



# The Amazing Ross

*By: Al Kelch, Editor*

In 1911, the year that the Johnson brothers' airplane building efforts were climaxed by thorough success with their first American monoplane, the world was engrossed in one great excitement after another. This was the beginning of the end of the horse and buggy days. The automobile was well established and now aviation came along and enthusiasm ran to horrendous heights. The mechanical age had brought many forms of entertainment to the masses, such as steam boat races, threshing conventions, automobile races, county fairs and even Chautauqua, were all participated in by men who were daredevils by nature. Those that would fly at this time were the supreme daredevils, and even Evel Knievel, with all his stunts, could not recreate the excitement that one aviator could create during this era. Ross Smith was truly a born daredevil, and by coincidence proved to be a natural at it.

Ross Smith had never seen an airplane, and was attracted to one of the public displays of the Johnson monoplane, the practice being a charge of 25¢ to see it in the tent to help alleviate the costs. The plane had barely flown, and excitement was running high. Ross evidently took one look at it and said "that's for me". It's hard to guess how he convinced the Johnsons that he should take a hand at it, however it is very possible that he was the only one with enough nerve, and the Johnsons had spent a great deal of theirs. A bird in the hand at this point was probably welcome. According to the records, the

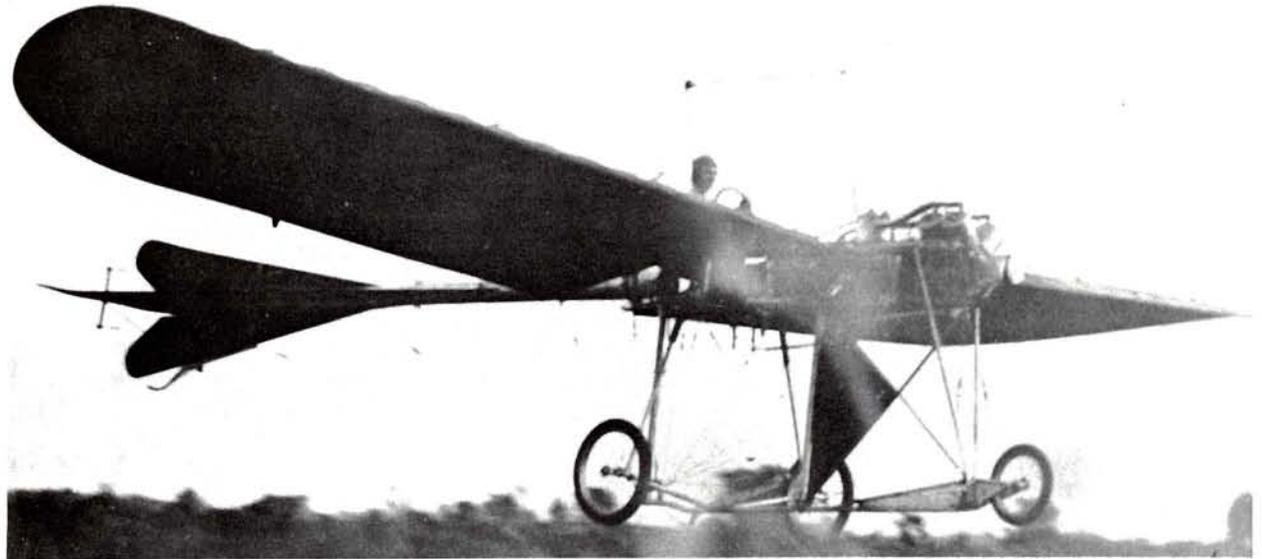
motor was started, and Ross ran the plane up and down the field for some half hour, experimenting with the controls, learning how to use the throttle, steering the airplane, accelerating until it was light. Evidently Ross had figured play time was over and the description states "suddenly the plane shot forward and then rose gracefully into the air." His very first flight lasted for 30 minutes, and he thrilled the onlookers as he flew back and forth over the field. (Instructors take note - how many students would you turn loose, in a better machine of today, with 30 minutes of instruction?)

Barely two days after Ross's first flight, he launched into the professional flying ranks in a big way. He immediately received an offer from his home town of Mattoon, Illinois, to engage in some demonstration flights, and was paid for three flights at \$500.00 per flight. Airplanes were so rare in these days that people paid to look at them, and in most cases such flights were initiated by promoters seeking a quick fortune. You would believe that flying such an airplane was enough of a daredevil stunt, but not for our friend Ross. He managed to concoct stunts that even from this distance

in time seem absolutely ridiculous. Daredevil is too mild a word. One of his next exploits was an engagement to fly the monoplane during a 10 day Chautauqua. Now for you youngsters, you'll have to run to the dictionary, however, I'll save you the effort. The name Chautauqua originated in New York where some wise promoter started an educational summer camp. Families took their vacations, very similar to those going to Oshkosh for the week long fly-in, lived in tents in a large tent community that attracted as many as 50,000 people during its run. This particular Chautauqua that contracted for Ross's services with the Johnson airplane, was at Merom Bluff, Indiana, a high point on the Wabash River. The bluff was in Sullivan County and stood 150' above the river on one side, while the opposite side fell to flat farm land going away from the river in a flat plain. This particular Chautauqua was obviously one of great importance for the midwest, and attractions included William Jennings Bryan, Senator Robert LaFollette, William Howard Taft, former President of the United States, Vice President Thomas R. Marshall, a gal named Maude Ballington Booth discussing prison reform, John Temple Graves, a noted orator of the time, and Jeanette Rankin, the first American Congresswoman. The Chautauqua encompassed every subject from religion to suffrage, child care, and anything at all that would interest the family.

To spice this particular Chautauqua, Ross came up with the idea of building a 250' wooden platform with its far end hanging over the bluff on the river side. The intent was to fly the airplane from this platform, and fly it he did for many performances. Descriptions of the flight states that "the airplane labored uphill, gained speed and disappeared from the end of the platform, in what must have been a free fall until it gained flying speed, leveling out some safe distance above the river, then circling back over the Chautauqua area like a peacock preening its feathers". It must have been a supreme thrill for all to witness. There was no possible way to land at the Chautauqua area, so Ross would cross the river to the Illinois side, and land on a road at the ferry. The plane would then be disassembled, hauled back across the river, pulled back up the winding road to the bluff, for its next day's operation.

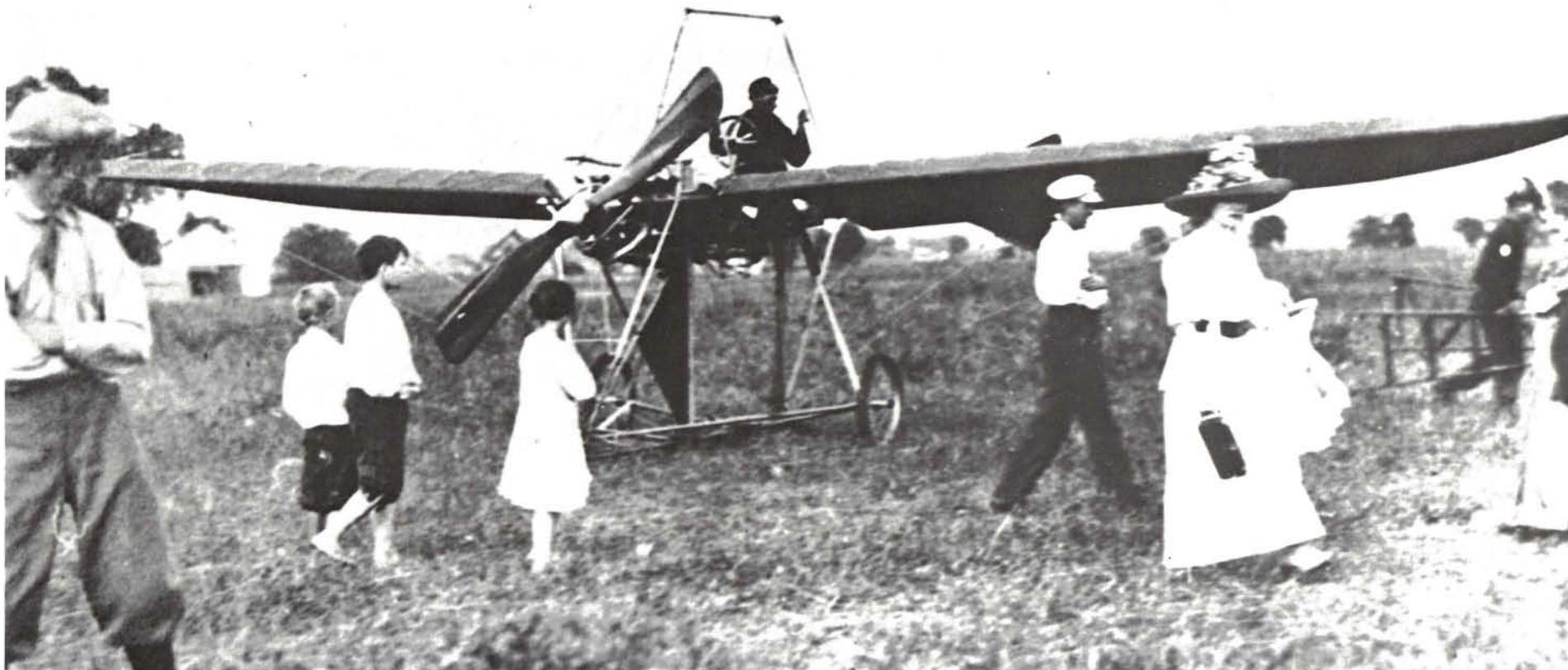
In the eyes of the Chautauqua attendance, Ross was no doubt walking mighty tall despite his slight stature. It was quite common practice for the Johnson airplane to be engaged for fairs, etc., at which time it generally flew off the racetrack. Evidently by this time a standard stunt



*This monoplane, piloted by Ross Smith flew off the Merom Bluff daily, August 22-31, 1913, during the Chautauqua.*



*This was the view from the Merom Bluff. The picture is deceiving, for it was 150' down to the water. Note the Ferry, cars and buggies waiting to cross and climb the winding road up the bluff. This is the view Ross Smith had as he literally dove his plane off the platform without adequate flying speed. The result was a near free fall, with flying speed gained in time to narrowly miss striking the water below. The flight was enacted daily to please the crowd.*



*Ross Smith preparing for an exhibition flight. Note man with ladder at right, below wing. It was a tall gear and a long climb to mount this machine.*

had been for the airplane to race a car on the track. Dirt track races being part of almost every fair, there was always someone present willing to race. At one such event, it states that "Speed in the air and on land, thrills thousands. Aviator Ross L. Smith and Speed King "Wild Bob" Burman, held first place in the hearts of sensation lovers for the wild thrills they gave the thousands at the fairgrounds on Sunday. Taking off from the track, Ross flew around the track, circled the infield, and landed directly in front of the grandstand, amid the applause of thousands". As an additional build up to the race, Burman took Ross for a ride in his 300 hp Blitzen Benz, and proceeded to smash the world record for a mile on a half mile dirt track, breaking his own former record. His

speed was just over 60 mph, but this meant that 80 mph must have been his speed on the straight away. On the first lap he gave Ross a thrill by hitting the turn too fast and almost losing control in a skid. Evidently Ross did not appreciate the ride, for when Burman said he would go up with him in his plane, Ross calmly said that if he did, he would get pushed out. Burman of course immediately changed his mind. Evidently this was the last of Burman's summer appearances, and he was going to spend his time readying himself for the 500 mile motor speedway event. He had held the lead the previous year, until his machine caught fire and burned while he was many laps ahead.

As to the race between the airplane and the car, the

airplane invariably won all events, in spite of the fact that the cars appeared to be going faster. Speed in the air does not seem to be speed compared to a roaring monster of an auto, spewing exhaust and throwing large clods of dirt as it rounds every corner. Smith evidently thrilled the crowd with a simple thing that today would be called a "touch and go". Newspaper emotes over the fact that even the French exhibition flyers had not done such a thing, stating that Ross had no trouble at all in thrilling the crowd. In another engagement it states that "Ross L. Smith will pilot the Johnson brothers' monoplane during the Corn Week Show, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Terre Haute". The big thrill of this event was to be a flight down Wabash Avenue, between the

buildings, just above the street car wires. It was stated it would be the first time in history that an aviator would attempt such a dangerous feat. The plane was to be brought down until the wheels barely cleared the wires, then proceed west down the street to the Court House where the plan was to circle the big dome. In a flair of penmanship the author writes "it will be unusual for a businessman to see the wings of an airplane almost brushing the windows of his building". He further states "the trip will be a dangerous one, but the aviator and the builders of the machine have such faith in the monoplane, that they believe that both will stand the test".

In a later account where Smith was engaged to fly an exhibition over Elsworth, he decided to give them a new thrill and go for altitude. With much circling, he reached dizzying height of 2,000', where he passed through a cloud bank that confused him for a short time. On recovering from the confusion, he found himself at 1,000', (he invented vertigo no doubt).

In still another account, it states "the Johnson monoplane gave one of the best exhibitions of the art of flying it has been our pleasure to witness. There were no death defying stunts, just plain flying".

The monoplane took off on the back stretch of the race track, and for 30 minutes circled, dived, swooped and turned, running up and down the valley for several miles. It states "the limited space in which he had to land caused him some trouble. He had failed to make the first descent (made a go-around - probably the first). When finally on the ground, Aviator Ross stated it was the hardest day to fly on he had ever experienced, as the air seemed dead and no breeze whatsoever was stirring". (Density altitude).

About the year 1913 Ross was running out of tricks, the bag was getting empty, so he decided to scoop them all. He announced that he would like to fly the Atlantic, and from all records, it appears that he was the first to have such serious ideas. He was at least 19 years ahead of his time. He proposed to fly the flimsy Johnson airplane across the Atlantic alone - a statement that makes Lindbergh's remarks an echo of the past. He approached the Navy Department and asked them to place 10 battleships at intervals of 300 miles apart, figuring that this would be the maximum load of gasoline possible to carry. The Navy, of course, refused considering the flight across the Atlantic, as only a hair brained scheme. The Government was not very interested in flying at this time, and their decision was certainly not a surprise.



*Evening flights from the field were customary.*

Ross did not remain silent on this issue and at a later time stated in print "when the Atlantic is crossed, it will be by a flying boat, and not a dirigible".

In reading the history of these days, all of the emphasis on long range travel was transferred to the gas bag. History proved Ross to be 100% right and the Navy's NC4s were the first to fly across.

To further add hues of color to his career, Ross was perhaps the first American aviator to get an offer from a foreign government, and probably one of the first conceptions of military aviation was born. President Huerta of Mexico offered him a high ranking position in the Mexican Army if he would organize an air force for them. Ross immediately declined. Poncho Villa, who was then the bad boy of Mexico and conducting what we would call today Guerilla attack, tried to make Ross a better offer of \$2,000 a month in gold to do the same thing for his side. Ross declined that too. Time proved how wise he was in declining this offer for one of his best friends was killed - not while he was flying, but by Villa's own men. Four of Ross's friends had decided to fly for Villa, but when weeks went by and they received no pay, they drew straws to see who would confront Villa with the facts. Mickey McGuire (the wild Irish Rose of the skies) was unlucky enough to get the job, and foolish enough to make the attempt. He faced the illiterate General in his tent and asked for the money.

The General promptly whipped out a 45 caliber pistol and shot McGuire through the heart. In revenge, the remaining three proceeded to burn Villa's airplanes, saving one to make their escape in. They successfully flew that one back to the United States.

This was not Ross's last encounter with Army life. As World War I came along, there were but 50 flyers available for instructors in the U.S. He was one that formed the nucleus of the great Flying Corps. This group was called on to also perform test pilot functions, and in their vernacular did nose dives, tail spins, and no doubt were the first creators of aerobatic flying in this country. This was no doubt a cup of tea for our adventuresome Mr. Ross, captivated the services and the record that he established was remarkable. General Andrews commended Ross with a citation ending it with a comment "Seven years without a serious mishap". Ross lived a long and successful life and became very well known in Washington and for years was Public Relations Manager for the Hot Shoppes, a food chain in the East. He lived a full life and died on February 19, 1959. For an adventuresome person who lead such a colorful life and seemingly knew no fear, he must have also been blessed with skill and a great amount of common sense. In the Hot Shoppes Company magazine, from which some of this material was gleaned, they coined an epitaph for him stating simply "An amazing man". 