

MAN-BIRDS FLY OVER ARIZONA

The 1910 Phoenix Aero Meet

by

Jeremy Rowe

HUGE CROWDS POUR INTO PHOENIX TO SEE THE MAN-BIRDS FLY," blared headlines in the February 10, 1910, edition of the *Phoenix Gazette*. The occasion was the country's second aero meet, following soon after aviators had converged on Los Angeles a month earlier. At the time, powered flight was still a novelty, if not a miracle, to most Americans. The Wright brothers had first flown at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in 1903, but few people had actually witnessed aviation prior to 1909. All at once Arizonans, along with people around the world, developed a passionate interest in flying machines and in the men who made and operated them.¹

Participation and attendance at early aviation events reflected this widespread enthusiasm. In August of 1909, more than two dozen pilots competed for speed, endurance, and distance at the world's first International Aviation Cup meet in Rheims, France. Almost a half million spectators witnessed an unknown American, Glenn Curtiss, beat out the favored French flyers to win the prestigious Gordon Bennett Cup. During the Hudson-Fulton celebration the following October, over a million New Yorkers watched Wilbur Wright circle the Statue of Liberty in his first public flight. New speed and cross-country distance records were set and broken at a rapid pace, with each new record emblazoned in front-page headlines around the world.²

Experimentation, along with the number of successful flights, boomed in the half-decade following the Wright brothers' pioneering achievement. Viewing airplane manufacture as a prof-

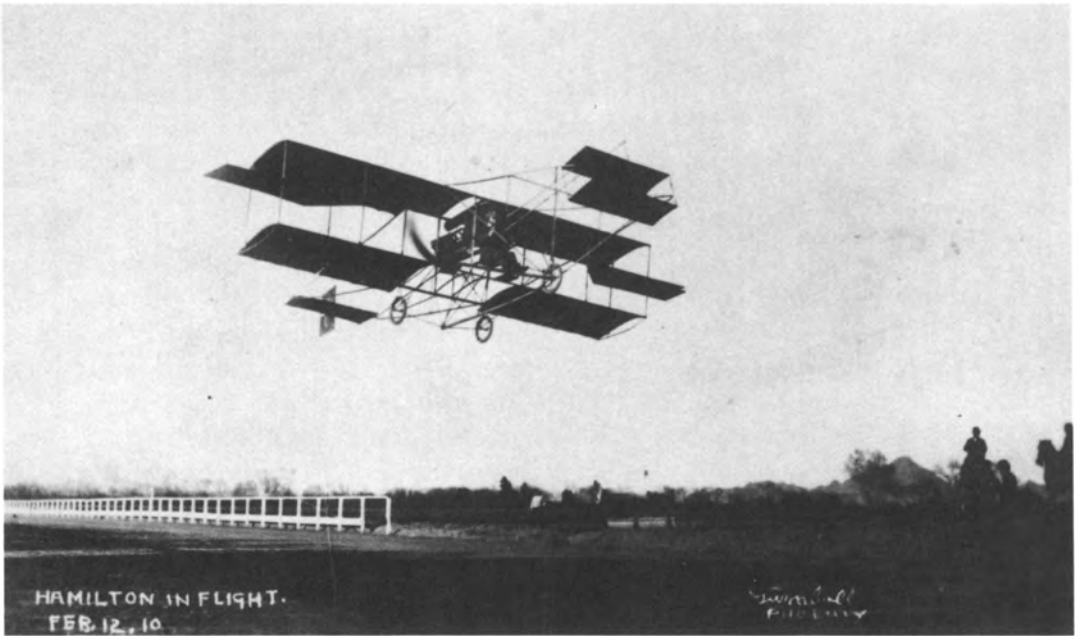
The author, an administrator in information technologies at Arizona State University, is interested in the use of new technologies to access and interpret historical materials. He has been collecting and researching early photographs of Arizona and the Southwest for the past twenty years.

itable business, several entrepreneurs—including the Wrights, Curtiss, and other bicyclists and amateur mechanics—began production. The government's call in 1907 for bids on the purchase of the first military airplane heralded a huge potential aviation market and fanned further interest in flying machines. Unfortunately, the military prototype, produced by the Wright brothers, crashed after a few months of successful flight, resulting in aviation's first fatality, a passenger, and seriously injuring pilot Wilbur. Nevertheless, the general environment of danger and excitement fostered a breed of aeroplane daredevils who traveled around the country demonstrating aerial feats, thrilling crowds, and occasionally transporting wealthy "locals" aloft.³

Arizonans' initial exposure to aviation came in the guise of traveling "aeronauts," who went from town to town with their dirigibles or balloons. For example, Roy Knabenshue and his dirigible appeared at the 1908 Territorial Fair. The following year, Otha O'Dell offered balloon trips to wealthy and adventurous fairgoers, while also providing a new forum for local advertising. Capitalizing on local interest, merchants featured balloons in the background of their advertisements in both Phoenix newspapers.⁴

In an intriguing sidebar to the story of early aviation in Arizona, Gates Fowler displayed his glider—the "Desert Eagle"—as a late entry in the crafts exhibit at the 1909 fair. On the closing day, Fowler hauled the craft outside, attached it to an automobile, and flew it at a height of four feet around the racetrack. Surprisingly few people witnessed the territory's first aeroplane flight, and the historic event received only a brief notice in the following day's newspaper. Public interest was sufficient, however, that the *Gazette* devoted several column inches to Knabenshue's tentative promise to bring a "Wright aeroplane" to Phoenix for the 1910 Territorial Fair.⁵

As the decade drew to a close, Phoenix was growing rapidly as local businessmen aggressively promoted the Salt River Valley throughout the country. Local boosters viewed an aviation meet and aerial competition as a wonderful promotional opportunity and as a splendid enticement for California investors to visit Arizona. H. I. Latham traveled to Los Angeles, where he met with the Chamber of Commerce, the Merchants'



Charles Hamilton in the air over Phoenix on February 12, 1910.

and Manufacturers' Association, and the Jobbers' Association to coordinate a businessmen's excursion to the Phoenix aero meet. The *Arizona Republican* optimistically hoped that Latham "will be able to bring a large delegation of the Los Angeles businessmen here, not only for the added success of the meeting, but for the commercial and developing benefits that will follow a closer acquaintanceship between the two cities."⁶ Although the excursion was cancelled a few days later, interest in the aero meet rapidly grew.

On February 3, a week before the event was scheduled to occur, the *Gazette* touted the Phoenix Aero Meet as the subject of worldwide publicity. The American Press Association had solicited from the Aero Club manager photographs of the planes in flight, which it intended to distribute. The only cost, the newspaper noted, would be \$30–\$50 to have the photographs taken. The potential audience was enormous. "Most of the aviation cuts," the *Gazette* reminded its readers, "are run as front page stuff."

Planning and preparation for the meet involved a broad range of services and accommodations. The Aero Committee established an "aviation center" to assist visitors with room reservations and local travel arrangements during their stay in Phoenix. It encouraged residents to make space available to the anticipated large crowds of spectators and compiled listings of rooms for rent. Although the committee advised travelers "to write or call for reservations," it assured anyone who might be concerned "that Phoenix was working to make sure that all who come will be accommodated."⁷

Dignitaries, of course, received deluxe treatment. The Aero Committee extended special invitations to notables throughout the territory, including Governor Richard Sloan. Private boxes went on sale on Tuesday, February 8, at aviation headquarters. Each ticket cost \$18, and subscribers had to be present to claim their box. The following day, the Phoenix newspapers listed the names of all fifty-two box holders for the meet.

Phoenix's preoccupation with the Aero Meet was evident everywhere. Sales and promotional materials revolved around images of flight, and many store advertisements incorporated aeroplanes in their backgrounds. The Miller-Sterling Company

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invited attendees to “Kodak the Flying Events” with one of its cameras, while Paspap and Herman enticed patrons to “Aviate to Cow Ranch Restaurant.” The H. A. Diehl Shoe Company sponsored a contest inviting boys under seventeen to build model flying machines, offering “five dollars in gold” to the winner and a three-dollar pair of shoes to the runner-up.⁸

The Aero Meet generated a holiday atmosphere, with many local businesses announcing that they would be closed during the event. Educators were caught up in the excitement as well. Classes at public elementary schools would be suspended all day on February 11, and high schools and the Normal School in Tempe would be closed for half a day, so that students could experience the wonders of the new machines.⁹

By February 1, daily reports of flyers who would be participating in the upcoming Aero Meet dominated the front pages of both Phoenix newspapers. The list of invitees read like a *Who's Who* of the aviation world, including the Wright brothers, Glenn Curtiss, Louis Paulman, Charles Hamilton, and Charles Willard.

Unfortunately, several of the best-known aeronauts were unable to attend. On February 6, the Wrights sent their regrets, explaining that none of their planes were in condition to fly. Louis Paulman, the famous French aviator, declined after he was slightly injured and his plane demolished when it hit a fence during takeoff from Denver. Glenn Curtiss, who had become world famous after winning the Gordon Bennett Cup in Rheims, committed to bringing two planes to Phoenix. Word arrived on February 9, however, that a court injunction tied to legal action by the Wright brothers would keep Curtiss himself from attending the meet.¹⁰ The Egyptian aviation meet, scheduled for late February, drew most of the major European flyers.

Still, there would be enough prominent participants to ensure large crowds. Charles Hamilton had flown at the Los Angeles meet and had made several exhibition flights in California since January. A student of Curtiss, he had contracted with the Curtiss Exhibition Company to fly the record-holding eight-cylinder plane from the Rheims meet. Hamilton had recently trimmed six seconds from Curtiss's world record for flying the one-mile oval, with a new time of one minute and twelve sec-

onds—a speed of over fifty miles per hour.¹¹ An avid self-promoter, Hamilton began corresponding from Fresno with Arizona newspapers to build interest in his appearance at the Phoenix meet.

Charles Willard, also a protege of Curtiss and an exhibition licensee, had flown with Hamilton as part of the Curtiss team at the Los Angeles meet. His plane, the four-cylinder, twenty-five horsepower “Golden Flyer,” was the first aircraft designed and built by Curtiss. Originally manufactured for the Aeronautical Society of New York, Curtiss had flown it to victory in the 1909 Scientific American Trophy race.¹²

Although lesser known than Curtiss, Willard and Hamilton had quickly become prominent aviators. The *Phoenix Gazette* portrayed Curtiss as a “careful experimenter and manufacturer with a half-million dollar plant who takes no unusual risks.” Hamilton and Willard, on the other hand, were “showmen and daredevils ready to thrill the crowd.”¹³

Three Curtiss planes arrived in Phoenix by rail on February 9 and were transported to the fairgrounds, where “mechanicians” worked all night uncrating and reassembling the machines. Charles Willard supervised the operation.

The Aero Meet program consisted of sixteen standard events. These included endurance tests; competitions for greatest altitude; high glide; a race with Mel Johnson’s chauffeur-driven Buick, the “White Streak”; cross-country flights; quick starts; a slow mile; take-off and landing within a twenty-foot square; and passenger flight. In keeping with the style of the time, the meet featured a staff roster of prominent Phoenicians as judges, timekeepers, and starters.¹⁴

The Phoenix Aero Meet officially opened on Thursday afternoon, February 10, as Charles Hamilton soared above a crowd of 3,000 spectators. Starting from the three-quarter pole, Hamilton’s aeroplane climbed to a height of 200 feet. Willard, however, had trouble taking off and was forced to land in the nearby Latham Addition Subdivision for brief repairs. The crowd lost sight of the aviator and was greatly relieved when his plane returned to the fairgrounds about forty-five minutes later. Other opening-day events included Willard’s two-mile cross-country flight, and Hamilton’s three-quarter-mile test flight, five- and

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six-mile cross-country flights, 200- and 300-foot-high glides, a short flight with passenger H. I. Latham, and a record-setting flight around a one-mile circular track.¹⁵

On February 11, the second day of the meet, spectators jammed streetcars and roads leading from the center of town to the fairgrounds. More than 7,000 people watched as Hamilton's plane beat Mel Johnson's Buick in a ten-mile race around Phoenix's one-mile oval track. The winning time was 13:31.6. Willard further excited the crowd when his engine died in mid-flight and his plane crashed, breaking several wing ribs. Luckily, the aviator was not injured and, after quick repairs to the plane, he returned to the air.

In promoting the Phoenix Aero Meet, the *Gazette* had boasted that the city's climate and terrain were ideal for flight. "Few places are better provided with facilities for these contests," the newspaper observed. "The race track has the world's record for speed, and the field is practically clear of obstructions: there are no trees, [and] . . . the atmospheric conditions are dependable. . . . That is one of the assets of this valley, as aviators have learned and demonstrated."¹⁶

The weather was indeed ideal, prompting additional flights on Saturday. Hamilton squared off against a Studebaker automobile in a five-mile competition and won once again. The April issue of *Popular Mechanics* touted the race as "the first speed contest of this kind to take place in this country."¹⁷

Excitement mounted that afternoon as typical early-aviation accidents delayed two of Hamilton's flights. In the first mishap, the propeller splintered, barely missing the ground crew and embedding a two- or three-foot-long, inch-thick piece of wood in one of the plane's tires. The crew replaced the propeller and tire in just a few minutes, and Hamilton took to the air. In the second incident, the plane's gas tank caught fire, burning over forty square feet of canvas before the pilot and the mechanic were able to extinguish the flames.

Hamilton raced against the Studebaker again on Sunday; this time, the automobile beat the aeroplane by a half length. In another challenge, Hamilton pitted his aircraft against a Curtiss motorcycle over a five-mile course. This time the aviator easily outpaced his ground competition, which was running



A balloonful of fair-goers.

poorly. The following day's newspaper headlines read: "Biplane puts Curtiss' earlier invention out of the running."¹⁸

In addition to wire photos distributed to the press, photographs of the aeroplanes, personalities, and flights were in great demand among spectators. Along with George Sadler, the self-proclaimed official photographer, "Bob" Trumbull, unidentified photographers Harrigan and Christie, and most other amateur and professional photographers in attendance produced and sold photographs and postcards of the event. Photographic postcards, in particular, were advertised widely and formed an important component of the aggressive promotion of Phoenix and the Aero Meet. Several of the images used by the *Republic* and the *Gazette* also appeared as postcards. The Adams Pharmacy advertised six different one-cent postcards of planes and aviators, as well as some comic aviation scenes. At least one photographer offered portraits taken in front of the painted background of a plane in flight over Phoenix. Postmarks indicate that the cards were in circulation long after the meet.

The 1910 Phoenix Aero Meet truly introduced aviation to territorial Arizona. From Phoenix, Charles Hamilton took his

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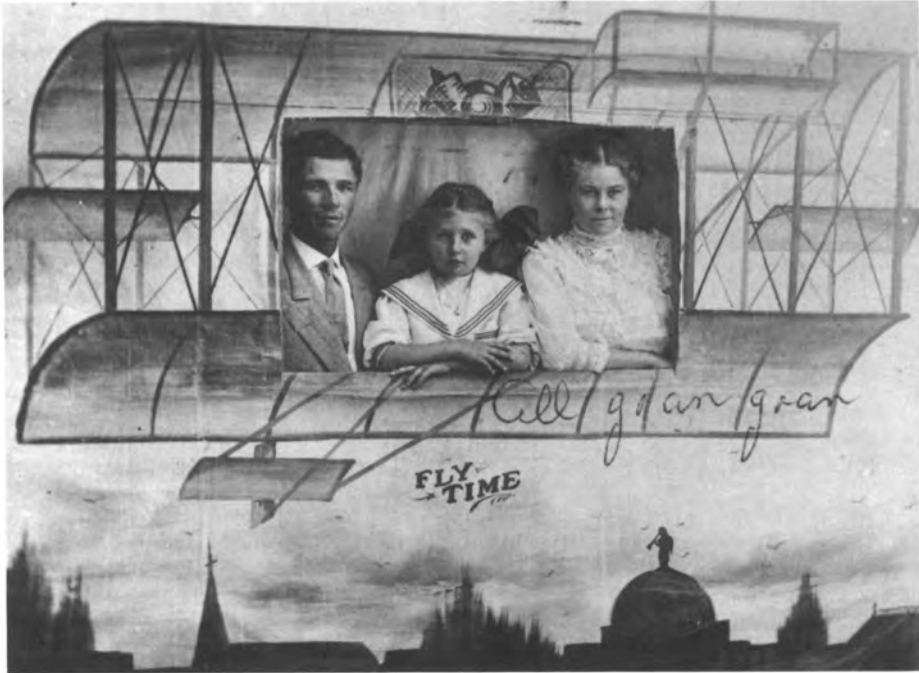
plane to Tucson, where he flew in exhibitions at Elysian Grove on February 19 and 20. In his wake, Arizona became a haven for cross-country fliers. The famous “Vin Fizz” crossed its skies, and in more perilous times Arizonans witnessed early experiments in aerial bombing during the Mexican Revolution and the establishment of flight schools for military aviators during World War II.

Unfortunately, the Phoenix Aero Meet has remained a relatively obscure chapter in the annals of aviation history. Perhaps additional images will one day come to light and raise our awareness of the early days of flight in Arizona.

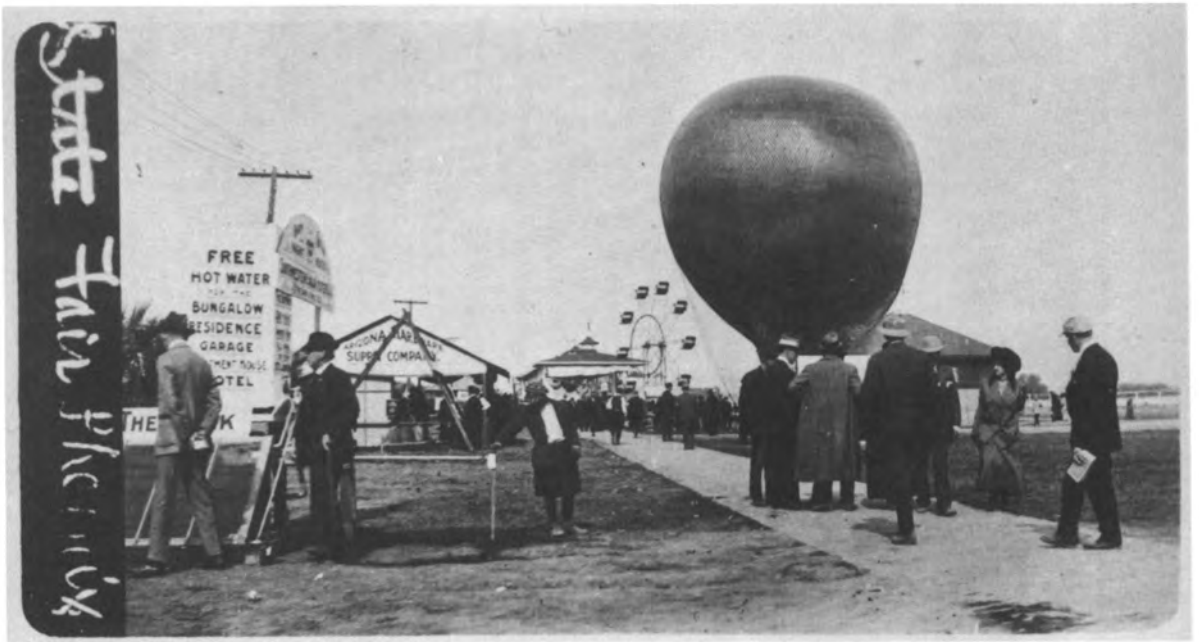
NOTES

1. Ballooning had previously been a part of the Territorial Fair. The Phoenix Aero Meet, however, was the first event to include the miraculous new “aeroplanes.”
2. Curtis Prendergast, *The First Aviators* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1980), pp. 61–63; Ronald Geibert and Patrick Nolan, *Kitty Hawk and Beyond* (Dayton, Ohio: Wright State University Press, 1990), pp. 125–26.
3. C. Roseberry, *Glenn Curtiss, Pioneer of Flight* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1972), pp. 127–28.
4. *Phoenix Gazette*, November 10, 1909.
5. *Ibid.*, November 10, 13, 1909.
6. *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix), February 3, 1910.
7. *Ibid.*, February 3 and 6, 1910.
8. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1910.
9. *Ibid.*, February 9, 1910.
10. The notice was not surprising, as the Wrights had rarely flown publicly. Despite recognition for the Kitty Hawk flights, Wilbur’s first public flight had occurred at the October 1909 Hudson-Fulton celebration in New York City. Roseberry, *Glenn Curtiss*, p. 208. *Arizona Republican*, February 4, 1910; *Gazette*, February 9, 1910.
11. *Gazette*, February 8, 1910.
12. Roseberry, *Glenn Curtiss*, pp. 170–77.
13. *Gazette*, February 9, 1910.
14. *Ibid.*, February 7, 1910. The officials included judges Hugh Campbell, B. A. Packard, J. C. Adams, T. E. Pollock, and H. C. Lockett; timekeepers George Purdy Bullard, Billy Cook, and Shirley Christy; and starter H. I. Latham.
15. *Ibid.*, February 11, 1910. Hamilton’s plane was damaged slightly during a cross-country event and then again while landing. In the latter instance, it hit a stake leftover from O’Dell’s 1909 balloon flights.
16. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1910.
17. *Popular Mechanics*, vol. 8 (April 1910), p. 480.
18. *Arizona Republican*, February 14, 1910.

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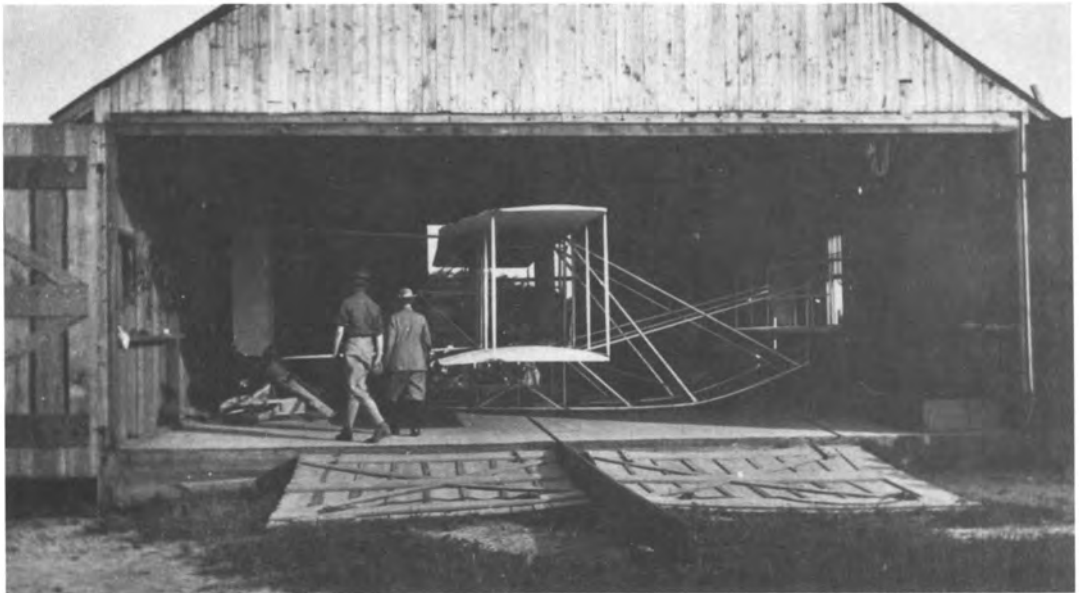


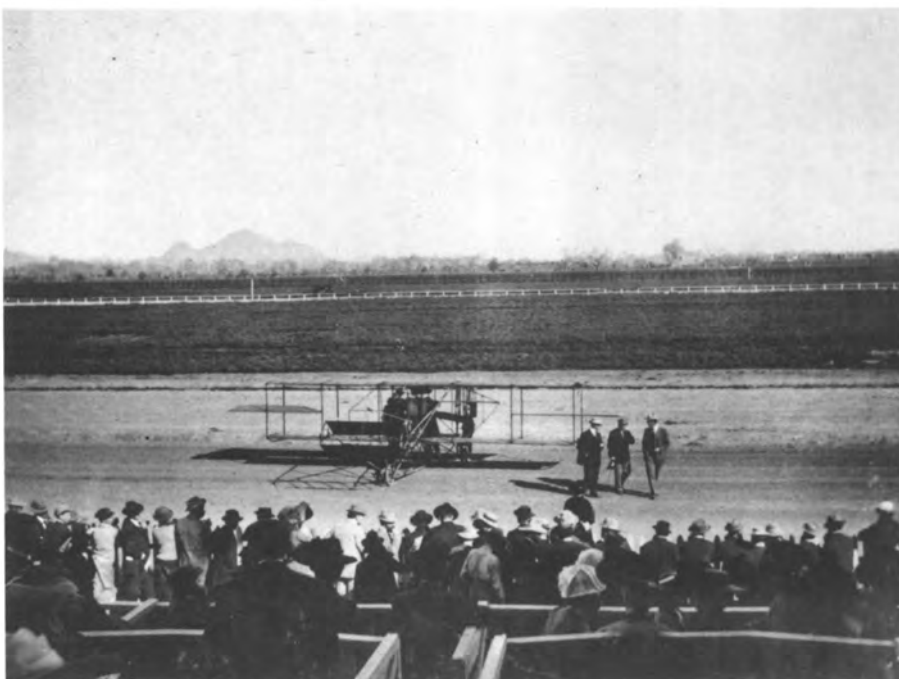
Top, the Herman Pearson family poses for an airborne portrait; bottom, the midway at the 1909 Territorial Fair.



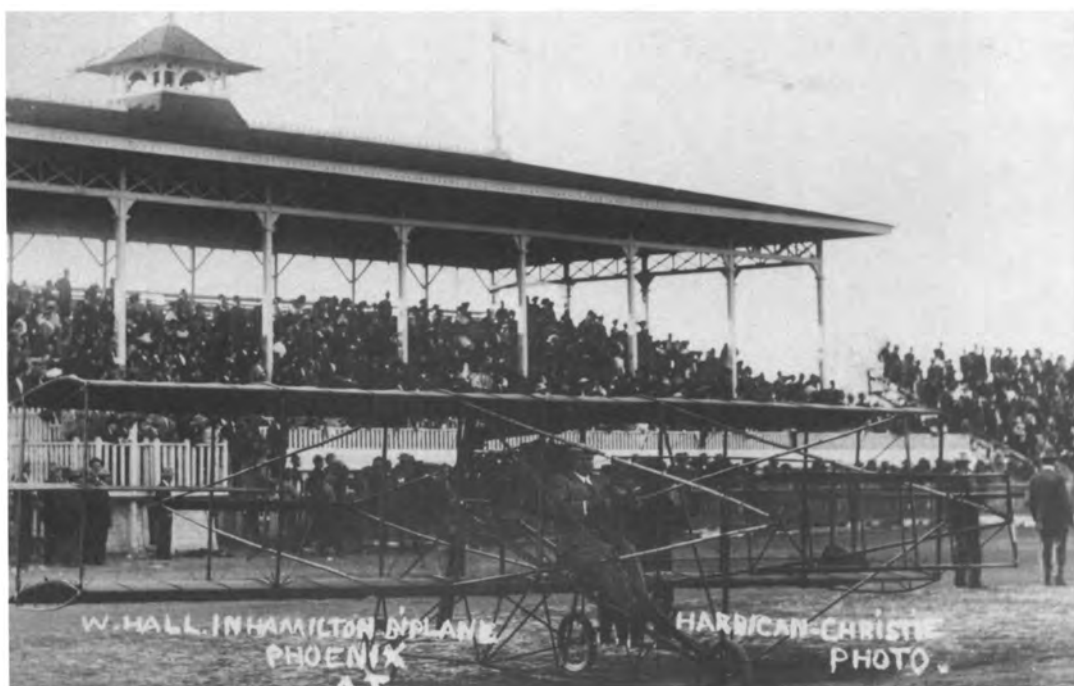


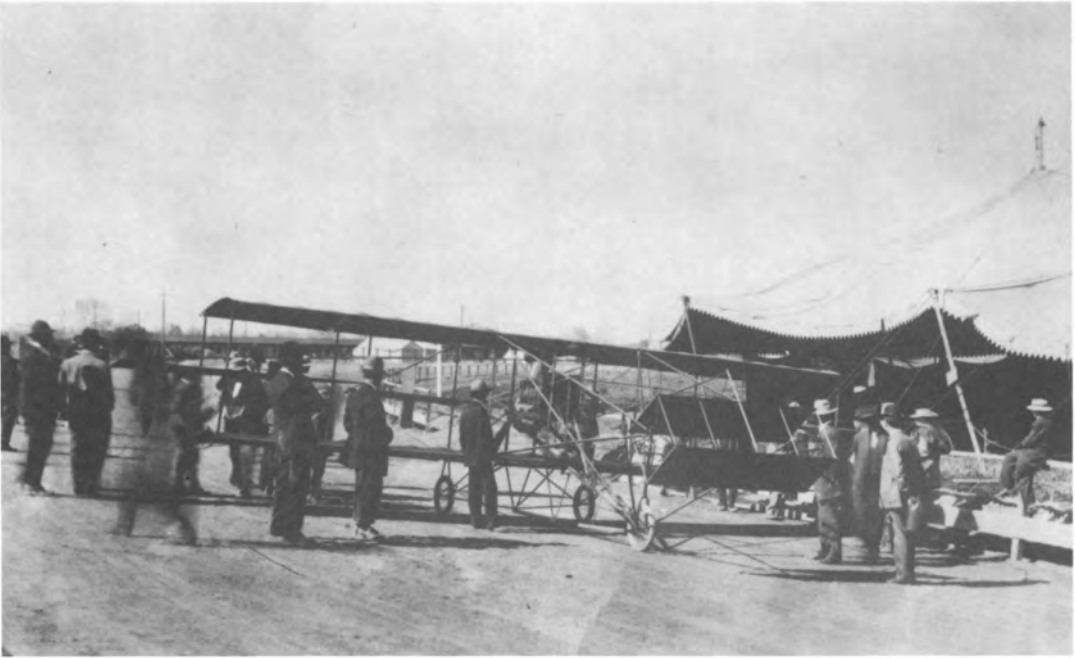
*Top, a Curtiss biplane in Phoenix. Bottom, one of the biplanes in its hanger.
AHS #74457.*



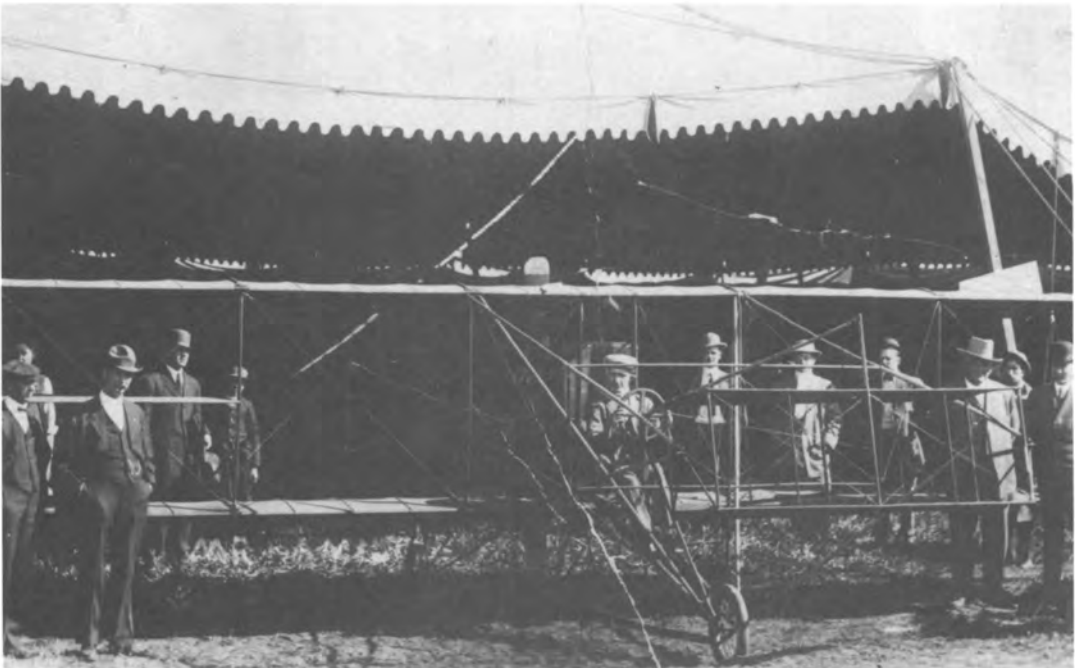


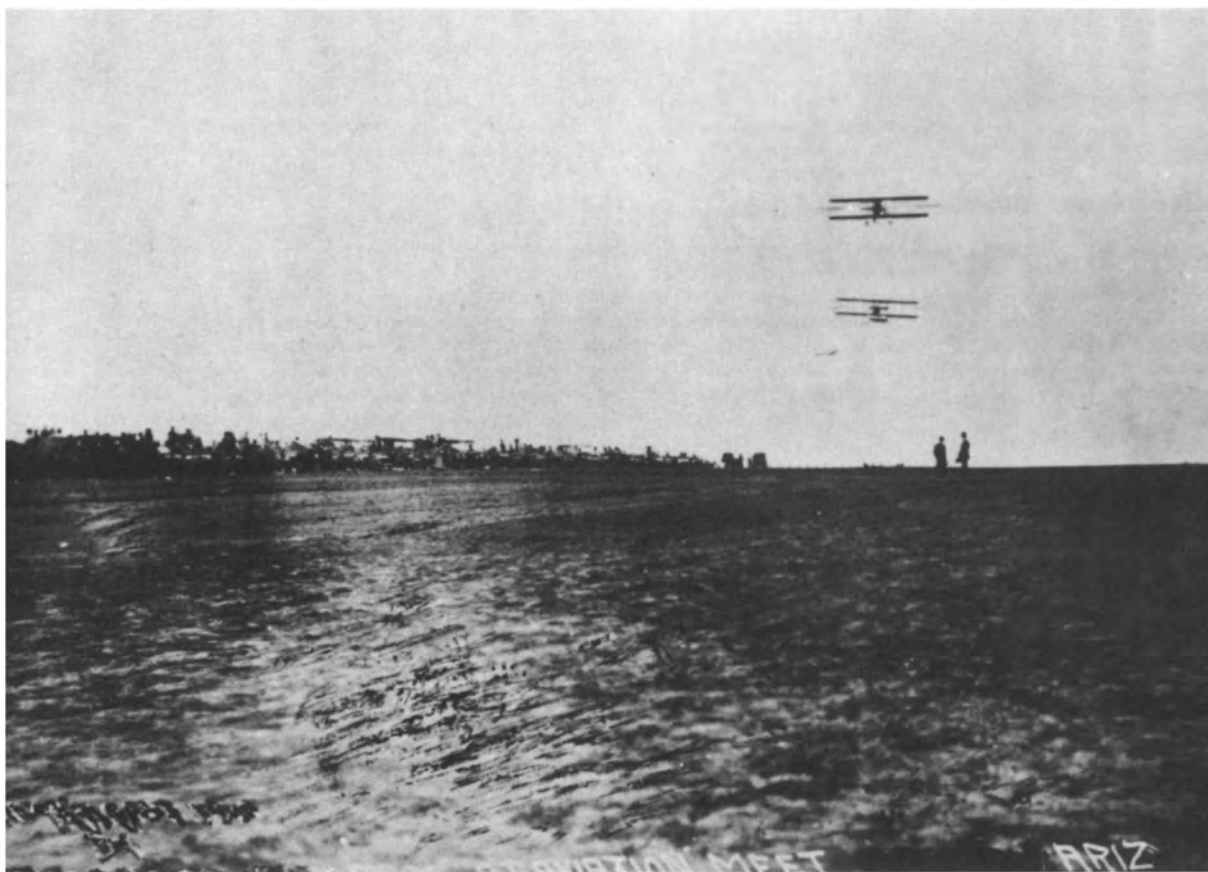
A view of the Phoenix Aero Meet from the grandstand, top, and from the field, bottom.





*Top, spectators inspect one of the planes; bottom, Hamilton at the throttle.
AHS #14226 and 22570.*





Hamilton and Willard take to the skies over Phoenix.