

From the archives: 'Bird man' Billy Robinson soared as early Iowa aviator

Des Moines Register

Published: 11/4/21

***Editor's note:** This story was originally published as part of our Famous Iowans series.*

Billy Robinson dazzled Iowans when he cranked up his newfangled flying machine and soared off into the sky.

It was an era when flight by man was still magical — and very daring. Billy had fallen in love with the sky shortly after the Wright brothers made human flight a reality in 1903.

Billy, who as one of the state's earliest aviators was known as "the bird man," strove for the heights before disaster cut his life short.

William Cornelius Robinson was born Sept. 24, 1884, in Redfield, South Dakota, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Robinson. Billy was one of four children.

In 1896, when his mother was widowed and in poor circumstances, the family moved to Grinnell, where Billy, then 12, showed an almost genius-like aptitude for fixing all things mechanical. He could make broken bicycles, typewriters and other machines run like new again.

To earn money, Billy became an apprentice to a Grinnell handyman. By 1909, he and a friend had purchased the handyman's repair shop, a place where the young man could invent and build the contraptions he loved so much.

On Feb. 3, 1909, Robinson married Katie Crase, and the couple settled down in Grinnell, soon starting a family that included three children, Donna, Luella and William.

His plane, his design, his engine

By 1910, Robinson was thoroughly fascinated with the new field of aviation. Working from his own design, he built a monoplane, complete with an air-cooled, 60-horsepower radial engine, also of his own innovation.

That same year, when a traveling circus came to Grinnell, Robinson took the opportunity to display his airplane there, creating a great deal of excitement. He even traveled with the show for a short time, even though he couldn't operate the craft he had built himself.

It would be a while before Grinnell-area residents would drive for miles to see the budding daredevil in his airborne invention. First, however, he had to learn to fly.

To do that, he spent the winter of 1911-12 in Florida learning from skilled pioneer aviator Max Lillie. Robinson then settled in the Chicago area, Lillie's base, working as an instructor himself. Later in 1912, he was a partner in the National Aeroplane School. He returned to Grinnell in 1913 and opened up his Grinnell Aeroplane Co., which attracted enthusiastic investors.

Robinson was a man of slight build, probably no more than 5 feet 5 inches tall, yet focused and energetic when it came to any project he undertook. He has been described as a tireless worker, quiet and courteous, and cautious as an aviator. He did not attempt the stunts that other fliers of the day often did.

Robinson made headlines Oct. 27, 1913, when he carried copies of the Montreal Daily Mail from Montreal to Ottawa, a distance of 116 miles. He made the flight in two hours and 55 minutes, establishing the first long-distance flight in Canada.

Robinson made even bigger headlines on Oct. 17, 1914, when he set a U.S. distance record for airplanes. In a trip sponsored by the Des Moines Capital newspaper and the Chicago Tribune, he flew nonstop from Des Moines to

Kentland, Indiana, a distance of 390 miles. The trip took four hours and 40 minutes.

Robinson, who had received federal permission to make a mail delivery, had intended to end his flight in Chicago, but extended the trip when he ran into heavy clouds and feared he might land by mistake in Lake Michigan. He kept going until he was almost out of gasoline, at Kentland.

Initially it was believed that Robinson had been the first American pilot to deliver mail by airplane. Although that record was set in 1911 in Long Island, N.Y., Robinson's achievement as the second aviator to deliver mail met with wide acclaim.

On April 30, 1915, Robinson was successful in his attempt to set a new altitude record by soaring upward to 10,000 feet. That endeavor put him in the news headlines once more.

High-up accident cuts life short

But Robinson's desire to continue breaking altitude records led to his downfall.

The end came on Saturday, March 11, 1916, when the aviator crashed while trying to break the then-altitude record of 17,000 feet. Robinson had taken off from a field south of Grinnell and his biplane had been in the air about one hour when tragedy struck.

The engine sputtered, and the plane, which was barely visible to people on the ground, began spinning toward Earth.

Accident reports varied. One said Robinson may have blacked out momentarily because of the thin atmosphere, as had happened before. The report said spectators thought the aviator was able to right the craft when it was about 1,000 feet off the ground, then control it as it landed in a field on

the James Donnan farm near Ewart, a village near Grinnell. But the plane hit a ditch and burst into flames when the gas tank struck the ground.

In another account, Robinson's airship burst into flames in the sky. Yet another report surmised that Robinson's heart had failed at the high altitude, and a different analysis theorized that Robinson, who apparently was blind in one eye, suffered an accident to his good eye and his vision was blocked, perhaps by a hailstone or oil spewing from the engine.

On the Tuesday after the accident, a heavily attended funeral was held at the Grinnell Methodist Church for the daring young man who would become part of Iowa history. He was laid to rest in Hazelwood Cemetery at Grinnell.

In a story in 1927, The Des Moines Register reported that the noted aviator was lying in an unmarked grave, but efforts were then under way in Grinnell to raise funds for a proper memorial.