

The History of Air Transportation in Florida

by THOMAS P. CALDWELL

Mr. Caldwell was a resident of Tampa when the first commercial air line in the country was established between that city and St. Petersburg and remembers vividly the Benoist Flying Boat which Tony Janus used to open the line in 1914. He became associated with Pitcairn Aviation when that company pioneered the air mail service to Florida in 1928 and has been with the successor companies since that time. He is at present the Regional Traffic Manager of Eastern Air Lines in Miami.

LATE in the afternoon of December 31, 1913, a freight car was shunted onto a spur running down to the commercial dock in St. Petersburg, Florida. Literally, that car was a great cocoon, enshrouding a giant moth that was to write a new page in the history of air transportation. The freight car contained a Benoist flying boat shipped from St. Louis. On hand to receive it were Tom Benoist, the creator of the machine; a mechanic known as Smitty; Tony Janus, who was to be the pilot of the boat; and several hundred extremely curious spectators. The patient curiosity of the crowd was almost immediately rewarded with a demonstration. The boat had been shipped in an almost ready-to-fly condition, and within an hour after it was unloaded the intrepid Janus had it in the water and off for a test flight. How urgently necessary the test flight was only Janus knew, for at ten a.m. on the following day, he and his associates of the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line (not incorporated) were under contract to begin the operation of the world's first commercial air transportation line.

The underwriters of the enterprise knew that they were beginning something. St. Petersburg evidently shared the opinion, for its citizens turned out in thousands to bid at auction for the privilege of becoming the first passenger on the first trip scheduled to fly from that city to Tampa. Mayor A. C. Phiel won with a bid of \$700. His wardrobe of raincoat, cap and goggles were evidence of the fact that he had come determined to ride. Well before the appointed time, Mr. Phiel was seated with pilot Janus on what some of the spectators aptly called the

front perch of the plane. With a beam of pride in his ability to get started promptly and successfully, Tony Janus took off on the dot. The awe which possessed the good citizens of St. Petersburg as they watched their Mayor leave his waterfront in this contraption was principally due to the fact that indeed it flew. Had this thought been less dominant, they might have grasped the tremendous significance of the fact that they witnessed the first *practical* application of the art of flying which civilization had yet known. A definite proof was being established that the Wright brothers' great discovery of 1903 could be put to constructive work in the transportation of man and his goods.

Mr. P. E. Fansler, organizer of the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line, stood on the dock experiencing mingled pride and apprehension from 10 until 10:26 a.m. He could hardly wait to hear the report of arrival in Tampa of his first and most important schedule. '(She's coming up the river,' a voice on the other end said, "and there's a big crowd here yellin' its head off." The release of this information was enough to keep all St. Petersburg standing eyes to the sun waiting for the return. Janus was due back at 11:30, and sure enough, Smitty, whose keen ear was trained to pick up the hum of an engine, pointed to something at 11:20. His gesture was the signal for the erection of a thousand fingers. Janus was almost 500 feet up when he soared over the city in triumph. He made a graceful landing on the still waters of the bay, taxied in to the dock, delivered a highly satisfied customer in Mayor Phiel, and became the father of a very important piece of Florida History.

The world's first scheduled air line operated successfully for several months, landing at a special dock on the Tampa Electric Company property at the foot of Lee street in Tampa. It is recorded that on January 6, 1914, Mayor D. B. McKay received a communication from the Aero Club of America hailing the progressive spirit of his city in its cooperative efforts towards sponsoring the air line. The plane, with Janus always as pilot, flew two round trips a day and, surprisingly enough, never lacked passengers, each of whom paid \$5.00 for the trip.

This cradle of commercial aviation was not to be permanent, however. Equipment difficulties, limited mechanical and physical resources exhausted before the business of the line did. Recognizing limitations, Tom Benoist had in the process of development a twelve passenger flying boat. The irony of the unhappy fate these plans were to meet! Tom Benoist leaned out of a street car window in Sandusky, Ohio, to wave to a friend and was killed by a telephone pole. Tony Janus joined the Russian army as an instructor and died in the war. A memorial to him is taking

form now on Davis Island where the magnificent Tampa Airport administration building will be his monument. A model of his historic ship built to quarter scale will be a permanent fixture in the lobby.

But even after a dormant decade, Florida was yet to maintain its position of leadership in commercial aviation. In 1925 a group of men, whose past and future accomplishments in the business of air transportation were to qualify them, banded together in the formation of the Florida Airways Corporation. Principals in this company were Captain E. V. Rickenbacker, Major Reed Chambers, Mr. V. E. Chenea and Mr. J. H. Johnson and Mr. R. T. Freng. These men must be credited with the vision of our present great system of air routes linking the Americas through Florida, for theirs was the original conception of a plan to fly passengers and cargo north and south via this gateway of the western hemisphere. So firm were they in their convictions that they interested Percy A. Rockefeller, Anne Morgan, Charles A. Sterne, Richard F. Hoyt and other strong financial leaders of the country in their enterprise. The company was successful bidder on United States contract air mail route No. 10, and on April 6, 1926, started the operation of a round trip daily flight between Miami and Atlanta via Ft. Myers, Tampa and Jacksonville. That the company lost \$80,000 between the opening day and December 31 of the same year was fundamental evidence to the stockholders, at least, of the fact that available equipment and public appreciation did not harmonize to make their form of transportation profitable. The company suspended operation by authority of the Post Office until Pitcairn Aviation could begin the Atlanta to New York line, giving them a northern connection. Meanwhile, an unfortunate accident brought the concern lawsuits to drain remaining resources and receivership was imminent because no insurance could be had in those days to cover such liabilities. It is a significant fact that Major Chambers, realizing the futility of attempting any airline operation without insurance, set out to provide insurance for airlines and is today head of the United States Aviation Underwriters, furnishing insurance to his former Florida Airways associates: Captain Rickenbacker, now President of Eastern Air Lines; Messrs. Chenea and Johnson, now General Traffic Manager and Comptroller respectively of Pan American Airways; and Mr. Freng, now Superintendent of Flight for United Air Lines.

The dissolution of Florida Airways Corporation did not cut off either the vision or the ambition of the men who nurtured the original great idea of inter-continent flying. They formed the Atlantic Gulf and Caribbean Airways and proposed to bid on mail contracts which in 1927 were put

up for operation between Key West and Havana, and between Atlanta and Miami. How closely this group was involved in the formation of our present domestic and foreign air routes may be seen in the coordination of plans leading up to the establishment of Pan American Airways. The Atlantic Gulf and Caribbean Airways was to take half of the stock in Pan American Airways. That company was to operate the Havana line, first link in the great system connecting the Americas. Atlantic Gulf and Caribbean was to bid in the Atlanta route, and together with The Aviation Corporation of The Americas, a company headed by Juan Tripp and associates, they were to form the nucleus of the new vast network. Possibly stimulated by the tremendous wave of enthusiasm which swept the country after Lindbergh flew the ocean, Atlantic Gulf and Caribbean bid too high on the Atlanta mail contract. All interests of that company then went into Pan American Airways system, leaving behind them in Florida a brief, inglorious record perhaps, but the spark of a wonderful idea, generated into action, today a reality of immeasurable benefit to inter-American commerce.

Through the coordinated schedules of domestic and foreign air lines, Florida attained the number one position in aviation in 1935. Miami became the largest airport of entry in the world, busily engaged in handling international air commerce. Florida soon boasted of the greatest number of cities directly served by air transportation of any state in the union, and was second only to Texas in the number of miles of daily scheduled air lines in operation. That the state is remote from our larger centers of population became a factor in favor of aviation development and the modern transport services of Eastern Air Lines with connecting carriers made Florida accessible to 85% of the nation's population in eight hours or less flying time.