

GROWING UP IN BRIGHTON TOWNSHIP

The Brighton Township Historical Society presents another installment in our series, "Growing up in Brighton Township." The details within these tales by individuals raised long ago in the Township provide us a glimpse of Brighton Township past. With this article we embark on a journey that even takes us into the skies above the Township, circa the 1940's. Our history contributing story teller for this article is Mr. Joe E. Russell. Joe was raised in the vicinity of the 3800 area of Dutch Ridge Road. The Russell family home was located on ten acres. Joe attended the Richmond School. Joe's childhood was during the decade of the 1940's. However, his Brighton Township background was not the typical life on a local farm. Rather Joe's late father, Joseph P. Russell, was employed at the Curtiss Wright factory. The family did not farm for a living. Joe's fondest childhood memories centered on private planes and early local aviation. Those memories were shaped by his father's intense interest in aviation. Joe's dad learned to fly in 1940. Initially, his focus was as a recreational pursuit. But those recreational interests were compromised by the outbreak of World War II. The Civil Air Patrol came into existence on December 1, 1941, shortly before Pearl Harbor. Eventually, mass mobilization of the war effort countrywide created a local Civil Air Patrol unit. While memories are short and records scarce some facts do surface. Joe's dad was the Captain of the local Civil Air Patrol. Meetings were held at a long gone grade school in Beaver, now the general location of the Beaver Fire Department Station. Also, the government provided two small aircraft to the local chapter. The planes were stored at the Patterson Heights Airport. Over the years Joe Sr. gained not only a private pilot license but also a commercial pilot license. Likewise, he was certified to work on both airplane engines and frames. Joe has numerous early Brighton Township plane stories, often humorous, always informative. Due to space considerations, two are presented in this column. Remaining recollections will be shared in future additions.

The Salvaged Plane: Joe's dad purchased his first plane shortly after he learned to fly. The new plane was housed at the Conway, PA Airport. Unfortunately, the plane sustained severe damage. The problem was not the result of an aviation accident as you might imagine. Rather, the plane, while parked in the field at the Airport facility, was badly burned by a brush fire. Joe Sr. was still determined to continue flying. He arranged to have the badly damaged plane hauled to his home in Brighton Township. With the aid of his kids and the housekeeper, who was very adept at sewing, needed repairs began. A sewing machine was placed in the front yard near the burned plane. Careful measurements were taken. Note, private planes of that vintage were mostly covered in a cloth material which was simply glued onto the frame. All of which explains the need of both a good seamstress and sewing machine. Then a resin like substance was applied to the cloth and painted. Simply size, shape and measure the plane part that needed to be covered. Then sew the cloth material precisely and it's just like putting on a sock, according to Joe. The sewing machine hummed along and the cloth pieces fit like socks. The kids helped glue and paint and Joe's dad completed the mechanics. A silver plane with bright blue wing tips emerged. Eventually, it was time to hit the wild blue yonder. An initial drawback, lack of a runway, was apparent as the rebuilt plane was located in the front yard of their Brighton Township house and not the airstrip in Conway. This situation is not necessarily a problem in the Township. After all, a gently rolling farm field can accommodate small private aircraft landings and takeoffs. So Joe Sr. decided to use a field across the road from their house for the long anticipated test flight. One question mark did exist. Could an untested rebuilt plane on such a short field gain enough speed

to lift off? Nevertheless, Joe's father drove the plane across Dutch Ridge Road into an adjacent field. The story continues that son Joe and his friend held the plane's tail section down and back as their dad revved the little plane's engine. Hence, the harder they held back, the more the engine could increase engine revolutions and thus power. More power should result in more speed and then lift. All of which means, hopefully, a safe takeoff. When the pilot yelled "let go", it was best to let go. If you didn't, you might find yourself being dragged and bounced across a farm field until you did let go. Fortunately, in this case the plane holders let go simultaneously. Everyone stood in the field, fingers crossed and hopes high, as the little plane sped and bounced along the field and finally skyward. The Russell family plane rescue mission worked. The plane flew flawlessly, even on the first attempt, into the wild blue yonder. That plane flew for many years thereafter providing a lifetime of memories for the Russell kids.

The Breakfast Visitor: Another time Joe and his siblings were gathered in their Dutch Ridge Road home eating breakfast. A small plane suddenly began buzzing the family house. The kids dashed outside to see the aerial visitor. The buzzing aircraft was a flying buddy of Joe Sr. The plane kept circling and circling, lower and lower, even flying upside down at times. Meanwhile, the kids enthusiastically waved skyward. Now low enough to be heard the pilot shouts, "What are you having for breakfast?" The kids standing in the yard screamed into the sky, "Pancakes-pancakes-pancakes." The voice from the small craft yelled back and not surprisingly, "I like pancakes. I'll be right down." Obviously, "plane shouting" predates the cell phone. So the little plane sputters off looking for a field to land on. An adjacent farm field is quickly located. In fact, it is now the front entrance to Baker Corporation. The plane drops down and lands on a very short clearing. Eventually the pancakes were finished and breakfast completed. It now is time to fly home. The family walks with the pancake visitor along Dutch Ridge to his parked plane. It finally occurs to someone that the landing spot might be too short for a takeoff. Not a problem, assuming you have people to do the tail hold down trick. This time Joe and his dad hold the tail down and pull back. The little plane's engine is gaining power and creeping forward while the Russells are pulling backwards. Then those words "let go" echo in the field. Now bouncing along the field the plane tries to gain enough speed to fly. But he continues to bounce along what little field is left. Finally, he just manages to barely clear Dutch Ridge Road. The Russells stand alone in the field and anxiously watch what they hope to be a takeoff. But the little plane is not traveling fast or high enough yet. The struggling craft fortunately is lined up across from a rather deep ravine. Losing altitude he begins drifting and sinking into the ravine. The plane disappears out of sight of Joe and family. Silent tension prevails as they stand motionlessly and helplessly wait. Finally, yes finally, the engine gets louder and smoke from the engine can be seen rising. Very fortunately the little plane did not pancake and barely emerges over the tree tops and meanders skyward and homeward. A collective 'whew' from everyone on the ground after witnessing a rather close call broke the deafening silence. Despite the stomach churning near disaster, Joe happily reports that no one even lost their pancakes!

The Brighton Township Historical Society thanks Mr. Joe Russell Jr. for sharing his memories. As he is a great story teller, we hope to bring you more of Joe's recollections in future columns. Special thanks to his sister, Bev Russell, for arranging this interview, and her editorial contributions. The reader may wonder. When Joe grew up, did he pursue flying for a living? He stayed on the ground and became a truck driver!