

## **EARLE OVINGTON – Engineer, Aviator, Inventor**

*by Glenna Metchette*

In the summer of 1911, Ovington was among thirty-seven pilots preparing for the first tournament of the fall season, the International Aviation Meet hosted by the Aero Club of New York from September 23<sup>rd</sup> to October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1911 at Nassau Field in Garden City Estates, New York. There was already an Aero Club in England and, as both men and women became pilots, there was fierce competition to be the “first” in aviation events.

September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1911 dawned gray and cold. Despite the chilly air and metallic skies, 10,000 spectators thronged to Long Island’s Garden City Estates for the big international aviation meet. Many ladies toted stylish Japanese parasols and some donned blue and green aviators’ goggles. One reporter wrote, “The field looks like a circus lot with its tents and waving banners, and the green slat seats on the bleachers only adds to the illusion.” Spectators had access to a walkway fenced off from the main field and lined with wooden hangers for each pilot whose last name was painted over each hanger door. There were cook tents and dining pavilions filled with people who kept one eye on the clouds and the other on their food. A snappy looking band in red coats and caps played lively tunes.

It had taken less than a week to build a long wooden fence around the field. The Aero Club hired 100 local women to whitewash it. No one had ever seen women do this kind of work before, so they attracted a large contingent of curious bystanders. As surprising as this was, the sight of three female pilots flying at the Meet must have seemed miraculous. The fact that the women could fly as well as any man, and better than some, was a shocking revelation to the men in the audience. Matilda Moisant and Harriet Quimby each claimed a victory. Moisant won a trophy but no money for climbing to 1,200’ for the highest altitude reached by a woman. Quimby pocketed \$600 as the winner and only woman to finish the 30-mile-cross-country race, while Helene Dutrieu of France took home \$500 and the women’s American record for endurance flying, by staying aloft for one hour, four minutes, and 57 seconds.

U.S. Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock had long considered aeroplanes prime vehicles for transporting mail. When he learned of the forthcoming trials at Garden City, he, with the help of Timothy Woodruff, President of the Garden City Estates and the Aero Club, convinced organizers to include an experimental mail trial. However, the electrifying topic at the Meet by representatives of the armed forces was neither passenger flight nor sport, but war. The thought that an airplane could fly undetected across borders and attack cities from the skies was terrifying. The US feared being left behind in what amounted to an early arms race.

The air mail delivery flight became the most popular feature of the exhibition. The spectators did not know that they were about to witness history. Hitchcock established a special airfield post office – a white tent labeled “U.S. Mail Aeroplane Station No. 1” – and set up 20 mail boxes for the crowds of enthusiastic spectators who flocked to buy postcards and

envelopes to be carried on the flight. Many aviators had already carried letters and packages before, but this was the first regularly scheduled mail flight over a “specified” route by a carrier who was sworn into service by the U.S. Postmaster General. This was Earle Ovington who was listed on the program as #14. He wore knee-high leather boots, knickers and a French crash helmet that resembled an English riding hat. To a modern eye his craft looked like a large winged tricycle, but aviation enthusiasts recognized it as a Queen d Bleriot monoplane. Ovington had learned his skills at Bleriot’s Aviation School in Pau, France.

Ovington had come prepared to enter the competitions; he brought two similar planes with him in case one failed. When the scheduled mail-carrying pilot’s plane failed and two other pilots declined to fly because there was no remuneration, Ovington stepped in and volunteered. He was duly sworn in as “the first US Aeroplane Mail Carrier” then handed a fifty pound mail bag full of 640 letters and 1,280 postcards. His plane was a single seater with no cargo space, so he carried the bag on his knees for the ten-mile flight to Mineola on Long Island, NY. Unable to land with the bag, he dropped it at a pre-arranged spot to a flag-bearing postmaster who, in the words of Ovington’s wife, Adelaide, “saw the bag coming down and ran for his life.” The bag broke on impact, scattering the mail hither and yon. After a scramble, all the mail was retrieved and sent on its way via regular postal channels, all of it bearing the cancellation “Aeroplane Station No. 1 – Garden City Estates, N.Y.” Altogether, Ovington flew 43,000 pieces of mail between Garden City and Mineola.

Minutes after Ovington took off, a coincidental tragedy caused much confusion when a strikingly similar plane appeared in the sky, trying to make bold moves. When the mystery plane tried to climb and bank at the same time, the plane tipped over and wound up in a deadly nosedive, striking the ground near the grandstand. For several agonizing minutes, everyone thought it was Ovington. The tragic victim was Dr. Charles Clarke, an amateur flyer with no pilot’s license who had repeatedly begged to fly one of Ovington’s two airplanes. Ovington had painted his lucky number 13 on both of his planes, so they were easily recognized. There was mayhem as mounted police and guards tried to hold back crowds scrambling towards the wreck. When Ovington returned to the Meet, he was greeted with sighs of relief and pats on the back, which befuddled him until the accident was explained to him. Ovington repeated his airmail delivery feat and drop for several days while the fair went on. Ovington probably didn’t feel the financial loss of the one plane as, a few weeks prior to the Aero Club Meet, he had won \$10,000 offered by the *Boston Globe*. He finished first in the race from Squantum, MA to Nashua, NH, to Worcester, MA to Providence, RI and back to Squantum. Earle described the entire trip in an unpublished article titled *Winning \$10,000 in Three Hours and 6 Minutes.*”

Known mainly as America’s first Air Mail Pilot, there is much more to the life of Earle Ovington. Born in Chicago Dec. 20, 1879, he began his career as an assistant in the x-ray laboratory of Thomas Edison, later transferring to the experimental lab of the Edison Electric Illuminating Co. where he contributed to early x-ray technology. He graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1904. After meeting Nikola Tesla, Edison’s great rival, he joined him and in 1910 built one of a pair of Tesla coils. Ovington displayed them at an electrical trade show at Madison Square Gardens, using them for demonstrations of high

voltage science. The one surviving coil built by Ovington is now on display at Griffith Park Observatory in Los Angeles and it and the million volt oscillator is used daily to thrill visitors.

At the same time Ovington was dabbling in aeronautics, he ventured into the promotion of *kiselo mliako*, literally sour-milk (yogurt) which was based upon the belief that Bulgarians gained health and a ripe old age because they imbibed quantities of it. Elie Metchnikoff of the Pasteur Institute had inadvertently launched a yogurt rush when he claimed in a public lecture, "Old Age," on June 8, 1904 that aging was caused by harmful bacteria in the intestines. He argued that beneficial bacteria had to be cultivated in the intestine, and this was best done by eating yogurt or other types of sour milk. The best candidate was the so-called Bulgarian bacillus, a bacterium found in yogurt from Bulgaria in a region known for the longevity of its inhabitants. His daring theory of immunity – that voracious cells he called phagocytes formed the first line of defense against invading bacteria - would eventually earn him a Nobel Prize as well as the unofficial moniker "Father of Natural Immunity." Today there is a museum of yogurt in Bulgaria which attracts tourists worldwide. There you can sample choices made from cows, goats, sheep, or water buffalo, each with a distinct flavor of a particular region season or animal rather than yogurt with added fruit or flavors. From Ovington's Vitality Laboratory in Santa Barbara, he mailed cultures for souring milk to clients. He eventually sold the business to Dr. Turner who moved the business to Maine.

In 1911, Ovington graduated from the Bleriot School of Aeronautics in France. He headed home aboard the transatlantic ocean liner *Minnetonka* with a pilot's license in his pocket and a brand-new Bleriot monoplane in the ship's hold. When Adelaide took her assigned seat at the captain's table, one of her tablemates was the newly minted aviator, Earle Lewis Ovington. "My first impression was of a big man - all eyebrows," she wrote in her book *An Aviator's Wife*. Adelaide and Earle kept company throughout the voyage, but he had no intention of continuing the relationship on dry land. "I wanted to be an aviator, and I hadn't any time to waste on girls," he recalled. "Furthermore, a man entering upon the career of an exhibition flyer in the early days of the airplane's development had no right to ask any girl to share his life. But – well, the inevitable happened, and we were married at the Little Church Around the Corner in New York just 25 days from the day we sailed from France as strangers." When Adelaide had her first child, son Earle Kester Ovington, in 1912 and daughter Audrey in 1913, Earle Senior gave up the flying circuit and switched from the flying circuit to the lecture circuit.

Also in 1911, Ovington wrote an article entitled "The Aviation Motor" which was published in *Scientific American* in August 1911. In it he says, "the writer has made a deep study of the internal combustion motor design and is firmly of the opinion that the rotary engine is the aviation motor of the future, not to say the present." Ovington had long been interested in Indian motorcycles, and it was a modified rotary engine from an Indian motorcycle which drove his monoplane. As a consequence, motorcycle companies took to the skies and changed the course of history. Ovington goes on to explain that the main disadvantage of the rotary engine was that castor oil was the only lubricant which had been found to be satisfactory. Because of the nature of the oil, large quantities had to be used. Castor oil is derived from the castor bean

and is highly toxic in small quantities. Its boiling point is 595 degrees Fahrenheit, making it an excellent lubricant for hot engines. During WW1, castor oil was used universally in rotary engine allied aircraft. Pilots wore scarves over their mouths and noses. These were used as goggle cleaners and filters to lessen the ingestion of castor oil fumes as well as anti-chafing devices for the wool collars on their jackets.

During WWI, Ovington served in the US Navy as lieutenant commander. In 1917 he partnered with Glenn Curtiss as head of his seaplane station where he helped oversee the construction of Curtiss seaplanes for the US Navy. Meanwhile Adelaide, who had retired as a talented stage actress, was writing magazine articles based on her life with Earle. In 1921 they switched coasts, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, settling in Santa Barbara. It was on that return trip to California that Earle and his wife and two children drove their eight- cylinder Packard across the country. It was in Los Angeles that he saw the business potential in real estate development.

Ovington was interested in architecture as well as engineering. He designed a "One Room Bungalow" of 18' x 26' which he patented. He built a small row of bungalows. This led to Earle purchasing 80 undeveloped acres near the Samarkand Hotel where he built his home at 3030 Samarkand Drive, which is still there today. Nearby was his 1,500' Casa Loma air strip which he hoped to develop into Santa Barbara's first airport. In 1925 he hosted visiting aviators, including Charles Lindberg and Amelia Earhart, who arrived in their planes. Earle's runway now comprises the 11<sup>th</sup> fairway at the Santa Barbara Golf Club.

Earle remained an active aviator, making regular flights to Santa Cruz Island, one of the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara, to deliver mail. He also designed a two-passenger biplane that a Los Angeles airplane maker offered to manufacture. But the Great Depression put an end to that venture. During his residence in Santa Barbara, he served as a consulting electrical and aeronautical engineer and took an active interest in the development of aviation in this city. As well, he was a commodore of the Santa Barbara Yacht Club and Santa Barbara Aero Club. Earle's health deteriorated, and after a long illness he died in Los Angeles of intestinal cancer on July 21, 1936 at the age of 57. He was cremated, and his ashes were scattered over the ocean. *The New York Times* reported that his wife was with him at the end. Earle Ovington exemplified all that was right with America: true sportsmanship, common sense, perseverance, achievement, entrepreneurship, and personal responsibility – character traits sadly lacking in much of America today. In a multifaceted career that spanned a mere fifty-seven years, he achieved a truly amazing number of accomplishments.

Adelaide Ovington still had 36 years left to live. In 1941 she snapped up the Cold Spring Tavern which began life as a stagecoach stop on the San Marcos Pass over the Santa Ynez Mountains. Adelaide and her daughter Audrey began transforming this weather-beaten old roadhouse into the beloved institution it is today. It has become an Ovington family heirloom passed on from generation- to-generation.

Stamp collectors and philatelists are probably wondering why there has never been a U.S. postage stamp issued to commemorate Earle Ovington's historic flight. In a letter written in 1991 by Earle's daughter Audrey, she outlines the history of requests for a stamp. It started with Hal Forrest, an aviation cartoonist. He and his friends collected 5,000 signatures and submitted them to the postal authorities. Nothing happened. Then Jack Prentice, a jewel designer in Palos Verdes, designed a stamp to commemorate Ovington's flight. Friends, plus aviator and television anchor-man Clete Roberts, put more pressure on. At that time, they were allowed to approve only two commemorative stamps per year. They chose first, "The Boy Scouts of America" who were 75 years old, and second, Earle Ovington. Congress approved it in 1961. Before the stamp was printed on Sept. 18, 1961, Dag Hammarskjold, Secretary-General of the United Nations was killed in an airplane accident. Adelaide, Earle's widow, was asked to relinquish the stamp issued for her late husband so it could be given to honor Hammarskjold. She agreed, with the stipulation that Ovington would get the next commemorative stamp. That was in 1961. This is now 2020. Nothing was ever heard of it again, even though both of Earle's children pressured the Post Office. In Audrey's letter she said, "I as Earle Ovington's only daughter feel it is a direct oversight of the United States Post Office not to have issued a stamp before to my father."

And isn't it ironic that the U.S. Post Office issued an airmail stamp for Harriet Quimby - C128 on April 27, 1991. Being the first U.S. female aviatrix to earn a pilot's license, she deserves to be honored, as does Matilde Moisant, the second aviatrix. Why has the U.S. Post Office neglected to fulfill its pledge to Adelaide to honor Earle Ovington in a stamp?

On March 8, 2018, the Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Inc. auctioned off several covers and postcards related to Ovington's historic flight. Most had the special cancellation "Aeroplane Station No. 1, Garden City Estates, N.Y., Sep. 23, 1911." These came from the "James P. Myerson Collection of Pioneer Flight Mail 1910-1916" and sold between \$250 and \$800..



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