms on both sides, with lightning flashing down first on one side, then on the other. Ahead was a fleecy white cloud through which

the pilot could see. He put on, for the first time in that plane, full speed (about 110 miles per hour) and dashed into the white cloud. When we struck the cloud it was like hitting a "thank-you-marm" at high speed in an automobile. It tossed the pilot up out of his seat and tossed us around violently for a few minutes. If the plane had not been sturdy and the pilot skillful, we would probably have crashed and probably would have been reported as having been struck by lightning.

As soon as we were through the white cloud, the air became less rough and we quickly left the storm behind us and were soon safe in Albuquerque. It was Grandfather's first experience near a real storm, and at the time we supposed that all storms probably looked the same as that one did. After we learned that this storm was reported as a "near cloudburst" which washed out the tracks of the Santa Fe Railroad so that no trains came in from the West for several days, the experience seemed more serious.

To quote from Grandfather's letter to Grandmother, written in the storm: "It seems good to be homeward bound. It is cloudy over the desert. If it were anywhere else I would think we were running into rain. It is getting a little cool up here again and I guess I will put on my overcoat.

"Ho, Ho, I took another little nap and here are trees and a tinge of green to the ground. These forests look odd without any underbrush - just trees and dead logs. There is the Santa Fe Railroad, and a highway with autos and trucks begins to look like civilization again. Here is a lumber yard and saw mill. The piles of lumber look cute down there - like a yard full of blocks which some child had set up carefully in straight rows.

"There is a light fog over the land - not dense enough to make flying invisible, but obscuring the sun. Some more desert, but a green tint as though there was in places desert grass or moss.

"We are getting lower. Winston must be in sight. I am glad of that, for it is past one and I am ready for lunch. We wired ahead to the Harvey Hotel to deliver us box lunches at the plane - the same as the T.A.T. have.

"There is a miniature Grand Canyon out into the desert. Would like to have gone up over Grand Canyon, but did not feel justified in adding 200 miles to our day's run.

"There is an automobile trying to race us. He sure kicks up the dust, but it is no use, we lost him and here, sure enough, is Winston, 1:30 Pacific Coast time but 2:30 this mountain time.

"Lunch and we are off again - not so fond of a box lunch, but it saved us an hour which we may need at the other end, as we set our watches ahead an hour. There was a hard rain here recently and a little stream is over its banks. That accounts, I suppose, for the tinge of green. We are once more out over the great barren desert.

"Ho, Ho, we run into a shower ourselves - quite a brisk one but we can see sunlight ahead. We left Los Angeles at 8:45 this a.m. We hope to reach Albuquerque about 6:00 p.m. We have been 5,500 air miles (I suppose probably 7,000 train miles) in 55 hours.

"Here is another shower. We are running around the worst of it, with the sun shining on us at the moment, but I guess we will get into the edge of the rain. Yes, here is the rain. Am glad we ducked the main part of the storm, for it is lightning over there to the right rather savagely.

"Well, I guess we ran around that one all right, but it sure was bumpy for a while. However, I am used to the motion by this time and did not feel sick. Yes, we are leaving that storm rapidly in the rear and headed for clearer skies. Yes, the storm is all gone. Aside from the fact that this is rough country with no place to land in an emergency, this is

quite safe again. After tomorrow most every farm will be an emergency landing field. Ho! There is an emergency landing field, but we do not need one. There is another thunder shower off to our right, but we will miss that one. Another emergency field - guess we could get down all right, but land knows how we could get in touch with civilization - not a human habitation or a railroad or a road anywhere in sight.

"Here's a railroad and a few patches of green - actual crops, it would appear. Guess the worst of the desert is past. There is a train moseying along - trains are slow things.

"It is lightning again off to our right - the area seems infected with local thunder showers. However, none is in our path at present, and I think that ridge ahead is just the other side of Albuquerque, so we will soon come down for the night.

"That little storm to the right is quite close enough. It seems to be raining very hard and every few minutes the lightning darts from the clouds above to the ground. Quite spectacular, but too near for comfort. Here is a broad fertile valley ahead of us. I think it must be Albuquerque. Yes, sure enough, it is - half hour earlier than hoped for. We had wind behind us at times, used full speed to get away from the rain. We have been saving the motors and going about 100 miles per hour but can go about 110 per hour."

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Albuquerque to Amarillo, Texas - July 29, 1929.

"My dear Daisy:

Well, I still have the letter I wrote Saturday, telling of our thrilling ride through the lightning storms. I thought they were somewhat unusual downpours of rain and find they were young cloudbursts that washed out the Santa Fe Railroad so that no trains had come in from the West up to noon Monday.

"I don't know whether in writing about those lightning storms I mentioned the rough air. I was so entranced by the lightning I failed to do justice to the bumps. The pilot says I am likely never to see rougher air than that was. We did get jostled about a bit, but I did not feel at all sick and had no idea at the time that that was as rough as air ever got.

"The Ford is a very steady plane. I imagine a Fokker or a light plane would have had a hectic time. As it was, the pilot said that one bump bounced him up out of his seat. Hitting bumps in the air is just like hitting bumps with an auto - you just get bounced up unexpectedly. In addition you get some writhing and twisting and corkscrew motion like sometimes on a steamboat in a storm. Yes, this is all tame - nothing but the desert looking somewhat green after the rains, with clouds high above us, so guess I will take another nap.

"Well, I had a nice nap, wrote some plane reports and then we went through a little thunder shower. Say, when it does rain in this country, it sure does a good job of it. To ride in one of those little downpours, with lightning and water by tubfulls and rough riding is some experience, but now it is all farms and here is Clovis, the end of our journey. No, I guess the pilot is going on to Amarillo for the night - that will suit me fine.

"We stopped in Clovis on the way out and it was not too comfortable. I was going to say not too hot. But that was the trouble - it was too hot. Now we have clear skies ahead and every square mile of farm is a temporary landing field, so I guess all the thrills of the Pacific Coast trip are over. We are for the moment in the best flying country - no thrills to be expected until we get East.

"Those farms down there sure look good - much refreshed by the rains. The cows look like ants, but since I know they are cows they look

good. This certainly seems an uneventful life just now - nothing to do but look out over endless expanse of prairies basking in a bright sunshine and to wonder whether the eats are good at Amarillo."

At Albuquerque the plane was held for a day by bad weather, and Mr. Bremier took the train to Washington to be sure to be on hand for an important meeting. Next day, after making one attempt to get up over the floating cloud masses, going 15,000 feet in the endeavor, the pilot gave up the trip for the day. The following day was fine weather with a strong wind from the West, and we hastened home.

On the last lap Grandfather wired Grandmother at 2:15 from Cleveland that he would arrive at the Camden Airport at about 5 p.m. Grandmother thought there must be a mistake in the message, but decided to be on hand. So when at just 5 The Curtis Publishing Company's plane appeared in the sky, carrying Grandfather as its sole passenger, Grandmother and Ruth and Grace were all on hand to welcome the plane and to greet Grandfather at the conclusion of his first transcontinental trip by air.

The pilot took Grandmother and Ruth for a short ride over Philadelphia. Unfortunately the rules of the Company, which provided that no minor should be taken up, barred Grace, who was not yet twenty-one. However, Grandfather promised Grace that she should have an airplane ride - a promise fulfilled in Europe in 1930 - and all drove home happy. The first air trip to the Pacific Coast and return had terminated successfully.