

The American Legion's Role in Keeping Ames Airport Alive

This article is based on Farwell Brown's "Air Service Comes to Ames" in chapter 33 of his book "Ames – The Early Years in Word and Pictures, From Marsh to Modern City," available at the Ames Public Library. Additional material was obtained from minutes of the Ames American Legion Post meetings from September 1929 through January 1932.

Interest in airplanes, and aviation in general, began in Ames before World War I when Elling Weeks made an emergency landing east of Duff Avenue and north of 13th Street. It was 1915 and the first recorded landing of a plane in the city's history. Aviation during World War I advanced to the point that after the 1918 armistice was declared, interest in airplanes and flying became widespread across the nation. Ames was no exception.

The next year, 1919, saw both a tragedy and the beginning of a bright career in aviation. A young girl, Leota Amlund, lost her life in an accident when a plane piloted by Walter Harriman was unable to complete a takeoff due to a muddy field. That year also saw Neta Snook bring a wrecked Canadian Army plane to Ames for rebuilding. She went on to become, in all probability, the first "licensed aviatrix" in Iowa the next year. In 1974, she wrote a book entitled, "I Taught Amelia to Fly" referring to Amelia Earhart, who in 1928 became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, nearly a decade before she famously disappeared somewhere over the Pacific.

Organized aviation as a local business began in 1926 with the Gerbracht brothers, Wilford and Joe, renting a 40-acre field east of the Skunk River and south of Lincoln Way for use as an airport. That is where the connection with the Ames American Legion begins. Joe Gerbracht was a veteran of World War I and was one of the 15 who signed the application in 1919 to form an Ames American Legion post.

The brothers developed the aviation facilities under Wilford's leadership and moved the air field to near its current location in 1928. An air show also held that year drew large crowds for races, stunts and demonstrations.

In 1929, Wilford Gerbracht sold his interest in the airport to brother Joe and assumed the position of pilot for the Automatic Washing Machine Company of Newton. Joe's main interest was the motion-picture theatre business in Ames. He operated the airport for only a few months before he relinquished control.

Minutes of the Sept. 14, 1929, American Legion post meeting show that discussions about the airport had been underway for some time. At that meeting, a report was given on the upcoming air show by Joe Ainsworth, approval of reimbursement for Joe Poage for his planned parachute jump and a motion that “the Legion take control of Air Field, use it to the best advantage, try to create interest toward election by people”.

Brown’s book states that Joe Gerbracht turned the airport over to the Ames Chamber of Commerce. However, the Oct. 12, 1929 issue of the *Ames Daily Tribune and Evening Times* recounts that Mr. Gerbracht made a proposal to the Ames American Legion post, which was accepted by Commander Harper. Commander Harper was authorized to accept that proposal by action of the Sept. 14, 1929 meeting. The lease was transferred shortly after that. While the exact details of the transfer from Mr. Gerbracht and the role of the Chamber of Commerce may be unclear, it is agreed that The American Legion Post assumed responsibility for the operation of the airport at that time.

Post 37 sponsored an air show on Oct. 13, 1929. The Oct. 12 *Ames Daily Tribune and Evening Times* announced several races were planned – and an attempt at setting a new world’s record for barrel rolling by Marcellus King – along with a parachute jump by Joe Poage and passenger flights. In that same issue, the Ames Chamber of Commerce authored an ad recounting how aviation had become commonplace and travel by air was now an accepted fact. They stated at the close of the ad: “We therefore congratulate Ames Post No. 37, American Legion, for this splendid example of civic enterprise in acquiring an airport as a first step in aviation progress.”

Marion Wearth became involved in aviation in Ames at this time. That is a familiar name in the Ames American Legion post history, not strictly because of Mr. Wearth. His son, also named Marion but known at the post as “Jake,” was a World War II veteran and longtime active member and officer of the post. He was also one of the early Legionnaires to be awarded an honorary life membership.

Money was always a concern. Rental of 40 acres of the airport land was covered by income from farming. A concession stand was built and operated by the post for additional income.

A second Legion-sponsored air show was presented May 11, 1930, featuring various races and highlighted by an aerial marriage ceremony performed for Norma Griffith and Ellison Cassidy. The American Legion paid all expenses of the wedding, and many

gifts were donated by local businesses. It was estimated that 10,000 people attended the air show, despite threatening weather.

Another air show was sponsored by the post on Oct. 12, 1930. The Oct. 13 issue of the *Ames Daily Tribune-Times* reported that the event eclipsed any of the previous shows, but it still lost money. It was estimated that although 4,000 people watched the show, less than one-third paid admission, and the rest watched from parked cars along the highway. Overall, the post lost \$200 on the venture, a substantial sum in 1930.

The post officers were quoted in that Oct. 13 issue as saying, "All we want to do is to make the project self-sustaining. It costs about \$1,000 per year to maintain the (air)port as a convenience to the people of Ames." While the Post lost money, it was reported that a farmer just north of the airport opened his fields and charged 25 cents to park there where the cars' occupants could watch the show free of any admission fees.

Following that experience, Post 37 members became less enthusiastic about operating the airport. Post minutes over the next few months reveal discussion of other fundraising possibilities, such as a trap shoot or high school football game and formation of a flying club. Members also sought rent reduction from the airport property owner and met with the City Planning Committee about the possibility of the city taking over the airport. The membership was divided over the future of the post's continued role with the airport.

By June 1931, another air show was proposed. Some prizes had been secured, but enthusiasm was definitely lacking. The Aug. 24, 1931, minutes report that the Air Show Committee "is willing to throw up (the) sponge." At the Jan. 11, 1932, meeting, it was reported that the lease for the airport property would expire March 1. A motion was made and passed "that the Adjutant and Finance Officer be instructed to do whatever they damned please with the airport."

That ended Post 37's involvement with the Ames Airport. Operation of the airport moved to Marion Wearth. Farwell Brown, in his book, states that The American Legion had been vital in maintaining development of the airport and aviation in Ames. While the involvement was only for a short time, The American Legion can be proud of helping to establish what is now an important asset to the city of Ames.

The next installment in this series will deal with events in 1932 when the post turned its attention from the airport to other American Legion and civic activities.

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