

Massachusetts' first altitude flights – Montague City, August 1910

A compilation of available accounts for the event.

Ed Gregory

SEE CHAS F. WILLARD

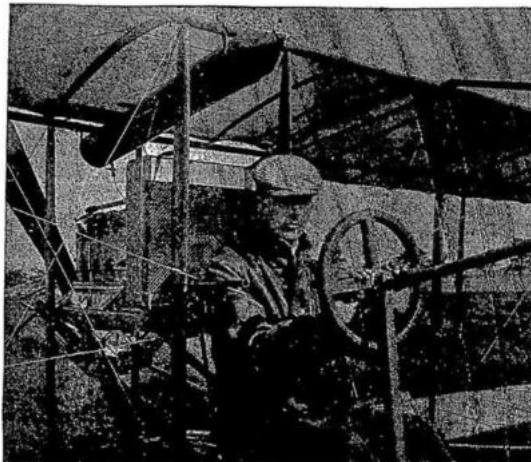
THE WIZARD OF THE AIR WHO WILL MAKE FLIGHTS AT
ROCK DAM AERODROME, MONTAGUE CITY

In the **MONARCH**, the largest Curtiss Bi-Plane in America.

Mr. WILLARD holds the world's record for carrying Three Passengers in a Bi-Plane.

Ample provisions on the field for Automobiles and Pedestrians. No horses admitted to the field.

**FLIGHTS MADE
SATURDAY
—AND—
MONDAY
AFTERNOONS.**



ADMISSION:

ADULTS, . . . 50c.
CHILDREN UNDER 12, 25c.
AUTOMOBILES, \$1.00 for
Machine, and 50c. and
25c. for Each Passenger,
According to Age, as
Above.

The Aerodrome will
be open FREE TO ALL, on

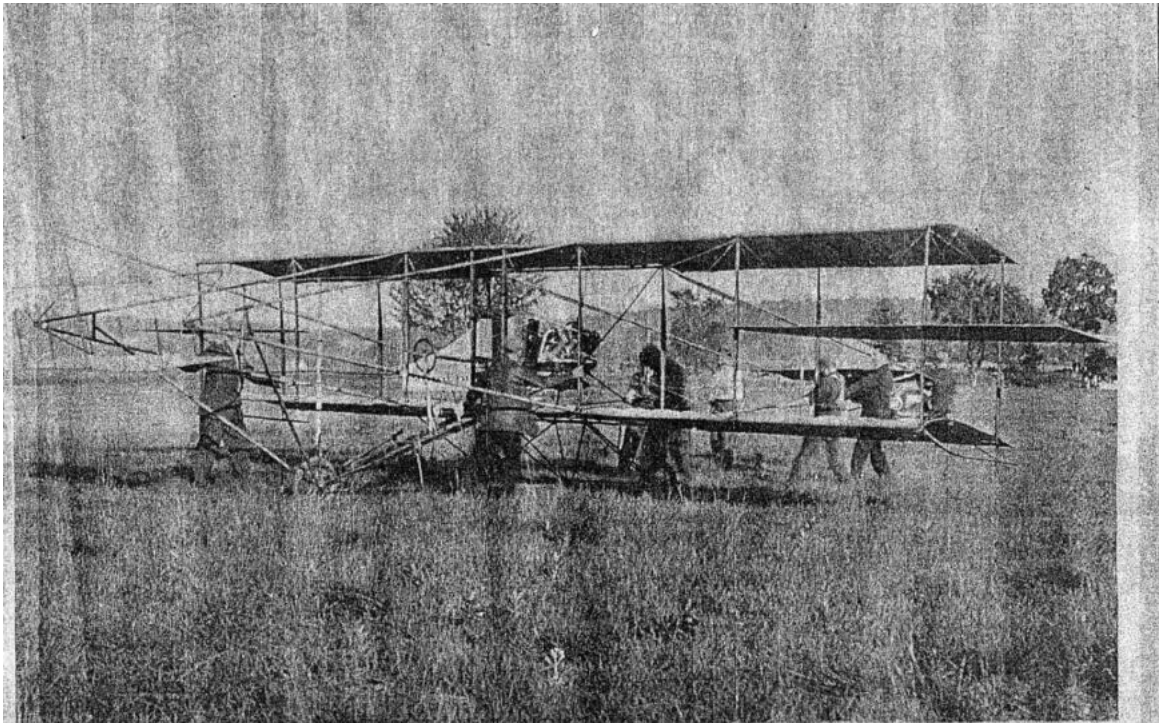
SUNDAY, AUG. 28.

The Bi-Plane will be open
to inspection that day but no
flights made.

BAND CONCERTS EACH DAY.

Advertising flyer (facsimile) *T. J. Reporter* 8.31.1910.

The following email is received by Ed Gregory . . . courtesy Deb Collins.



Photograph loaned by Thomas Burnham of Montague City

Massachusetts' first altitude flights — Montague City, August 1910

The first altitude flights in Massachusetts were made in this Curtiss biplane at what was then called Rock Dam Field in Montague City. It was the weekend of Aug. 28, 1910 — nearly 75 years ago. The pilot was Charles F. Willard, a Melrose engineer who

delighted a crowd of 15,000 in Enfield, Conn., the week before. The flights here drew about 5,000 people. In a three-day weekend, Willard got his plane aloft several times, gaining a height of 300 feet and flying as far as downtown Turners Falls

and back; a four-minute flight covering three miles. About one-quarter of the crowd missed Willard's final flight, his longest, preferring to go home for dinner, their appetites for food apparently stronger than for new-fangled aeroplanes.

1/23/2020 9:29 PM

To [ED GREGORY](#)

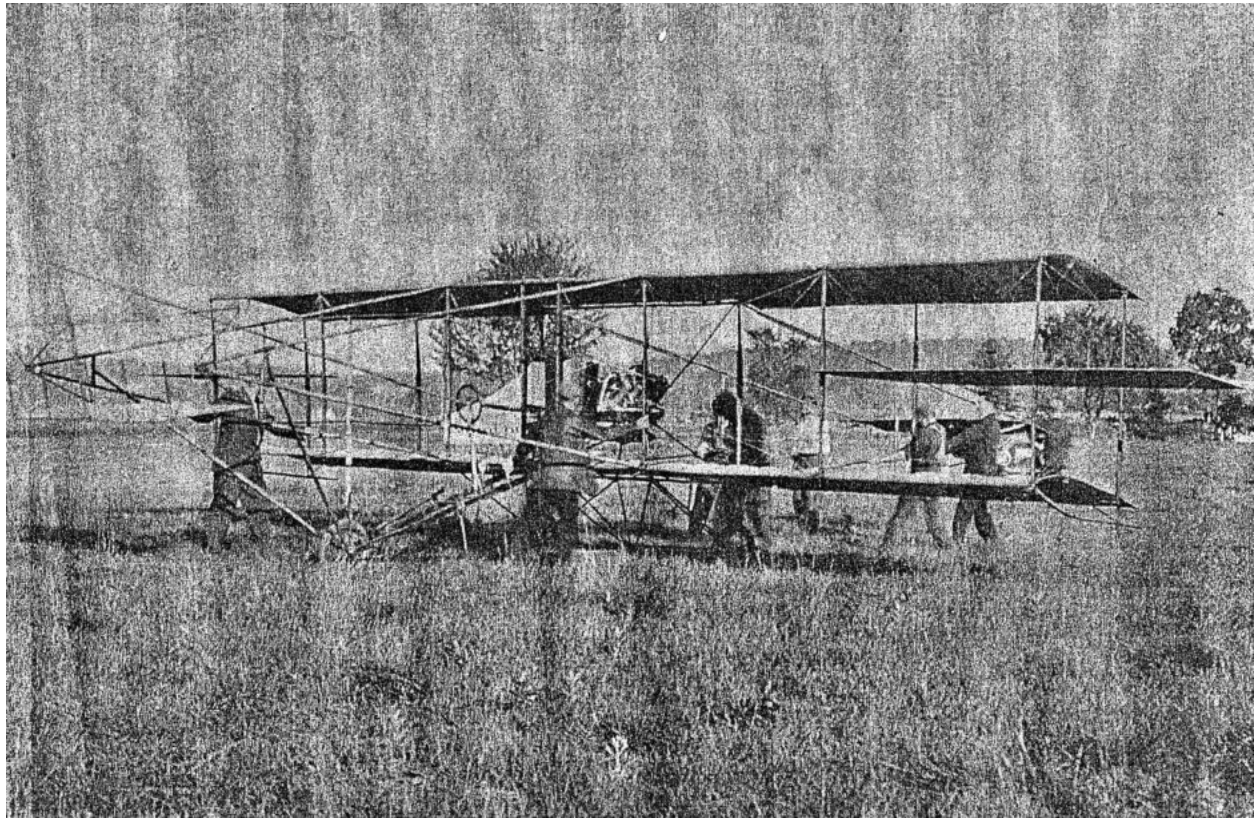
I was given the photo, actually it's a photocopy, by Todd Weed who's an electrical instructor at FTCS where I work. He's also a pilot. He got it from either Bill Bonnette or Brian, the airport manager whose name I can't recall. I thought Todd said it was hanging in the office. I've stopped by several times on my way home, but I never manage to catch anyone.

I had an opportunity to chat with the new director of the New England Air Museum last year. She did a little research and did not find any info on Red Rock Field.

The other *photo came from my dad's papers. He was supervisor of hydro maintenance and construction for WMECo based out of Cabot. This may have been on the wall there. It could have come from my grandfather. He was District Manager.

* Not relevant to this paper.

Text transcription.



Massachusetts' first altitude flights — Montague City, August 1910

The first altitude flights in Massachusetts were made in this Curtiss biplane at what was then called Rock Dam Field in Montague City. It was the weekend of Aug. 28, 1910 — nearly 75 years ago.³

The pilot was Charles F. Willard, a Melrose engineer who delighted a crowd of 15,000 in Enfield, Conn., the week before. The flights here drew about 5,000 people. In a three-day weekend, Willard got his plane aloft several times, gaining a height of 300 feet and flying as far as downtown Turners Falls and back; a four-minute flight covering three miles.

About one-quarter of the crowd missed Willard's final flight, his longest, preferring to go home for dinner, their appetites for food apparently stronger than for new-fangled aeroplanes.

e.g. archive

³ This dates *this* newspaper article, c1984.

Rock Dam Field.

Before the Turners Falls Power Canal¹ reached the then—Rock Dam Field—now the canal forebay for Cabot Station—the area was a 60-70 acre, low-growth field bounded on the west by the Connecticut River, easterly by Montague City and to the north, Turners Falls; both villages in the Town of Montague. To the south is Greenfield.

Rock Dam proper, is a natural bedrock barrier in the Connecticut River that links the eastern shoreline to Smead Island. The dam is located along the field's west side and about two-thirds of the way down at the base of a steep bank to the river's edge.

The field area was a popular venue for religious, social and ethnic groups who held various picnics and outings at the spot. Being partially wooded along the west edge it made for a comfortable and when required, semi-private setting for those affairs.

Four (4) images of the area (Rock Dam Field) follow. Directional and object orientation will benefit those familiar with the area today.

Image source: *e.g.* archive via FirstLight Power Resources.

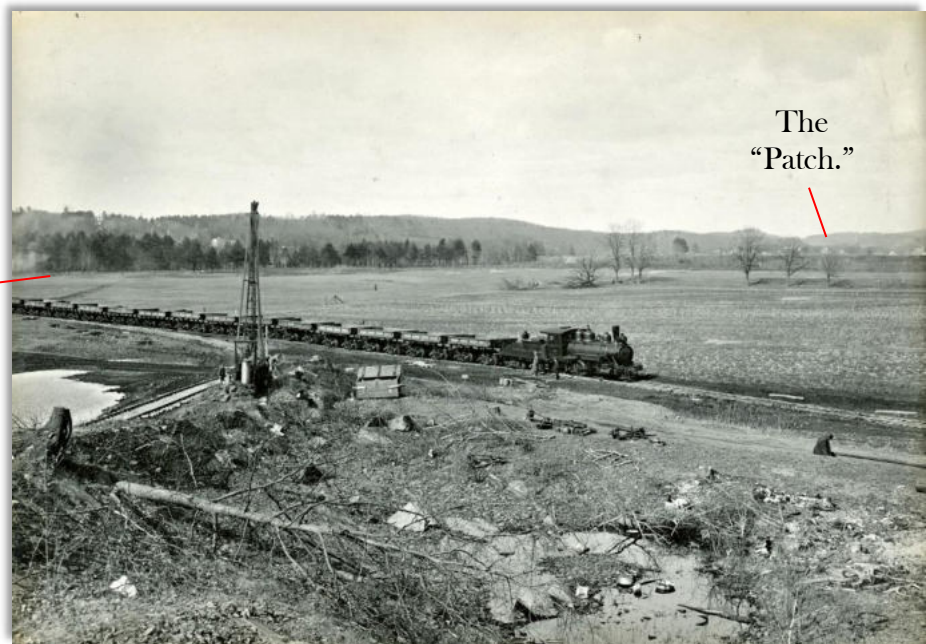
Image size is reduced for insertion here.

¹ For canal history, ref. "Turners Falls Canal-History & Description 2006. Ed Gregory.



The "Patch."

Looking due north across the field.



To become
Migratory Way
Along west side.

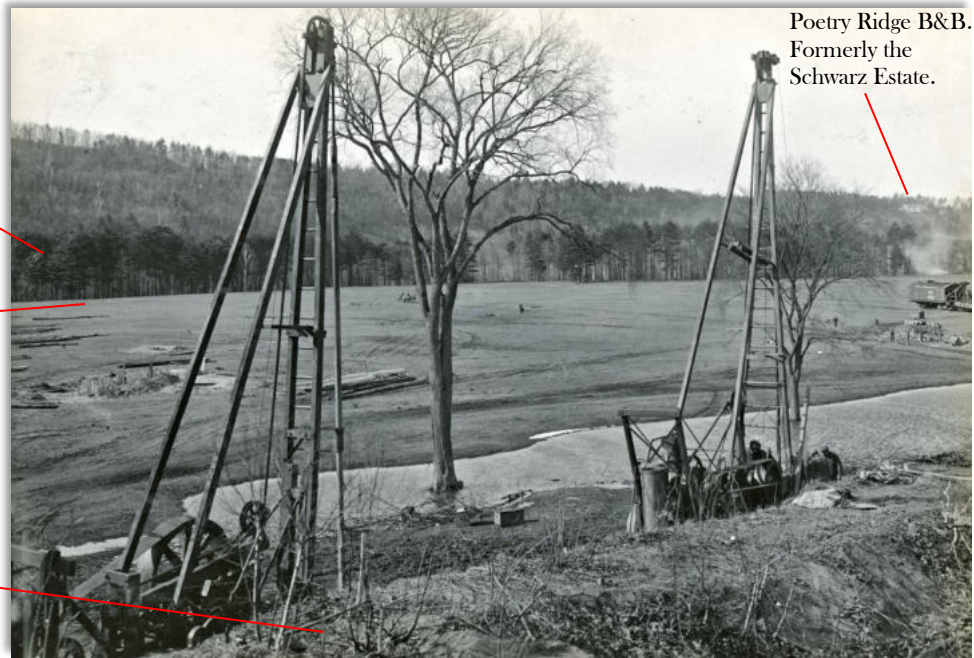
The
"Patch."

Looking north to the "Patch."

Connecticut
River below
tree line.

To become
Migratory Way
along west side.

Future bike path
along east side.



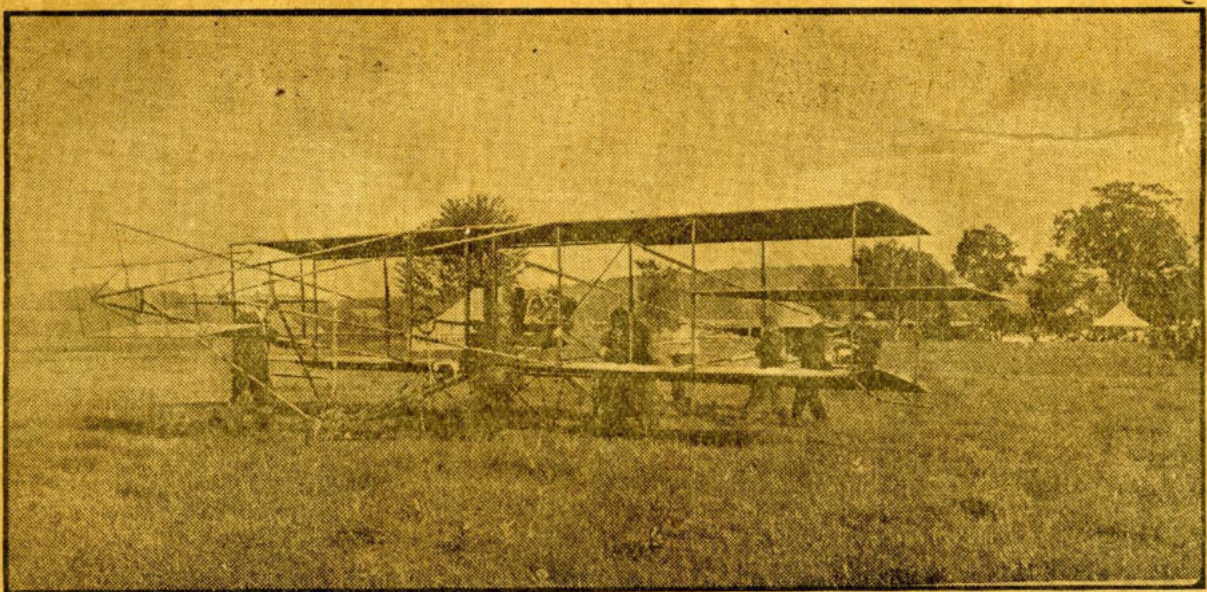
Poetry Ridge B&B.
Formerly the
Schwarz Estate.

Looking north



To become
Migratory Way
Along west side.

Looking north - the "Patch" right-center.



Aug. 31. 1910.

Photo by Forbes.

WILLARD TESTING HIS ENGINE BEFORE HIS START, SATURDAY.

e.g. archive (facsimile)

—End—



Subsequent research reveals . . .



The Wizard of the Air at Rock Dam Aerodrome

"A first blush one would think that such a queer looking contrivance could not be good for anything . . ."

The Wizard of the Air at Rock Dam Aerodrome
Gleanings from the **Turners Falls Reporter**

August 24, 1910

Hurrah! Air Ship Flights at Rock Dam!

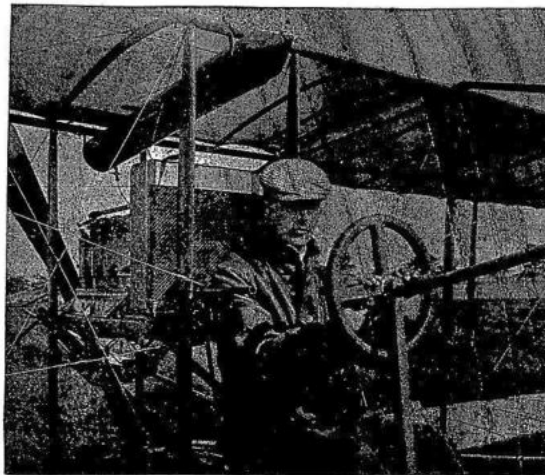
Franklin County, in fact, all this section of the state has been on the qui vive⁵ ever since Saturday, when was made the thrilling announcement that we were to have the opportunity of witnessing air ship flights by one of the most daring and brilliant aviators in the field, Charles F. Willard, who will fly at Rock Dam near Montague City on Saturday and Monday, August 27 and 29, and whose machine will be on exhibit on Sunday, August 28, though no flights will be made on that day.

SEE CHAS F. WILLARD
THE WIZARD OF THE AIR. WHO WILL MAKE FLIGHTS AT
ROCK DAM AERODROME, MONTAGUE CITY
In the MONARCH, the largest Curtiss Bi-Plane in America.

Mr. WILLARD holds the world's record for carrying Three Passengers in a Bi-Plane.

Ample provisions on the field for Automobiles and Pedestrians. No horses admitted to the field.

FLIGHTS MADE
SATURDAY
—AND—
MONDAY
AFTERNOONS.



ADMISSION:

ADULTS, - - 50c.
CHILDREN UNDER 12, 25c.
AUTOMOBILES, \$1.00 for
Machine, and 50c. and
25c. for Each Passenger,
According to Age, as
Above.

~~✂~~ The Aerodrome will
be open FREE TO ALL, on

SUNDAY, AUG. 28.

The Bi-Plane will be open
to inspection that day but no
flights made.

BAND CONCERTS EACH DAY.

Mr. Willard, who will use the "Monarch," the largest Curtiss bi-plane in America, holds the world record for carrying three passengers in a bi-plane. He was General Glenn H. Curtiss' first pupil and has been affiliated with him in two marvelous flying exploits. He recently gave flying exhibits at Enfield, Conn., which drew immense crowds and aroused great enthusiasm, and he is in constant demand.

⁵ Alert and Vigilant.

The aviation field selected for the air ship flights is the large, open flat space near Rock Dam at Montague City, which is admirably suited for the purpose. Rock Dam field is easily reached from all directions by trolley and makes an ideal place for the ascension. The field will be divided into a section for spectators, a park for automobiles and the aviation field proper. The Connecticut Valley Street Railway is making plans to handle the immense crowds expected quickly and easily, and has a force of men now at work getting the aviation field into readiness for the great event. The admission will be 50 cents for adults, 25 cents for children under 12 years and \$1 for each automobile, the passengers in which must be supplied with individual admission tickets, the \$1 being merely the fee for the admission of the machine to the field.

Ample provision will be made for pedestrians and automobiles, but no horses will be admitted to the field. On Sunday no admission will be charged and there will be present a demonstrator to explain the parts of the machine, which will then be on the field on each of the three days.

Mr. Willard will make at least two flights each afternoon. Willard is a daring aviator, and the chances that he would be unable to make a flight on either afternoon are slight. In case so violent a gale was blowing that he could not go up or in case of rain the Saturday flight would take place Monday, and the Monday flight Tuesday. The exact time of the 4 flights is dependent on the wind. Mr. Willard begins by making short flights to test the wind, and the balance of the machine, and then he makes two long flights.

Mr. Willard is 29 years old but he appears to be not over 20. Mr. Willard goes from here direct to Harvard aviation meet, in which he is entered.

The street railway company has secured this sensational attraction and there is no doubt but that everybody for miles around will turn out to see the flights. The development of flying machines has made great strides in the past few years and its practicality seems to be assured.

This is an exceptional opportunity to see one of the most daring and foremost aviators in the country make flights in one of the latest and most approved machines without the trouble and expense of traveling miles to see it.

Saturday and Monday will certainly be noteworthy and red letter days for this section and there will be a lot doing all the time.

Local Matters

-All roads will lead to Rock Dam next Saturday, Sunday and Monday for the big aviation meet.

-There will be no flying done by Mr. Willard next Sunday, but the mammoth Curtiss bi-plane will be on exhibit all of that day on the field and it is open to inspection free of charge.

August 31, 1910

Human Bird Flies Over Our Heads and Housetops

All roads led to Rock Dam last Saturday, Sunday and Monday, when took place there the first flight by a heavier than air flying machine to be held in this good old state, the flights being made by Charles F. Willard, in the monster Curtiss bi-plane, "Monarch." There was ideal weather the three days and both on Saturday and Monday, the daring young aviator made several superb flights on both days reaching a height of 300 feet or more and remaining in the air upwards of five minutes in each of the main flights.

There was no flying done on Sunday, but the machine was on exhibit that day and all interested in navigating the air and that included the major portion of the population, had a good opportunity to inspect the big, sprawly[sic] craft that imitates a bird so successfully.

Saturday afternoon the weather was simply superb, and the populace came from the four corners of the country and from outside its limits, to see what flying would be like. A big fortune in automobiles arrived, there being about 150 machines lined up in the parking space, and about 300 eager men, women and kiddies attended the meet.

Unfortunately, a damaged rudder caused a long delay in the beginning of the flights, so that it was about 5 o'clock before it began to look as though there would be anything doing in the aviation line. By that time many of the spectators had become impatient and growly and amused themselves making sarcastic remarks and in downing immense quantities of refreshments that were on sale. But when the machine had been wheeled out of its tent, everything tested, the megaphonic[sic] announcements were made, and the field cleared.

Mr. Willard seated himself in his jiggly[sic] bamboo rigging and every moment was full of interest.

Seeing the machine in the air is the least interesting part of the performance. To see the mammoth flying craft trundle across the field like a baby carriage, to see the husky assistants start the giant propeller in the rear going, and to note and feel the immense currents of air generated by the propeller, to observe that it takes the united efforts of four brawny men to keep the big kite on terra-firma when the propeller and engine are tuning up, to see the frail, nonchalant young aviator seat himself in his precarious perch and get his two feet and two hands and all of his with ready to manipulate the proper wires and levers and other mechanism, then it is that one realizes that to fly like a bird may be very easy to the birds who were built that way, but to humans it is a mighty risky, tremendous performance, in the learning of which, human brains and ingenuity had to exert itself to the utmost, the danger and risks adding only to the thrill and pleasure of surmounting all difficulties.

The bi-plane looks like some outlandish thing which any boy who likes to tinker and fuss, could rig up in his back yard. A first blush one would think that such a queer looking contrivance could not be good for anything, but when the thing finds its wings and rises up into the blue, circling, dipping, turning, swooping down and rising like a shot, just as the little human spec seated on the "peaked edge of nothing," wills, then skepticism gives way to admiration, admiration is vented in explosive enthusiasm and one feels, and does, clap hands and cheer like a wild man.

Everybody who saw the aviation flights must certainly feel grateful for the opportunity and commend the enterprise of the Connecticut Valley Street Railway in making it possible to see such a superb exhibit of flying through the air.

The machine looks very funny while it is getting ready to mount up on its wings like an eagle. The huge affair sort of hippity hops, skips and jumps across the field for a number of feet, just like a startled hen with flapping wings skimming across the road to escape an automobile, then it seems to take a long breath, and up it goes as fine as you please.

Mr. Willard made three fine flights on Monday and three lesser ones. On his second flight across the field, Superintendent J.A. Taggart of the street railway company was a passenger in the bi-plane. Mr. Taggart's radiant and genial smile didn't come off during the trip but was more resplendent than ever on his return to earth so it is fair to assume that it was a pleasurable experience.

At 5 o'clock Mr. Willard set out on the big flight of the afternoon, which surpassed any of the previous ones he made on the field. It lasted six minutes, and the altitude at times probably exceeded 300 feet. The total distance of this flight, as near as can be estimated, approached five miles. On the flight the machine made three great circles, passing twice over the heads of the crowd.

Band concerts were given each day and the whole meet was a decided success. The Rock Dam site was admirably adapted for the meet and every possible thing done for the comfort and pleasure and convenience of all who attended. The whole management was simply superb. Twenty thousand people could have been handled with perfect safety and comfort with the arrangements made.

[The One Sponge That Isn't Tabooed](#)

The Boston papers had much to say about the aeroplane[sic] flights in Greenfield, and how well the Greenfield chief of police handled the crowds. The aerodrome at Montague City was well taken care of, that is a fact, but its officers were led by our own Deputy Sheriff, C.A. Davis and E.J. Pratt. Never was a crowd handled so well as at Montague City, and 5000 people Sunday behaved much better than a Methodist camp meeting.

Perhaps the Greenfield chief was up on Poet's Seat taking care of the immense crowds that got the benefit of the street railway company's great enterprise in treating them to the first flying machine demonstration in Massachusetts without even costing them a nickel for car fare.

Greenfield enjoyed hugely the satisfaction of the reputation for having the exhibition on its sacred soil, and also enjoyed hugely the glorious privilege of sponging its pleasures by witnessing the flights from her tall mountains casting their shadows in the setting sun over the well pleased patrons at Montague City who had generous impulses sufficient to contribute fifty cents for self respect, and a good many dimes for soda-pop and popcorn.

[Local Matters](#)

-The Street Railway Company did an immense business last Sunday. Between the Polish church dedication and the eagerness to see the flying machine at Montague City, the travel was exceedingly heavy and gave us a very citified appearance at times. About every car in the company was pressed into service.

-Joseph Paquette, aged about 18 years, in his eagerness to see the flying machine exhibit Saturday afternoon at Montague City, without paying an admission fee, came to grief. As the old New England primer had it, "Like Zaccheus he, did climb a tree in order to see all that was going on." Paquette climbed up good and high, but unfortunately a limb broke and the young man fell to the ground. He had his wrist broken and was rendered unconscious. Medical aid was summoned.

Compiled by
Ed Gregory
March, 2016

Hurrah! Air Ship Flights at Rock Dam!

Franklin county, and in fact, all this section of the state has been on the qui vive ever since Saturday, when was made the thrilling announcement that we were to have the opportunity of witnessing air ship flights by one of the most daring and brilliant aviators in the field, Charles F. Willard, who will fly at Rock Dam near Montague City on Saturday and Monday, August 27 and 29, and whose machine will be on exhibit on Sunday, August 28, though no flights will be made on that day. Mr. Willard, who will use the "Monarch," the largest Curtiss bi-plane in America, holds the world's record for carrying three passengers in a bi-plane. He was Glenn H. Curtiss' first pupil and has been affiliated with him in his marvelous flying exploits. He recently gave flying exhibits at Enfield, Conn., which drew immense crowds and aroused great enthusiasm, and he is in constant demand.

The aviation field selected for the air ship flights is the large, open flat space near Rock Dam at Montague City, which is admirably suited for the purpose. Rock Dam field is easily reached from all directions by trolley and makes an ideal place for the ascension. The field will be divided into a section for spectators, a park for automobiles and the aviation field proper. The Conn. Valley street railway is making plans to handle the immense crowds expected quickly and easily, and has a force of men now at work getting the aviation field into readiness for the great event. The admission fee will be 50 cents for adults, 25 cents for children under 12 years and \$1 for each automobile, the passengers in which must be supplied with individual admission tickets, the \$1 being merely the fee for the admission of the machine to the field. Ample provision will be made for pedestrians and automobiles, but no horses will be admitted to the field. On Sunday no admission will be charged and there will be present a demonstrator to explain the parts of the machine, which will then be on exhibition. There will be band concerts on the field on each of the three days.

Mr. Willard will make at least two flights each afternoon. Willard is a daring aviator, and the chances that he would be unable to make a flight on either afternoon are slight. In case so violent a gale was blowing that he could not go up or in case of rain the Saturday flight would take place Monday, and the Monday flight Tuesday. The exact time of the flights is dependent on the wind. Mr. Willard begins by making short flights to test the wind, and the balance of the machine, and then makes two long flights.

Mr. Willard is 39 years old but he appears to be not over 20. Mr. Willard goes from here direct to Harvard aviation meet, in which he is entered.

The street railway company has secured this sensational attraction and there is no doubt but that everybody for miles around will turn out to see the flights. The development of flying machines has made great strides in the past few years and its practicability seems to be assured. This is an exceptional opportunity to see one of the most daring and foremost aviators in the country make flights in one of the latest and most approved machines without the trouble and expense of traveling miles to see it.

Saturday and Monday will certainly be noteworthy and red letter days for this section and there will be a lot doing all the time.

T. F.
Reporter
articles:

8.24.1910

The Human Bird Flies Over Our Heads and Housetops.

All roads led to Rock Dam last Saturday, Sunday and Monday, when took place there the first flights by a heavier than air flying machine to be held in this good old state, the flights being made by Charles F. Willard, in the monster Curtiss bi-plane, "Monarch." There was ideal weather the three days and both on Saturday and Monday, the daring young aviator made several superb flights, on both days reaching a height of 500 feet or more and remaining in the air upwards of five minutes in each of the main flights.

There was no flying done on Sunday, but the machine was on exhibit that day and all interested in navigating the air and that included the major portion of the population, had a good opportunity to inspect the big, spry craft that imitates a bird so successfully.

Saturday afternoon the weather was simply superb, and the populace came from the four corners of the county and from far outside its limits, to see what flying would be like. A big fortune in automobiles arrived, there being about 150 machines lined up in the parking space, and about 8000 eager men, women and kiddies attended the meet.

Unfortunately a damaged rudder caused a long delay in beginning the flights, so that it was about 5 o'clock before it began to look as though there would be anything doing in the aviation line. By that time many of the spectators had become impatient and growly and amused themselves making sarcastic remarks and in downing immense quantities of refreshments that were on sale. But when the machine had been wheeled out of its tent, everything tested, the megaphonic announcements made, and the field cleared, Mr. Willard started himself in his jiggly bamboo rigging and every moment was full of interest. Seeing the machine in the air is the least interesting part of the performance. To see the mammoth flying craft trundled across the field like a baby carriage, to see the husky assistants start the giant propeller in the rear going, and to note and feel the immense currents of air generated by the propeller, to observe that it takes the united efforts of four brawny men to keep the big kite on terra firma when the propeller and engine are tuning up, to see the frail, nonchalant young aviator seat himself in his precarious perch and get his two feet and two hands and all of his wits ready to manipulate the proper wires and levers and other mechanism, then it is that one realizes that to fly like a bird may be very easy to the birds who were built that way, but to humans it is a mighty risky, tremendous performance, in the learning of which, human brains and ingenuity had to exert itself to the utmost, the danger and risks adding only to the thrill and pleasure of surmounting all difficulties.

The bi-plane looks like some outlandish thing which any boy who likes to tinker and fuss, could rig up in his back yard. At first blush one would think that such a queer looking contrivance could not be good for anything, but when the thing finds its wings and rises up into the blue circling, dipping, turning, swooping down and rising like a shot, just as the little human speck seated on the "peaked edge of nothing," wills, then skepticism gives way to admiration, admiration is vented in explosive enthusiasm and one feels, and does, clap hands and cheer like a wild man. Everybody who saw the aviation flights must certainly feel grateful for the opportunity and commend the enterprise of the Connecticut Valley street railway in making it possible to see such a superb exhibit of flying through the air.

The machine looks very funny while it is getting ready to mount up on its wings like an eagle. The huge affair sort

of hippity hops, skips and jumps across the field for a number of feet, just like a startled old hen with flapping wings skimming across the road to escape an automobile, then it seems to take a long breath, and up it goes as fine as you please.

Mr. Willard made three fine flights on Monday and three lesser ones. On his second flight across the field, Superintendent J. A. Taggart of the street railway company was a passenger in the bi-plane. Mr. Taggart's radiant and good smile didn't come off during the trip but was more resplendent than ever on his return to earth so it is fair to assume that it was a pleasurable experience. At 5 o'clock Mr. Willard set out on the big flight of the afternoon, which surpassed any of the previous ones made on the field. It lasted six minutes, and the altitude at times probably exceeded 800 feet. The total distance of this flight, as near as can be estimated, approached five miles. On the flight the machine made three great circles, passing twice over the heads of the crowd.

Band concerts were given each day and the whole meet was a decided success. The Rock Dam site was admirably adapted for the meet and every possible thing done for the comfort and pleasure and convenience of all who attended. The whole management was simply superb. Twenty thousand people could have been handled with perfect safety and comfort with the arrangements made.

~ Notes ~