

He'd rather be flying!

At age 79, he's still flying. He was the first in Hope to have an airplane, as far as anyone knows, he started the earliest and has stayed with it the longest of anyone in the region.

He knows the hazards and joys of flying, and even after 60 years of piloting, George Kirk still gets a thrill from soaring through the Wild Blue Yonder.

George Kirk was born September 17, 1914 in Cerro Gordo, Arkansas. Both of his parents died by

the time he was four years old.

Raised by a guardian, George worked all his life. When he was age 7, he saw his first airplane. In those days there was not as much noise as now, even in the country. "You could hear an airplane a long ways off. I'd watch them until it was just a speck going out of sight," George recalls.

His younger days were filled with farm work, milking, hoeing and plowing. He rode horses and

cow-boyed as a child. "I didn't have a bicycle until I was 15," George said.

He took his first ride in a small airplane around 1930. George was then in his mid-teens.

The experience created a strong urge to learn more about planes. It was an exciting new frontier.

As a young bachelor, George set out to accomplish his goals, but he needed money. He took jobs anywhere he could make enough money to pay for flying lessons. He worked at a cotton gin, drove a truck and even "honked tables" at a honky tonk. George worked long days at a service station in Horatio for \$10 a week plus room and board. Flying lessons were \$6 per hour for the instructor and the airplane rental. In those days the old planes were made of metal and wood frames tied together with wire braces. The "body" was covered with canvas or "dope fabric."

When he was 20, George moved to Texarkana so he could be closer to the airport. He accepted a job at a service station about three miles from the airport. He earned \$1.50 for a twelve hour work day. "They let me sleep in the hangar for free and I ate at a boarding house in town for 50¢ a day. That meant I could save \$1 a day toward my next lesson."

Finally the big day came. George made his solo flight without an instructor. He still has the postcard he sent his sister, announcing the event, "Sis, (Mrs. W.F. James) I soloed yesterday and boy was it a thrill, I'm telling you. I was up there all by myself and did I make a sweet landing. --Bud"

The card is postmarked "Horatio, Arkansas, April 16, 10 AM 1936.

George soon bought his own airplane. It was a Travelaire 2000 with an OX-5 engine made by Curtis Wright Manufacturing. The OX-5 was a V-8 water cooled engine with about 90 horsepower. The Travelaire 2000 had a top speed of about 95 miles per hour. Compared to modern equipment, it had a simple instrument panel with a compass, a gauge for water temperature, engine RPM and one for oil pressure. George traded a Chevy Coupe worth about \$400 and \$25 cash for his flyin' machine.

George and a friend began to sell airplane rides.

"I started charging 50¢ to \$1 for a short ride during the depression, so people could say they'd been in an airplane."

Sometimes people paid him up to \$10 for a ride. The main attraction was the stunt work he performed in the air. Most of the stunts were improvised and self-taught.

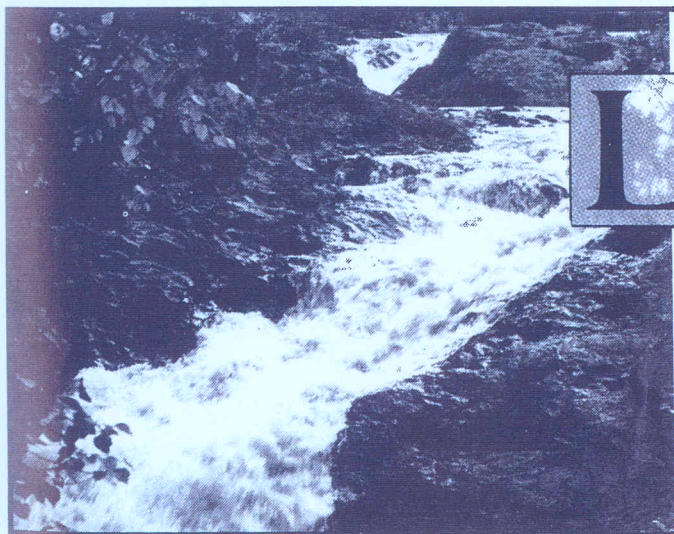
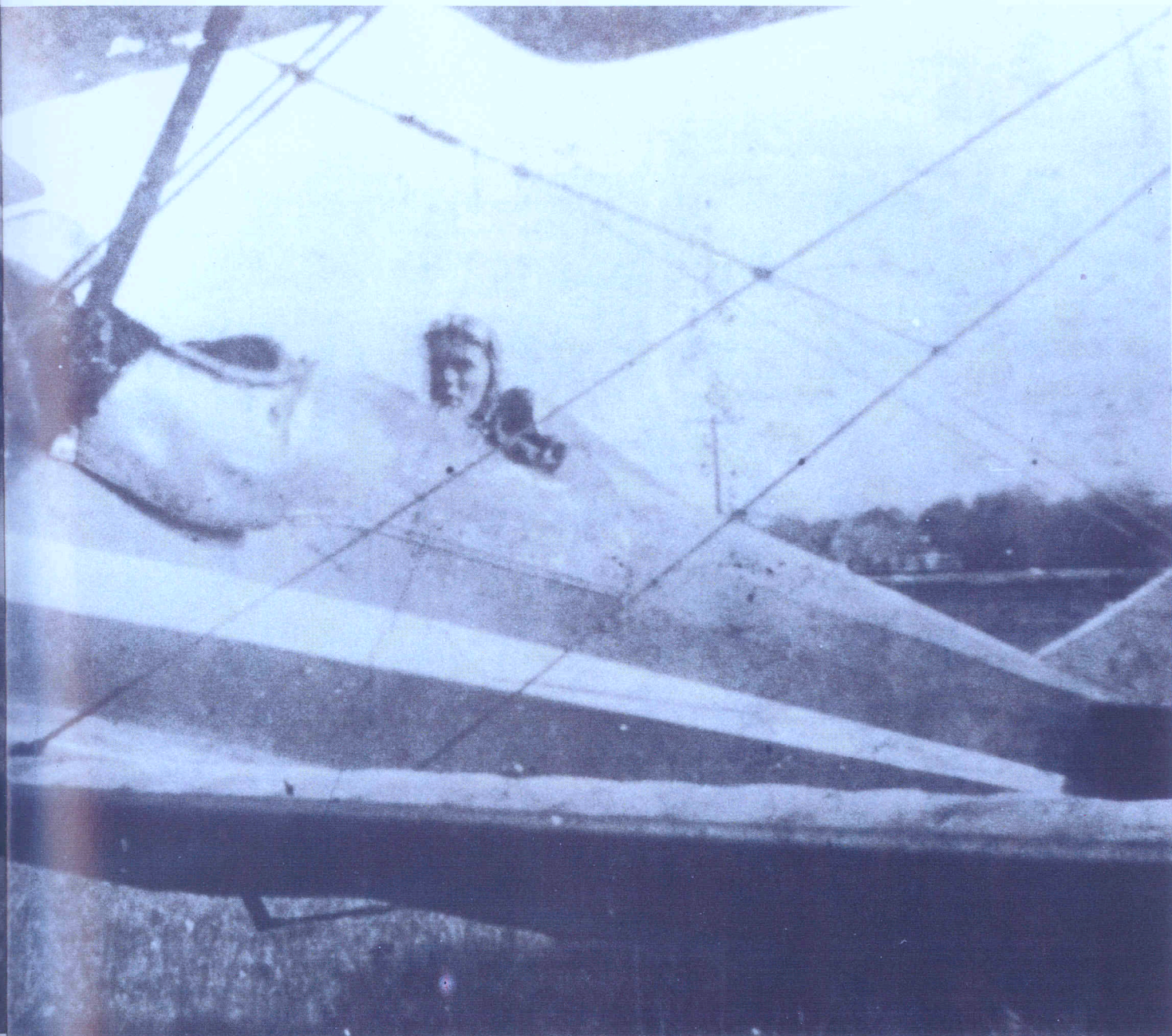
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George Kirk in 1937 with his Travelaire 2000. It was powered by an OX-5 engine developed during WWI.

George remembers giving thrill rides to the public for 50 cents a head.

"If I could make a passenger holler real loud as we came in for a landing, it would stimulate interest on the ground for more business."



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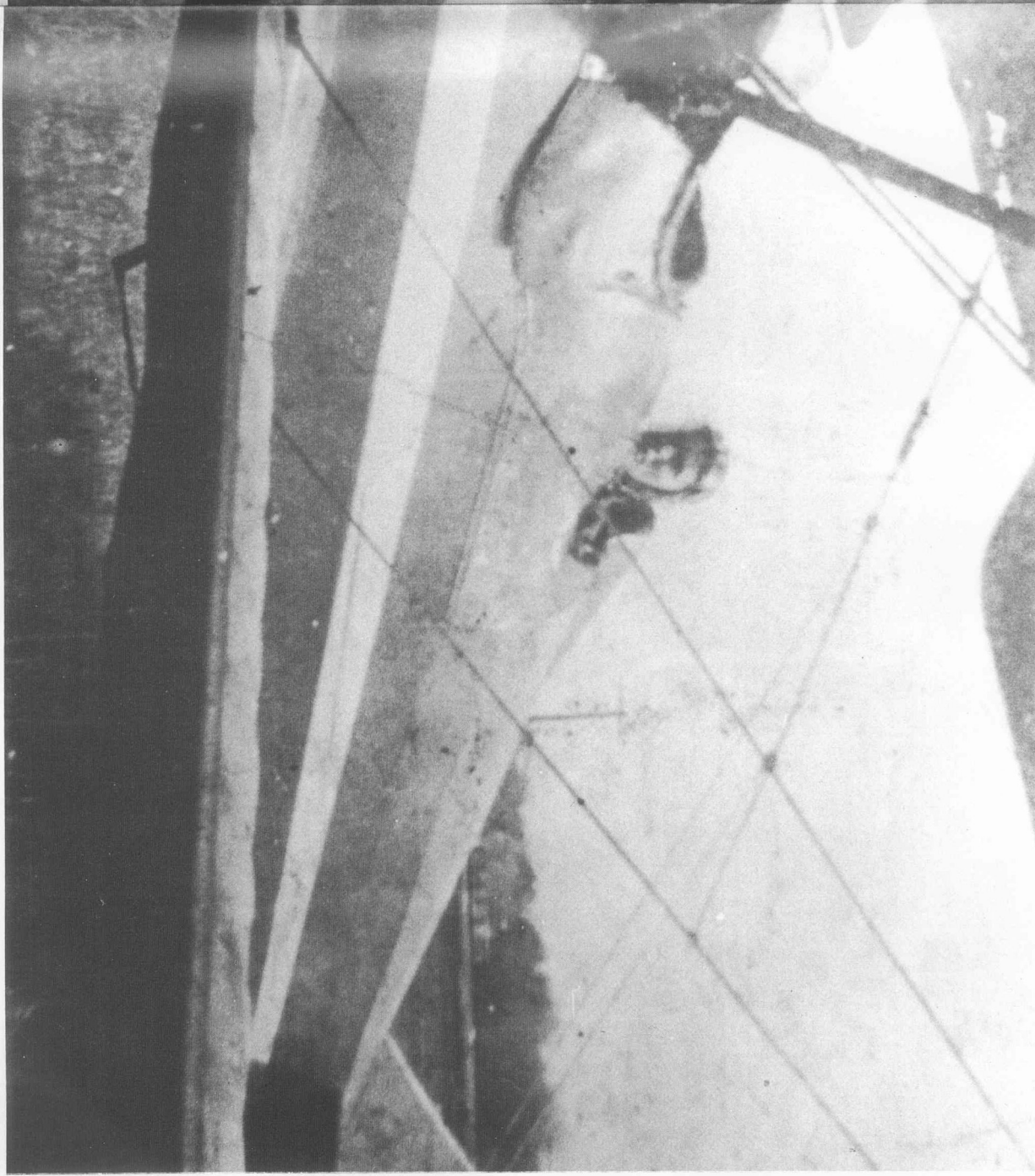
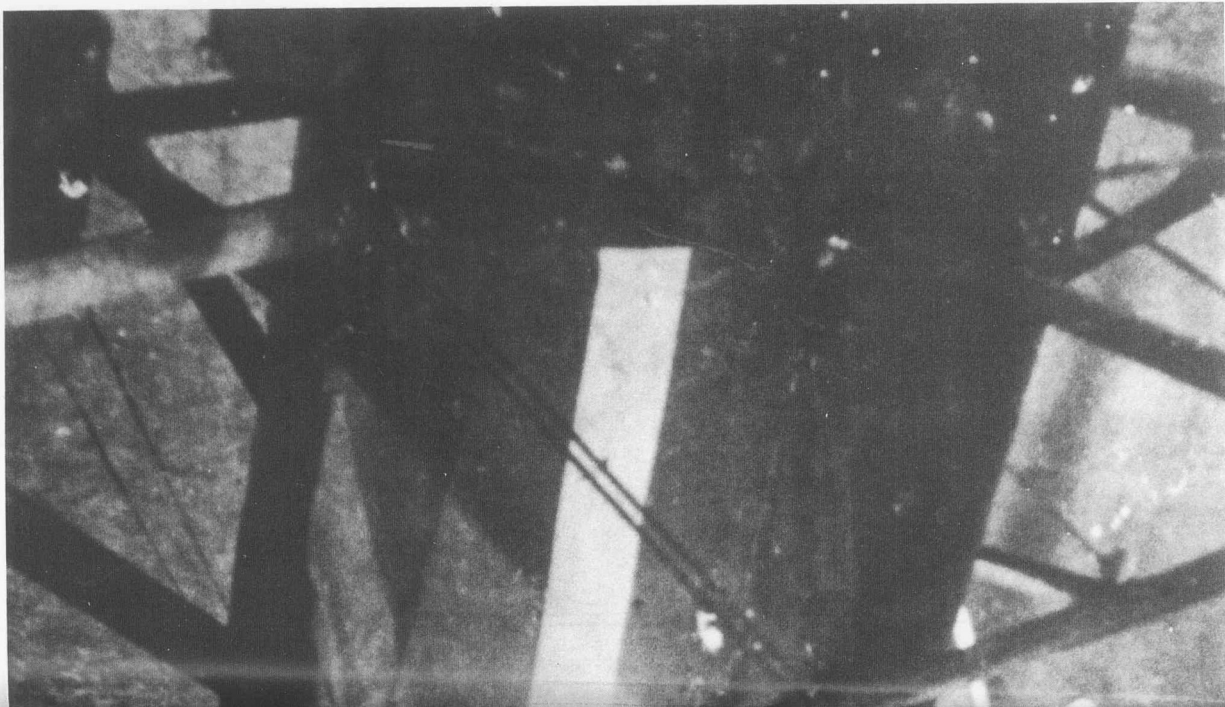
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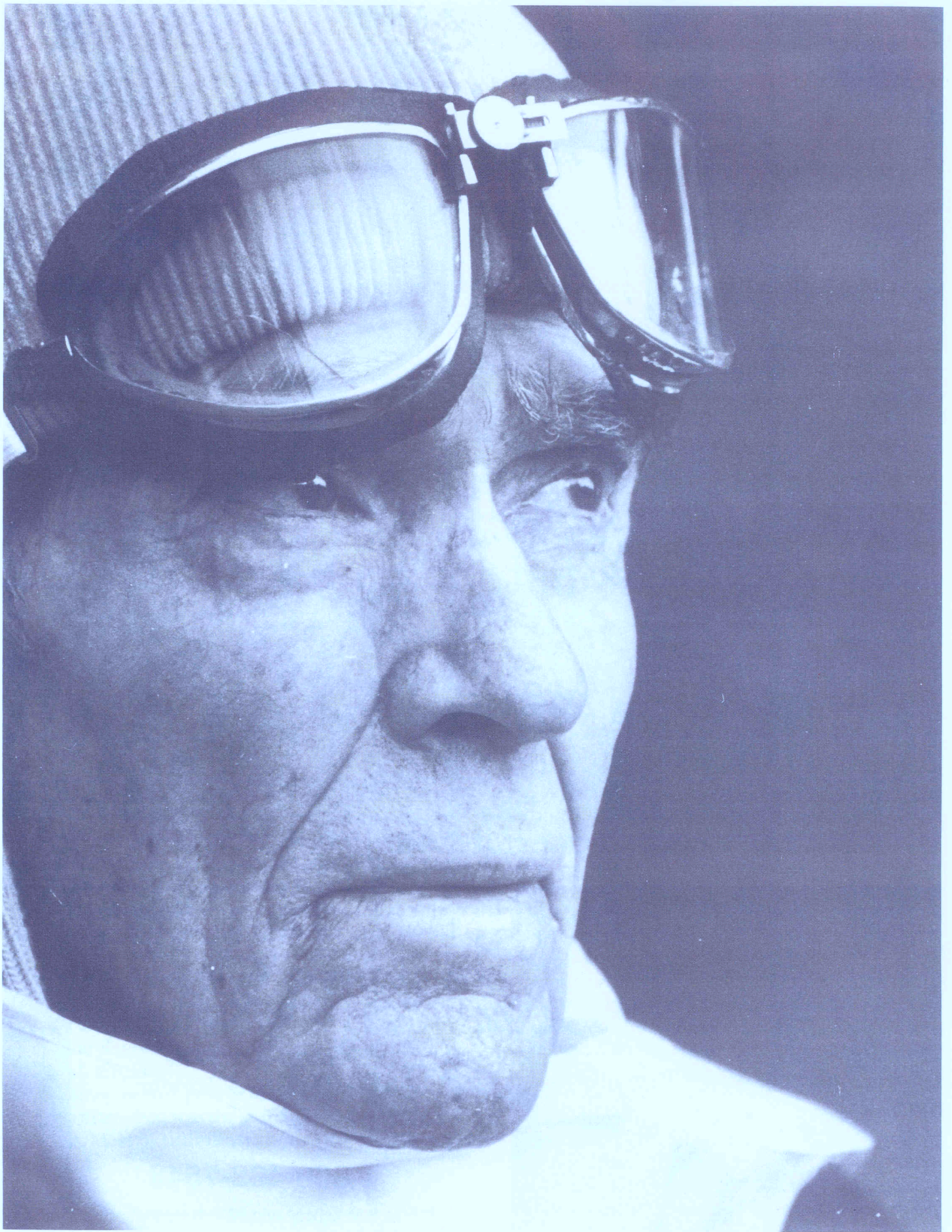
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"We did what we called hammerheads, split S's, loops and spins. We were flying negative G's. The negative G effect is used today to acclimate astronauts to space-- to get them used to weightlessness," he explained.

Once, at the end of a day of flying, George had already unbuckled his seat belt when conversation suggested they take one more spin in the clouds. The pair took off and they climbed to about 800 feet when his friend decided to do a stunt maneuver known as a "hammerhead." It was too late to buckle up. George had to lock his feet under the seat to keep from falling out head first.

"My wife used to fly with me, but now she's interested in art," Kirk said. Still, Mrs. Kirk has some fond memories of her flying years. "He would fly over my house, cut the motor and yell, 'I'll see you at seven,'" Mrs. Kirk reminisced. "He worked at the cotton compress to get a gallon of gas to fly to Texarkana," she said. Many of the Kirks' dates were spent star-gazing right in the midst of the stars.

George is a long-time member of the Hope Flying Club and also a member of the OX-5 club. To be a member of this club, one has to have flown an airplane with an OX-5 engine before Dec. 31, 1940.

George remembers flying from place to place, selling airplane rides, performing "derring-do" stunts, trying to keep gasoline in his tank and food in his stomach.

"Once, Sam Gladney and I was invited to put on a show for the locals and pick up a few dollars carrying passengers. After numerous speeches, a big barbecue, and a baseball game, we opened for business. After a few stunts to prove that the planes would go up and come down in one piece, the customers began to line up for rides. Would you believe 50 cents and \$1 per head? We were only on the ground long enough to load and unload passengers, take on fuel, and maybe drink a soda. Every pocket I had, was full of money. It was like taking candy from a baby. After a couple of hours, I was thinking of opening my own bank!

I had brakes on my plane, but Sam did not. I would come in, park behind Sam, unload and load. While I was doing this, Sam would have a couple of the boys hold his wing to turn him around behind me, since I

FACING PAGE: George casts a far away gaze skyward as he recalls the first time he put on these flying goggles. They were a gift from his sister to reward his first solo flight in 1937.

Collectors have made numerous offers to buy them, but they are not for sale.

would be gone before he unloaded and loaded.

This went on and on until one time I started to go and looked behind me and Sam was not there. "He's still in the air," I thought. As I poured the coal to the OX-5 and my nose came down, there sat Sam, a sitting duck! I chopped throttle, hit the brakes and proceeded to (chew the tail) of Sam's bird with my prop! There went the profits for the day-- and then some. The next day I had to come back down to earth and continue to do business with Mr. (Lloyd) Spencer's bank in Hope."

The day the ground moved

"In all my life until this day, the ground was supposed to be under me. I had tried to keep it under me as I learned to walk as a toddler- learned to ride a bicycle as a youth- ride horseback and drive an automobile as I grew older. I knew it had to be under me - it always had been there. But this was ridiculous! The sky was underneath and I could reach over my head and feel the grass and dirt.

In the Spring of 1937 I thought that I would fly up to Little River County where I had spent most of my youth and show my relatives and friends what I could do with my lately acquired OX-5.

Flying first to Texarkana and then to Ashdown and on past Foreman, I flew over Winthrop. It was a Saturday afternoon. Most all the people from the surrounding area were in town. There were more wagons and teams on the street than automobiles in those days.

OK, George, do your stuff, I said to myself as I roared down the main part of town to get the populace's attention. Those that were inside the stores and houses came piling out to see if they were having a tornado on a beautiful sunny day. I blew all the birds out of the trees and dusted off the roofs of the buildings. I knife-edged down main street about tree-top height. The people went running back into the buildings about as fast as they had come out. The mules and horses began rearing up and breaking loose and heading in every direction."

George had intended to draw a crowd to the meadow just off the main part of town. And draw a crowd he did! There was nothing unusual about landing in a field except this time he didn't see the ditch that had grown up with tall grass. As people raced toward the field, the young daredevil spotted the ditch too late. "I had touched down but was going to fast to stop before I hit it and too slow to re-power the engine and fly over. It was like one of those slow motion movies where you see it coming but can't do anything about it. I hit the ditch and the tail just came right up over the top and suddenly the ground

was above me." His pride was dented pretty bad and so was his plane, otherwise George was unhurt. As the crowd drew closer George began to wonder if they would help him turn the plane upright or just want to burn it down. Fortunately, the folks at Winthrop helped their ACE get his feet on the ground and after eight days of repair, he carefully flew away.

A combination of savvy, common sense and likely a few prayers kept many young pilots like George, out of the obituary column. There were many that weren't so fortunate.

Following a flame

"In the days before farms had night lights and before lighted runways and radio navigation aids, nightfall was no time to be flying cross-country. The Caddo River and Little Missouri River are not the best airways, especially at night in the '30s.

One day Lawrence Bell picked me up at Hope and we flew to Hot Springs to bring the OX-5 Travelaire to Texarkana. I was to fly his airplane back. I knew we could not get home before dark but Lawrence said not to worry, just follow him.

It gets dark later when you're (in the sky) and the ground gets blotted out first. Seeing the sun go down from an (elevated view) gives a false sense of security until you realize you no longer can recognize familiar landmarks.

Lawrence took off first and I followed as soon as he was clear of the runway. He wasn't too hard to find with the sun shining on his wings. I kept a little behind him so he would be skylighted. As the sun began to go down, I moved in closer like a chick trying to get under its mother's wing for protection.

The silver wings of the Travelaire began to fade into the night. I thought I would not be able to keep him in sight when the exhaust flames began to appear. As the night grew darker the flames became brighter. Taking my eyes off the flames for a moment to see where we were, I recognized nothing. Lawrence had disappeared!

I knew he couldn't be far away. Not wanting to risk flying into him, I began to pull to my right. Moving up and down, finally I saw his exhaust. I flew in close and stuck like a tick until we saw the beacon at Texarkana.

That was an example of the Lord protecting the innocence-- NO, protecting the *stupid or know-it-all*. When we neared the airport I pulled away so Lawrence could land first."

WWII

During the war, George moved to California where he worked for Douglas Aircraft for a while. He also spent some time in Hope working for *The Hope Star*

as a pressman. While he was "out west" George and his family operated a printing company.

He later retired to Hope where he still lives.

Just for fun

George still flies every chance he gets, but no longer owns an airplane. His years of flying have always been for enjoyment and not for transportation. He says that most of the disastrous reports of small plane crashes are due to weather conditions. Small craft do not handle the stress of bad weather as well as larger birds. George says pilots that depend on private flight for transportation are often frustrated by weather conditions. Sometimes caution is compromised when time is a factor and people get caught. "I've always played it safe, because I knew I could always go flying another day."

As a lifelong pilot, George is proud of his nephew



who became an Air Force Commander and a two star General. Wm. Kirk James was just two years old when he took his first plane ride in 1937 with "Uncle George."

The little commander squalled with terror on his first flight and Uncle George had to quickly land. A couple of decades later, Wm. Kirk James flew 180 military missions over Vietnam.

In February 1994, George became ill and had to have emergency surgery. He suffered a collapsed lung as a complication of his illness and at press time is recovering with the aid of therapy. His hospitalization and surgery is not expected to reduce his ability to fly again after he regains his strength.

His wife told TLG, "He told the doctors not to give him anything that would keep him from flying."

Resources:

GEORGE KIRK personal interview by Michael Cate, Jan. 10, 1994 and Mar. 7, 1994.

HOPE STAR; Tuesday, October 15, 1985.

HOPE TRACKS: Vol. I, No. 4; Vol. I, No. 5; Vol. I, No. 6; Vol. II, No. 3; Vol. III, No. 1.

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These days, George Kirk flies from Hope Airport. The photo below, shows the Historic Airport Hangar at Hope, Arkansas. It was built by the government as part of SW Munitions Proving Grounds during WWII.

