

History – High Flying Governor

Sorting through a wealth of printed material, about John Trumbull, the man, the aviator and the governor, I have gained a new insight into the man. This wonderful collection is now part of the Plainville Historical Society's "Trumbull Collection" which includes many items from his various 'lives'.

Most everyone knows that he flew, but the details of some of his earlier flights make your hair stand on end, even now.

A tall, broad shouldered man, with the keen blue eyes of his Scottish parents, he was an outdoorsman. Fishing, hunting and trips into the wilderness were all his loves.

But flying was his passion. It was something new and exciting and caught the fancy of a man of his boundless energies.

Typical headlines read: "Governor's Plane Outflies Storm" and "Governor Flies to Washington for Conference," (made it in three hours too) "Flying Governor Founded State Aeronautical Agency" (1932) "Governor Secures Federal License as Plane Pilot."

We see him in news pictures, brisk, smiling, arriving on the first mail run from Hartford to Boston and back, (1926) and in 1930, greeting officials of the Colonial Airlines as they open their branch at Brainard Field.

A Narrow Escape

An even earlier clipping, unfortunately undated, is my favorite. "Plainville Men in Airplane Fall." Special to the Herald, March 8. Hugh Rockwell and Captain John Trumbull had a narrow escape from death today when an aeroplane in which they were flying came to grief in landing and was badly smashed – machine was a total wreck with the exception of the engine, but neither received a scratch.

"According to Captain Trumbull, the machine flew perfectly – from New Haven – but air stunts were indulged in before attempting a landing. Rockwell looped the plane, did a nose dive, the Immelman turn, banked and went soaring up again. The plane was from Liberty Field and was a number 110. It was taken apart and hauled to New Haven.

Later, after John became governor of the state, we find a blaring headline, "Governor Takes Spill in Glider. Dragged over Frozen Runway." This in February of 1930; his leg and hands were cut and he was severely shaken. "This confirms my opinion that gliders are safe even when they do crash," he told men moments later.

Press is Critical

A critical item appeared in the press saying, "While we are not unappreciative of the pluck and playfulness of Governor Trumbull – we do not particularly thrill at the thought that the

state might easily have been minus the health and services of an excellent chief magistrate. “In this glider business, we should say the results hardly justify the hazards.”

A meek press release the next day declared “Governor to Use Caution in Flying; Will Take Good Look at Next Glider Before Takeoff.”

In August 1938, his plane crashed in Greenville Maine, fatally injuring the pilot and shaking up his son-in-law. The Governor was not aboard. In 1925 his plane came down in a pasture in Monroe, and in another accident in Trumbull Field in Groton, his nose was cut. After this last crash, he told reporters the next day, that it was all in a day’s work. But I’ll bet there were some active ulcers cases on his staff.

The question of why he did it can be answered, I believe, by the answer given by the mountain climber when queried as to why he had to tackle the highest mountain. ‘Because it’s there!’” Mr. Trumbull loved the challenge, and the adventure must have been a welcome relief to an outdoorsman chained to a desk, however dedicated he might be to said desk.

I think the cutest thing in the collection is an article, again undated, which tells of a visit to Shubert Theatre in New Haven. Mr. Coolidge was with Mr. Trumbull this night and the one and only Will Rogers was the star.

An Instant Wit

Rogers introduced the governor from the stage, as a “real Connecticut Boy.” Mr. Trumbull smiled and bowed. Then someone in the gallery yelled, “is the governor really here tonight?” “Sure,” replied the wonderful instant wit. “He’s the bald-headed guy in the front row. He got that way flying a plane without wearing any helmet.” Will also congratulated the governor as being the only governor he knew with a sideline.

On John’s 55th birthday, a miniature “Spirit of St. Louis” was dropped on the lawn of the mansion. The box containing the miniature, held by a small parachute, floated gracefully down. Incidentally, plane buffs, the “Drop” plane was a Fairchild Monoplane which made it from Teterboro to Hartford, in just one hour –great for 1928!

John Trumbull did much to nurture the infant aviation movement. He added color, brought it into the limelight as a useful thing and also made it the “in thing” of the era.

Respectfully submitted,
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