AN AIRFIELD
AND AN AVJATOR
THE STORY OF WINSTON-SALEM'S MAYNARD FIELD

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BY JENNIFER RAY BOWERS

Winston-Salem will go on record as being the first North Carolina city to establish a municipal field without government aid - Aerial Age Weekly, February 2, 1920

Today, an airplane in flight is a common sight. The sound of its engines is as familiar as a songbird. People no longer bound outside when they hear its roar, or cast their eyes skyward in hope of seeing the manmade wonder. In 1919, however, the opposite was true. Most North Carolinians had never seen an airplane and its approach evoked excitement—and in some cases fear.

Levie Smith was ten years old in the summer of 1919. While playing on her father's farm, which was located off Kenmoreville Road in Winston-Salem, she heard an unfamiliar sound in the distance. At the same time, her older brother rushed out of their house and shouted: "Run, Levie, run! There's an airplane coming and it's going to fall on your head!"

Terrified, the little girl ran inside and crouched beside her bed. After several long minutes and no apparent crash, Levie realized her brother had tricked her. The false warning had prevented Levie from seeing her very first airplane. Nevertheless, her days would soon be filled with the comings and goings of flying machines.

Before the end of World War I, the Winston-Salem Board of Trade realized that attracting aviation industries to their city could prove highly profitable. In 1918, the board tried to attract an aviation company to Winston-Salem, but it could not be obtained due to the city's lack of an acceptable flying field.
The city's need for an airfield became more evident in September 1919, when James Kay kendall, secretary and treasurer of the board, learned that plans were being made to locate an airfield on an adequate field. He also heard that an airmail route was going to be established between Washington, D.C., and Atlanta, Georgia, and that a midway stopping point was needed in North Carolina. Without an airfield, the city would suffer from neither. Eager to remedy the situation, the board set out to establish a first-class commercial airfield—an airfield that would be the first of its kind in the state.

In October 1919, the board leased 35 acres of land off Kernoville Road from William F. Stickler. Located approximately seven miles from the center of Winston-Salem, the land partially surrounded the farm of John H. Smith—Levi's father. Articles of incorporation for the Winston-Salem Aviation Company were drawn and the task of preparing the airfield was underway. Enthusiastic volunteers gave their time, money, and resources to ensure the field would be ready if the airmail route became a reality.

By the end of November, the United States government had approved Winston-Salem's new commercial airfield. The Board of Trade named the field in honor of Lieutenant Belvin Womble Maynard, a native North Carolinian and pioneer aviator.

Born in Anson County, North Carolina, in 1897, Belvin W. Maynard was "the first North Carolinian to become a world figure." In 1905, Maynard moved with his family to Sampson County. At an early age, he demonstrated an innate mechanical ability. "When he was 17 years of age," said William C. Goodson in the October 12, 1919, edition of The News and Observer, "he could take an automobile completely to pieces and put it back together with the greatest ease."

Yet, despite his talent for all things mechanical, Maynard's passion was the pulpit. He studied for the ministry at DePauw University in Indiana, and he was voted "Best Preacher" by his peers. In 1913, Maynard married Essie Goodson, and a year later enrolled at Wake Forest College. When America was thrust into World War I, Maynard was compelled to join the Army and withdrew from college. Because of his intelligence and mechanical skills, Maynard was placed in the air service and sent to France. There, he achieved the rank of lieutenant and became a chief test pilot. Maynard tested hundreds of airplanes and was heralded for his flying abilities. At the end of the war—and prior to leaving France—Maynard set a world record for completing 318 loop-the-loops in sixty-seven minutes.

When Maynard returned to North Carolina, he re-enrolled at Wake Forest College and continued to serve in the aviation reserves. Although he planned to complete his course of study, a reliability test—an exercise that sought to show the safety and commercial efficiency of airplanes—from New York to Toronto grabbed his attention. As a result, he delayed his studies, entered the race, and won. Not long after, the press discovered that Maynard was a Baptist preacher and dubbed him the "Flying Parson."

In September 1919, Maynard returned to his studies, but left again in October to compete in the First Transcontinental Air Race. It was a flight that would take him from New York to California and back again. Maynard's airplane, a de Havilland DH-4, was christened "Hello Frisco" for the occasion. He was accompanied on the flight by Sergeant William Klein, a skilled mechanic, and Triss, a German shepherd pup.

The Transcontinental Air Race was a new and dangerous undertaking. Many pilots died along the 3,400-mile route while countless others endured non-fatal crashes and mechanical failures. Maynard had his own share of problems including mechanical issues, storms, a blown radiator, and a flat tire. Despite the difficulties, Maynard prevailed and on October 19, 1919, was declared the winner of the race. Maynard's name was emblazoned on the front pages of newspapers across the country. He was the "greatest pilot on earth" and every one in America knew his name.

Throughout the country—and particularly in North Carolina—processes and other festive events were held to honor the new national celebrity. In November, Maynard flew to Raleigh where he gave Governor Thomas Walter Bickett his first ride in an airplane. On takeoff, Bickett shouted: "Give my regards to Lieutenant Governor Max Gardner and tell him I have made the best Governor he can have."

The two men had planned to fly to Waitsford for a reception, but the designated landing field was too short and they had to return to Raleigh. Maynard and the governor eventually arrived at the event by way of an automobile. In Sampson County, the field that had been plowed for Maynard's "homecoming" was also inadequate. Against his better judgment, Maynard attempted to land, as he did not want to disappoint the crowd. When the airplane touched the ground...
Such was the case throughout North Carolina. So-called “airfields” dotted the landscape, but were nothing more than golf courses, country club lawns, agricultural fields, and other patches of land that had been cleared to allow space for landings and takeoffs. Although these fields were selected and put into shape by the United States government, most were plagued with stumps, roots, and mud.

The Winston-Salem Board of Trade, along with their supporters, recognized these issues and set forth to create an airfield unlike any other in the state. At its completion, Maynard Field consisted of intersecting runways that allowed planes to take off and land from any direction. The field was cleared and smoothed; the top surface was softened and compressed against the second layer; and a sandy soil, which prevented the accumulation of mud in bad weather, was spread over the top. Fifteen-foot-wide signs that spelled out Maynard Field were erected for the purpose of aerial navigation and directional markers were posted at each end of the runways. A wind indicator was erected on a 30-foot pole. In addition to safe and durable runways, Maynard Field provided hangar space, gasoline, telephone service, a mechanic and two parking areas for automobiles.

On December 6, 1939, the field was officially dedicated and Maynard was the first flyer to land on its runway. Unlike his recent landing in Sampson County, Maynard landed in smooth form and found the field to be perfect in every regard. When Maynard addressed the crowd he stated that Winston-Salem had taken the lead in the advancement of commercial aviation and encouraged its citizens to “keep up the good work.”

The city quickly gained fame as a pioneer in the science of aviation,” according to the December 30, 1919, edition of the Winston-Salem Journal. The February 2, 1920, edition of the Aerial Age Weekly echoed the sentiment. It reported that: “Winston-Salem will go on record as being the first North Carolina city to establish a municipal field without government aid. An insight into the prestige gained through the move is seen in a letter received by Mayor Gilmer [of Winston-Salem] from the Boston Chamber of Commerce in which the intellectual metropolis of America asks advice on how it should go about securing a similar field.”

Famous aviators Harry Runser and Roscoe Turner—who were staunch promoters of commercial aviation—also publicized the success of Maynard Field. The June 17, 1920, edition of the Statesville News-Leader, documented the men as saying: “Winston-Salem has a fine airport and it is a mecca for all airmen flying in the south.”

Runser and Turner often performed “hair-raising” stunts at Maynard Field. One of Turner’s feats included walking on the wings of the airplane and hanging from the steering gear. A young man from Winston-Salem witnessed the act and later wrote about it in a letter to his friend. He said: “...one of the fellows
who must have been weak in his upper
story walk on the wings of the plane
while flying, then he swung on the ladder
underneath (sic) the plane. I bet his feet
felt as if they were flying on reputation.

Lieutenant Lynn D. Merrill offered
airplane rides over Winston-Salem during
the winter of 1913. The cost to fly with
Merrill was $20, but for an additional $5,
he would transport passengers to a loop or
tall spin. Merrill’s first customer—and the
first local citizen to fly out of Maynard
Field—was Carl M. Spry. When asked about
the experience, Spry said that since
the Prohibition Amendment had
become effective, aviation now offered
the only manner of “getting high.”

But Maynard Field was created for
more than aerial fun. Its purpose was to
bring aviation businesses to Winston-
Salem and prove the commercial viability
of airlines. On November 24, 1920,
Harry Runser and Winston-Salem jour-
nalist William D. DeWitt wrote of
Maynard Field with an airplane full of wrapped
newspapers. The Winston-Salem Air
Messenger, which was specifically printed
to promote air service in Winston-Salem,
was dropped on all cities within a 60-mile
radius.

The following day a large air carnival
was held at Maynard Field. Aviators from
across the country landed at the field,
including Monte Rolfe of the Augusta,
Georgia, Aviation Company and James
Dunn and J. J. Merribee, who were both
Currituck Airplane salesmen from
Lynd-
burg, Virginia. Runser and Turner were
also there and decided to hold an air race
over Winston-Salem. Runser’s airplane, a
British Avro, outdistanced the others, and
according to the Winston-Salem Journal,
took “victory in the first airplane race
over held in the state.”

Maynard Field had become so popu-
lar that in December, 1920, Santa Claus
exchanged his sleigh for a “modern
mechanical airship” and descended on
Winston-Salem. Gilmore’s, Inc., heralded
the “jolly old elf” along with Monte Rolfe, to
frighten and delight 14,000 spectators.
The airship store was devoted to making
the 1920 Christmas season, the best, the
happiest, and most interesting in recent
years.”

In September, 1922, however, a black
cloud of sadness hovered around
Maynard Field. While performing an aerial
route at a fair in Rutland, Vermont, Lt.
Bevin W. Maynard’s engine failed and
his airplane dived into the ground. North
Carolina’s beloved son was dead.

The “Flying Parson” enjoyed a short
but eventful life and was the case for
his namesake airfield too. Aerial
activities continued to occur at Maynard
Field for years after its creation. But in
1927, the field began a slow descent to
closure. City leaders were informed that
Charles A. Lindbergh, who had
completed the first solo non-stop transat-
lantic flight, would be flying over the
City of Winston-Salem as part of his
countrywide tour. Because Maynard Field
could not be expanded and the roads
leading to it were in poor condition, it
was determined that a new and modern
airfield should be built. A site was chosen
off Liberty Street, and Miller Municipal
Field—renamed Smith Reynolds in
1942—was quickly constructed.

Although the new field greatly dimin-
ished the use of Maynard Field, it con-
tinued to operate until the mid-1930s.
Today, the area that was once the site of
North Carolina’s most modern airfield is
covered by homes. At the end of 1919, a
newspaper report for the Winston-Sa-
lem Journal proudly stated that Winston-
Salem would always be remembered for
creating the first commercial airfield in
the state. Unfortunately, Maynard Field
and those behind its creation were all
but forgotten. That changed on May 18,
2008, when the Forsyth County His-
toric Resources Commission unveiled a
marker honoring the achievements
of Maynard Field and the progressive-
thinking citizens of Winston-Salem. On
the day of its unveiling, several members
of the community, including one who
had flown an airplane out of Maynard
Field, gathered at the site and recounted
memories. For others, it was a
day of learning about a place they never
know existed.

Lovlie Smith—the little girl who missed
seeing her first airplane—died before the
marker’s unveiling. She had grown up in
the presence of Maynard Field and it was
an integral part of her life. She witnessed
a daily barrage of airplanes and walked
across the field on her way to school.
When she married, she and her hus-
bond built their home on a parcel of land
located at the end of a Maynard Field
runway. She never forgot her memories of
Maynard Field and showed them freely
throughout her 83 years. Remarkably,
Smith loved to watch the airplanes, but
her feet never left the ground.

In Memory of St. Belvin Wimbled May-
nard 1892-1922, and Lovlie Smith Shelton
1908-2002.

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