



Midway Village Museum
Rockford's
HISTORY MUSEUM



**Bessica Faith Medlar Raiche:
America's First Female Aviator**

Biographical Timeline:

April 23, 1875— Bessica Faith Medlar was born to James B. Medlar and Elizabeth Curtis Medlar. In the Federal Census records she lists herself as being born in Wisconsin, but the specific town is unconfirmed.

Her father James owned a photography studio and his wife Elizabeth was also involved in the business. After they separated, Elizabeth went into the photography business for herself.

1894— Bessica graduated from Rockford High School.

1894-1900— Studied painting in France.

1896-1897—Assisted dentist Dr. C.J. Sowle

1900—Entered Tufts Medical School in Boston

1903—Graduated from Tufts Medical School

After graduating, she worked at Staten Island Children's Hospital and received training in obstetrics.

1904— Opened her own general practice in Massachusetts under the name Faith C. Medlar, M.D.

1904-1907—Married Francois 'Frank' C. Raiche. Frank was the son of a French immigrant, an attorney, and a member of the New York Aeronautical Society.

1907—Bessica & Frank began building airplanes while in their summer home which was near the aviation activities going on at Mineola, NY.

The first plane they worked on was assembled in the living room of their summer home, using the grand piano as a work bench. To get the plane out, Frank & Bessica removed the front of their house.

September 15, 1910—First plane completed.

September 16, 1910—Bessica achieved the distinction of being the first woman accredited with flying solo in the United States.

October, 1910—Bessica was honored by the Aeronautical Society of New York; she was presented with a medal, inscribed with 'First Woman Aviator of America, Bessica Raiche.'

The Raiches started their own company in Mineola building planes & giving flying lessons.

1911—The Raiches moved to Chicago and joined with the Standard School of Aviation.

Biographical Timeline Cont.

1912—Bessica organized the first women's only pilot's instruction course. This did not last long and within the year the pair moved to Balboa Island, CA and Bessica returned to her medical practice.

1914—Bessica's daughter Catherine was born.

1917—Bessica joined the Orange County Medical Association.

1923—Bessica was elected president of the Orange County Medical Association. She practiced obstetrics and gynecology and worked with public health problems and tuberculosis, along with children's welfare.

1925—Bessica & Frank divorced.

April 9, 1932—Bessica died of complications from heart disease in California.



Bessica Faith Medlar, c. 1900-1903

*Photo taken by Elmer Chickering,
Boston, MA*

Courtesy of Midway Village Museum.

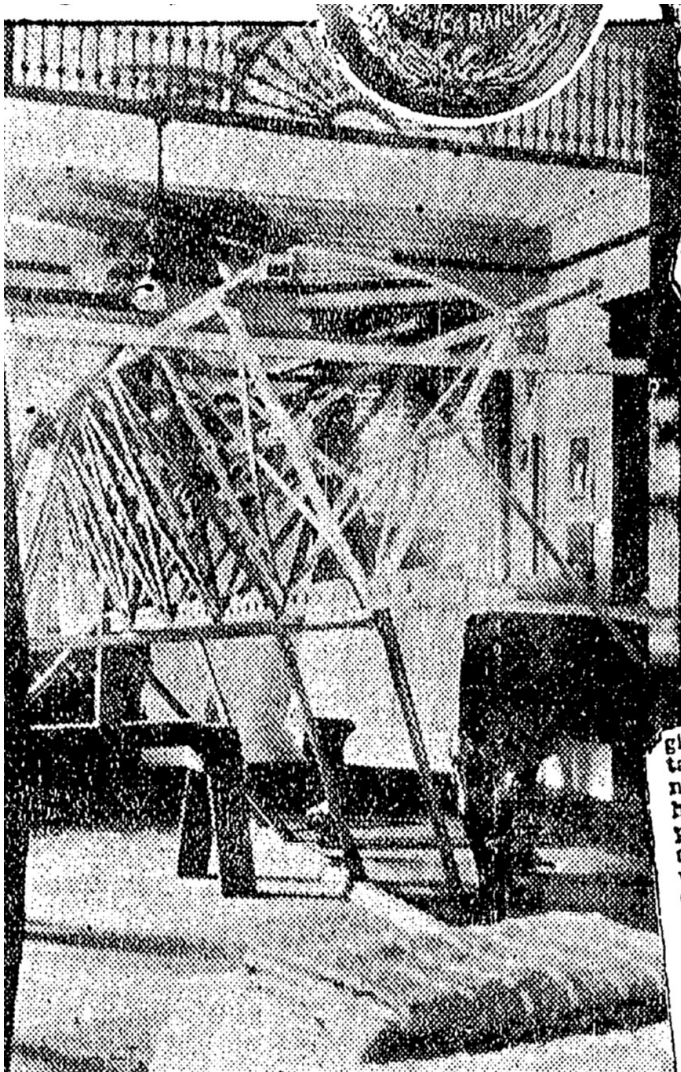


Photo showing the interior of the Raiche home during the construction of a plane.

(from Omaha World Herald, 3/31/1929)



Bessica, in the driver's seat, c. 1910-1912

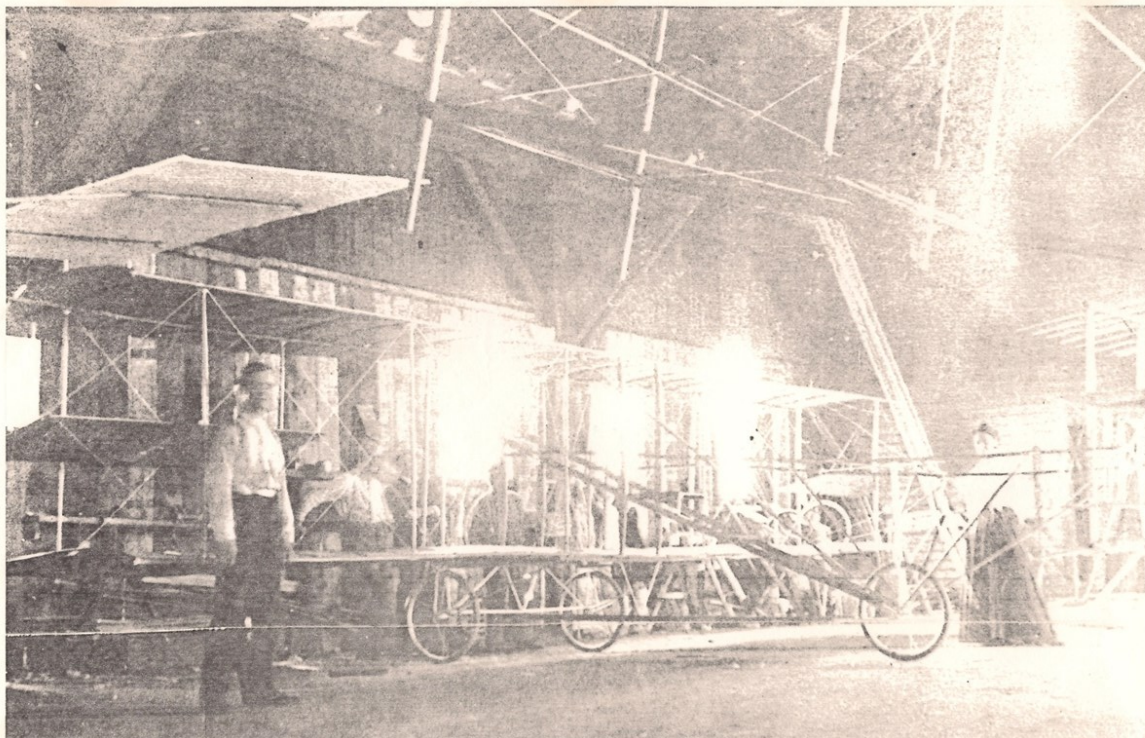
(www.womeninaerospacehistory.com)



While flying Bessica realized that her skirt got in the way, keeping her from safely working the controls. She wore riding breeches till she had leather pants, jacket, and a helmet made.

Bessica in flying gear, c. 1910-1912
(www.womeninaerospacehistory.com)

Mineola, 1909, in the hangar. Frank on the left, Bessica on the right standing near plane. Courtesy of Midway Village Museum.



Dr. Raiche, as pictured in the San Diego Union, 1/1/1928.



She was Sweet Sixteen.

Miss Faith Medlar was sweet sixteen yesterday and just about that number of friends called to do her honor. They spent the evening in games and later on elegant refreshments were served. Then followed dancing and it is needless to say that the young people had a merry time. The following were present: Arthur Wall, Alfred Boner, Walter Burritt, Charlie Utter, Fred Peterson, Sidney Smith, Ernest Smith, Will Brown, Rollo Walters, Edith Fenfield, Rena Burritt, Rose Remington, Helen Wetherel, Katie Boner, Alma Boner, Marguerite Warner, Winnie Oakes, Fannie Oakes.

WOMAN FLIES IN BIPLANE

**Mrs. Bessica Raiche, of Wisconsin,
Makes Good at Mineola, Ia.**

(By Associated Press.)

Mineola, Ia., Sept. 24.—Mrs. Bessica Raiche, the Wisconsin aviator, who came to grief here a few days ago while trying out a new biplane, redeemed herself to-day by making seven short flights over the Mineola trying ground. Her most successful attempt was a flight of a mile and a quarter at a height of thirty feet.

Dr. Raiche Will Be Speaker At Monthly Session of Board

Dr. Bessie Raiche of Anaheim will be the luncheon speaker at the January meeting of the county board of the county federation of Women's clubs, to be held Saturday, Jan. 7, in the Y. W. C. A. building.

Dr. Raiche is past state chairman of the department of public welfare of the California federation and present southern district chairman. Her subject will be "Personal, Home and Community Health."

A musical program arranged by Mrs. Alice Warwick, county music chairman, will include numbers by the chorus of the University Heights' Mothers' club preceding the morning business session and luncheon music by the Lyric Four of El Cajon. Mrs. Bessie Williams Potter is accompanist of the quartet, whose members are Mesdames Roy Fuller, M. C. Blanchard, A. R. Hunter and Frank Jennings.

The Chorus of the University Heights Mothers' club includes Mesdames J. Allin, William Sartian, Frank Adams, Milo Atkinson, C. R. Bayliss, Earl Bayliss, M. R. Essery, Henry Gabbe, H. L. Heaton, H. W. Jones, A. J. Roeschlaub, T. H. Roland, S. A. West, A. E. Brenz, Gustave Frankson and W. P. Reichert. Mrs. H. P. Ernst is director and Mrs. B. F. Murray, accompanist.

Any club woman of San Diego county is welcome at the board meetings.

Luncheon reservations should be made by Friday noon with Mrs. George Roberts, Hillcrest 7443-W.

DR. BESSICA RAICHE

Of Anaheim, who will be the luncheon speaker at the January meeting of the county board, County Federation of Women's clubs.



America's First Woman Aviator

Bessica Raiche Built and Flew Her Own Plane Way Back in 1910; and Hudson Maxim Presented Her with a Medal for Her Achievement . . . Then She Slipped Modestly from View and Became the Great Mystery of Flying History . . . Here She Is Rediscovered, Quietly Practicing Medicine in the West, Hiding from Fame Long Due Her

When this photograph of Bessica Raiche was made in 1912, she had been making flights for nearly two years in this plane of her own design. . . . At the right, the gold medal awarded Dr. Raiche for her first flight in 1910.

BY MARGARET STANLEY

AFTER a brief and brilliant performance on the stage of pioneer aviation in America, Dr. Bessica Raiche, the first woman aviator of the United States, watches closely from behind the scenes the rapid progress of events, and shares with each the advantages of the air, participating in the achievements of women.

Because she is supervising her life to the education of her young daughter, Catherine, and to her medical profession, Dr. Raiche does not find time to play an active role among America's women aviators, but her life is not too full for her to follow with keen interest the enactment of the exciting drama of the air upon which the eyes of the world are turned.

The pioneer woman pilot, who now makes her home in southern California, was the recipient of a signal honor October 19, 1910, when famed Hudson Maxim, inventor, acting for the New York Aeronautical society, presented her with a gold, jewel-encrusted medal in recognition of her flight as America's first woman aviator.

The medal, which is suspended from a brooch representing an airplane between a pair of wings and studded with diamonds, sapphires and rubies, is one of Dr. Raiche's most treasured possessions.

The aviator and her husband, Francis Raiche, were closely associated with the Wright brothers in the construction and piloting of planes in New York for several years, and Dr. Raiche did actual flying for more than four years.

IN THE honor of this interesting woman many valuable photographs and records of aviation in its infancy are to be found. Among these are pictures and newspaper accounts of the first aviation events.

In contrast to her daring and pluck which brought her distinction in the field of aviation 18 years ago and won her the admiration of the pioneer flyers of America and France, is a modesty which has kept her from many of her closest friends a knowledge of her important connection with aviation. And it is with diffidence that Dr. Raiche tells of her flying, even though she has been for each now account or detail of women's accomplishments in the air.

"I marvel daily at the rapid strides in the progress of aviation and although I think that I shall never pilot a plane again, I thrill with new achievement of the world's flyers, both men and women," says Dr. Raiche.

"The mere fact that I have lived to see the progress of aviation is an adventure of my life. My present inactivity is due to the fact that aviation is such a rapidly advancing factor in the world's progress that I have to devote a year or two, in any month of 15 or 18 years, to my flying, not to my living."

"It seems incredible that when I was flying a plane our chief aim was to make the ship as light as possible, using bamboo and silk for its construction. To be able to person in the plane was a thing unheard of. That was our belief then, the lighter the plane, the more chance we had of getting it off the ground."

"Just think, when I first manifested an interest in aviation, my first plane was built that way, but the ground, everyone was keyed up to a tension every day—waiting and hoping that the plane would actually fly. And when a plane went into the air for a few feet at Mineola, Long Island, we were virtually insane with joy."

THESE were no controls on the engine and when we were ready to take off, the mechanic turned the engine, while three or four men held the plane at different corners until the critical moment—then they released it and it sailed an eager flyer that would leave the ground. And the descent from these first flights! How foolish it seems now to think that the same men who had held the plane before the start were there to catch us when we returned.

"If the planes had been modern aviation, with all its apparatus, it would have been handled. We made most of our initial flights at daybreak, for there was less wind and the flier was spring and summer, the best time before dinner during the fall."

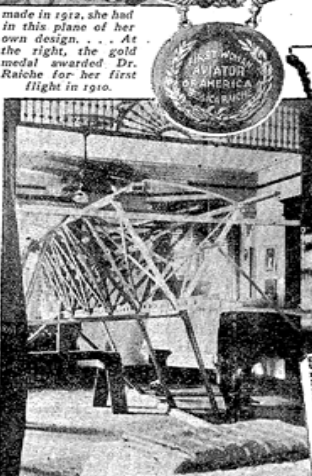
"Of course, there are places other than on the aviation field, so we did not venture far from the field. We were all in the air, but it was not built up then and it made an aviation field. No one knew much about aviation and we were continually receiving advice from everyone about what to do, when and how to do it."

"No one thought about publicity then and I believe publicity had been a tremendous assistance in the development of flying. We were all so impressed with experiments regarding construction and piloting of planes that we had no time to think of publicity or attendant interests."

"The joy was in the flying, with its increasing perfection and commercial development in a fascinating and almost unbelievable thing to see."

DURING the period in which Dr. Raiche devoted her life to aviation, she was not a physician. She was present on the scene of the invention of inventors at Washington and her mother's generosity went back to the Mayflower stock.

The girl was brought up in an atmosphere of refinement and culture and was served the best of mental food. She became acquainted with numerous "famous" and the arts, and was known



A hitherto unpublished photograph of Bessica Raiche's airplane under construction in her home at Mineola, L. I. . . . Even her grand piano served as a carpenter's horse.

The clipping at the right from a New York newspaper of October 15, 1917 . . . attests how completely Flier Raiche was "lost" for several years.

First American Aviatrix

Mrs. Bessica Raiche, a Daring Young Woman of Wisconsin, Recently Honored by the Aeronautical Society for Her Flights

The magazine article that carried this head . . . was a spurge among the scant publicity given the first U. S. woman to pilot a plane.

to her young friends as a clever musician, a painter and linguist.

Another side of her makeup found expression in her mastery of swimming, shooting, automobile driving and horseback riding. She found life in Wisconsin a bit "tame" and sought Paris in 1905, where she met the old masters of painting, and to see a bit of continental life.

When she returned from France she brought home a husband, Francis Raiche, and a driving ambition to free herself of the "backers of civilization" to fly.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Raiche were endowed with



THE first woman to start an airplane in America.

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forward and up, and the plane, it increased by a pump, so that a minimum amount of water in the tank would be sufficient to run the motor before making flight.

The motor of mineola, Long Island, was manufactured by the "South Chicago" Power, and was a 40-horsepower motor which gave it a speed of about 35 miles an hour.

Then the trials began. Flying may have seemed an easy thing to some of the onlookers, but it certainly was not to the aviator. A frame of bamboo covered with every part of wood was enough to match against the crushing force of gravity. To see it convulse with every puff of wind was enough to bring the average mortal that it was a rather light craft to contrast with all of one's earthly hopes.

"We realized that all things which go up must come down; several planes, by that time, had gone up with the ease of a bird, but came down with the weight of a rock."

"However, when the plane was ready for flight it did not occur to us that my trip skyward might be my passport to eternity. Adventure was calling me and I readily obeyed."

On September 16, 1910 with no other preparation than that gained by assisting with the building of the first two airplanes, Dr. Raiche took charge of the craft and won the distinction of being the first American woman pilot.

Katherine Wright, sister of Orville and Wilbur Wright, was the first American woman to fly, but she had never been a pilot, so to Bessica Raiche went the coveted credit of being her country's "mother of flyers."

"MY FIRST four attempts at flight were unsuccessful, and I managed to leave the ground and return to it without mishap, but the fifth flight was not such a triumph," says the aviator, reviewing her experiences. "The plane for a third and better one—the plane with which Mrs. Raiche was to win the honor and distinction of being the 'first woman aviator in America.'"

Together they constructed one plane and designed a motor for it. To their amazement it not only flew, but won them a silver cup. A second machine was built and sold to make room for a third and better one—the plane with which Mrs. Raiche was to win the honor and distinction of being the "first woman aviator in America."

"I began to construct the third plane in August, 1910," relates Dr. Raiche, "and it was to be exclusively my own machine. Therefore, I had to make it as light as possible."

Below—Bessica Raiche about to take off in her flimsy biplane in 1910. . . . "Four men held the machine until the critical moment, when they stepped back and the plane took its flight."

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Lifestyles

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The Rockford Register Star, Tuesday, May 13, 1997



When history flew over Rockford

Aviators have been challenging local skies since 1855

By **JULIE SNIVELY**
The Register Star

Boom. A cannon shot reverberated, calling the crowd to attention. Thousands of Rockford area residents turned their eyes to the sky, watching as Silas M. Brooks, waving an American flag, slowly ascended into the late afternoon sky in a hydrogen balloon called the "Comet."

It was Aug. 14, 1855. Aeronautical history was being made. The barnstorming Brooks, a flamboyant Easterner whose silk balloon was sewn for him by Rockford area women, was making the first balloon ascension in Rockford, and just the second such flight in Illinois.

The Rockford area's fascination with manned

flight was born.

Since that afternoon nearly 142 years ago, Rockford has had its share of other aviation spectacles. A case also can be made that Rockford has produced more than its share of aviation heroes, including five men who're among seven Illinoisians to be inducted into the Illinois Military Hall of Fame in special ceremonies Saturday, May 17, at Clock Tower Resort.

The induction ceremony is another chapter in Rockford's proud aviation history, said Herb Healey, coordinator of the Rockford area's World War II Combat Flyers organization. His group is co-sponsoring the induction in conjunction with officials of the Hall of Fame, situated at the former Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul.

"This is a page in history," Healey

said.

The five inductees from Rockford are:

■ The late Col. Bert R.J. "Fish" Hassell, a colorful aviation pioneer who earned international headlines in 1928 with his attempt to prove the viability of the "Great Circle Route," an air route over Greenland and Iceland used today by commercial and military craft traveling between North America and Europe.

■ The late Adm. George J. Dufek, one of America's most important polar explorers and the first man to land at the South Pole in an airplane.

■ The late Four Star Gen. Laurence S. Kutler, a participant in the Yalta Conference, one of World War II's most important meetings of Allied leaders, and a founder of the U.S. Air Force.

■ Maj. Gen. Fred J. Ascani, 79, now of Alexandria, Va., commander of a bombardment squadron who flew 52 combat missions in World War II and later was an Air Force test pilot.

■ Brig. Gen. Lewis Stocking, 79, now of Colorado Springs, Colo., commander of an A-20 attack aircraft squadron that, among other missions, supported the World War II D-Day landings in Normandy.

Although Rockford has a rich aeronautical heritage, most residents don't know much about it, said Dean Todd, a World War II Combat Flyers organization member and former long-time aviation writer for the Rockford Morning Star.

"There are darn few

Please see **Aviators**, 2B

Photo courtesy of John R. Snively
While attempting to fly from Rockford to Stockholm, Sweden in 1928, Bert R.J. "Fish" Hassell's plane, The Greater Rockford, was forced to land in Greenland, where it remained until 1969.



Bessica Faith Medlar Raiche, who was born in Rockford in 1875, made history when she became the first woman flier in 1910. Raiche flew solo in a plane she and her husband designed and built.



Photo courtesy of Mary Lyons
Pilot Bert R.J. "Fish" Hassell (left) and navigator Parker "Shorty" Cramer pose in front of "The Greater Rockford."

If you go

- **What:** Illinois Military Aviation Hall of Fame induction ceremony
- **When:** Saturday, May 17: cocktails, 11 a.m., luncheon, noon.
- **Where:** Clock Tower Resort, 7801 E. State St.
- **Cost:** \$25. Tickets can be purchased at Logli, Hilander and Bergner's stores until noon Friday.
- **About the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame:** Located at the former Chanute Air Force Base, Rantoul, the Hall of Fame currently has a membership of 27 men and one woman. Current members include Paul Holland of Oregon, a World War II medal winner who was instrumental in planning the Rockford induction ceremony. The only new inductee who'll be present for the ceremony is Maj. Gen. Fred Ascani, now of Alexandria, Va.



Photo courtesy of Mary Lyons
Fred Machesney (left) and Bert R.J. "Fish" Hassell attempted to fly to Stockholm, Sweden, in 1928.

When history flew over Rockford

> Continued from Page 1B

towns of our size who have more to brag about," Todd said.

And, all of history hasn't been made by men, Todd added. Rockford's amazing female fliers include Jessica Faith Medlar Raiche, recognized as America's first woman aviator, and Elizabeth "Libby" Gardner, 75, now of New York City, among the first women to pilot U.S. military aircraft, including the B-26 bomber.

Raiche, born in Rockford in 1875, already was a medical doctor when she made air history as the first woman flier with her Sept. 16, 1910, flight in Mineola, N.Y. The intrepid Raiche flew in a solo aircraft that she and her husband designed and built.

Gardner's date with history came when she joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots, a pioneering group of women fliers whose stateside assignments during World War II included towing targets to train male pilots and ferrying planes to airfields where they were needed. After the war, she made Life magazine when, working for Piper Aircraft, she became the first woman to try to descend from a plane that was suspended from a parachute.

First airplane

While Rockford got its first taste of manned flight with the Brooks balloon ascension in 1855, it wasn't until 1911 — eight years after the Wright brothers made the first flight in a power-driven, heavier-than-air machine — that area residents got their first up-close glimpse of men soaring in airplanes.

Amid much hoopla, Beckwith Havens, a New Yorker, and Jimmy Ward, a former Chicago cab driver, flew Curtiss biplanes during a three-day aviation meet in Loves Park. Newspapers reported that Ward thrilled viewers with a daring exhibition flight that ended when he "buzzed" a group of photographers, scattering them and causing a woman boater to jump in the river.

A year later Havens made Curtiss seaplane flights off the Rock River, said to be among the first such flights in the nation. An old photograph shows Havens in the plane on the river in front of the Rockford Public Library.

Trips to Machesney

One of the most enduring names in Rockford aviation history is that of the late Fred Machesney, a barnstormer from Kewanee who got his first glimpse of the town in 1925 when he flew over dropping handbills for a clothing store.

Machesney — the namesake for Machesney Park and the Machesney Mall — moved here in 1927 and opened an airport north of Rockford. A year later the Rockford Chamber of Commerce took an option on 160 acres just a half mile north of Machesney's field and Machesney agreed to operate it, relocating from his smaller field.

Family excursions to Machesney Airport on Sundays during his boyhood are a memory for Hall of Fame inductee Stocking. "Of course, flying was relatively new in those days and it was a special treat when my family would take me and my sister to Machesney Airport to watch the planes fly," Stocking said.

Among the first, and certainly the most important, flights to take off from Machesney Airport was that planned by Hassell, who grew up in Rockford, and his navigator, Parker D. "Shorty" Cramer.

Hassell, a daredevil barnstormer and one of the nation's earliest pilots, long had been obsessed with devising a safe, commercially feasible air route across the Atlantic Ocean. By July 26, 1928, he and Cramer were ready to test Hassell's "Great Circle Route" theory with a flight from Machesney Airport to Stockholm in the "Greater Rockford." The plane crashed shortly after take-off. A second attempt was made Aug. 16, 1928. But, that time the pair had to make a forced landing on the Greenland icecap.

However, after a two-week trek out of the wilderness, they were feted in Washington, D.C. by President Calvin Coolidge and President-Elect Herbert Hoover. The plane remained on the icecap until 1969 when it was returned to Rockford. It's been restored and now is the centerpiece of an exhibit at Midway Village & Museum Center.

Air museum proposal update

A proposal to build a flight museum at Greater Rockford Airport as a tribute to American World War II fighter pilots appears to be dead. Last summer members of the Historical Aviation Group, an organization from Lincolnshire, England, came to Rockford to talk about creating a museum here that would be a sister site to a museum at the Godhill Airfield in England. Discussions ended after local airport officials determined they had no space for the museum, said Steve Johnson, airport deputy executive director.

To learn more

Midway Village & Museum Center, 6799 Guilford Road, has displays about Rockford's aviation history in its Aviation Gallery. Museum hours: noon to 4 p.m., Fridays through Sundays. Summer hours begin Memorial Day Weekend, May 24-25. During the summer, the museum is open every day. Hours are: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Mondays through Fridays; noon to 5 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays.

Meeting Churchill

Another former Rockfordian whose aviation exploits gave him the opportunity to hobnob with famous people was Gen. Larry Kuter, a 1923 Rockford High School graduate. One of the four principal authors of the basic air war plan for World War II, Kuter later served as chief of staff for Gen. Henry H. Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces during the war.

When Arnold became seriously ill, Kuter was tapped to represent him at the Yalta Conference. Photos from the conference show Kuter in meetings with British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. Dr. Donald Lyddon, whose late sister, Ethel, was married to Kuter, said his famous brother-in-law was fascinated by Churchill, whom, he reported, drank a tumbler full of brandy at breakfast each morning.

Kuter also recalled being amazed when Churchill approached him at a Yalta cocktail party and said, "Hi, Larry," Lyddon said. "Larry almost fell backwards, a man like Churchill calling him by his first name. They talked, and then Churchill said: 'Larry, that general over there, what's his name?'"

After Kuter answered his question, Churchill moved on, circulating some more before approaching the general Kuter had identified. Kuter watched as Churchill greeted the general, calling him by his first name. "Churchill was a real politician," Lyddon said. "He made the round, calling them by their first names when he met them."

Coming full circle

If Rockford's love affair with aviation spectacles began with the Brooks balloon ascension, it might be said that a full circle was made in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Rockford and the world watched as Rockford native Ben Abruzzo became the first man to captain free-balloon flights across both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Before his death in a 1985 airplane crash, Abruzzo had announced another goal — an around the world, non-stop balloon flight.

Now, Rockford's link with air history has been stretched even further with Rockford native Janice Voss' third trip into space. Voss, 39, was aboard the shuttle Columbia, which last month was forced to return to earth earlier than expected because of technical difficulties. But, not before a Rockford television audience watched as Voss spoke, via a satellite hook-up, to WTVO-TV news anchors Steve Stadelman and Jennifer Block.

From a 19th century balloon ascension to pre-millennium space travel, you've come a long way, Rockford.

■ Meet the inductees, 4B

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