FLOYD BENNETT
THE UNTOLD TRUE STORY

by Jean Hadden

As printed in the Fall, 1998 WHS Quarterly

Have you ever driven by the Floyd Bennett Memorial Airport in Queensbury or the Floyd Bennett Memorial Bandstand in Warrensburg and wondered, “Who was Floyd Bennett?” Answer: He was a local hero who grew up in Warrensburgh, enlisted in the Navy on December 15, 1917 in Burlington, Vermont, and placed in the new Naval Aviation Wing. This beloved son of Warrensburgh served his country with honor and distinction – he was a recipient of the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal, and a World War I Victory Medal. He also is credited for making the first flight to the North Pole on May 9, 1926 with United States Navy Commander Richard E. Byrd. Naval Officer Bennett died of pneumonia on April 25, 1928 as a result of attempting to rescue two flyers stranded in Labrador. He was just thirty-seven years old. He was buried among this nation’s other heroes in Arlington National Cemetery. Sandi Parisi, Town Historian and Warrensburgh Historical Board Member recently presented the idea of a day to honor this local hero’s contributions to this community and to his country. The Board agreed and officially adopted May 9 as Floyd Bennett Day at the March 9, 2022 Town Board meeting. While there are no planned events to celebrate this year, we will be planning for events and other ways of celebrating this wonderful piece of our history.

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Countless heroic tales of drama and adventure have been told and retold over the years about our illustrious local hero, Floyd Bennett, who stirred the hearts of the nation before his untimely death seventy years ago. Although he well deserves the honor and praise he has received, he was not at all like the swashbuckling character historians try to make him out to be. Floyd was a scant five feet, eight inches tall with a slight build. In 1953 columnist, Agnes Gilligan wrote about him, "He never talked much and seemed interested in nothing but motors and automobile engines. People who tried to strike up a conversation with him could get him to comment on nothing but the weather. Sometimes he refused to talk about that." The poverty, hardship and neglect he suffered as a child must surely have shaped his lifelong personality.

Floyd was born October 25, 1890, on Truesdale Hill, at the home of his grandparents, John W. and Alzina Marie Baker Patrick. He was the third child of Hannah ' 'Henrietta" Harrington Patrick who married Wallace Bennett, 38, on January 3, 1888. Her oldest child, born in 1876, was Ben T. Patrick who, although he only had one arm, went on to become a well-respected house painter in Warrensburgh. Next came LeRoy Bennett, born December 17, 1888, who grew up and went to school with his younger brother. Floyd and "Roy" along with 34 others were listed in 1899 as being pupils of Miss Frances May Mickey in School District No.1, Caldwell (Lake George). The two younger children were Effie Mae Bennett, born sometime between 1893 and 1895, and Herman (also called Harmom) Bennett, born around 1896. Henrietta and Wallace were well known for their stormy relationship. Legend has it that when they started arguing at their home on Truesdale hill, they could be heard across the valley over on Harrington Hill.

The family was finally forced to split up because of "adverse conditions" and Henrietta, 43, and four children, on February 16, 1901 were admitted to the Warren County Home, known locally at that time as Poor House". County Home records say that Effie Mae should be "placed in an institution as soon as possible". "Wall" Bennett was admitted to the County Home on April 23, 1901 with a bro-

ken leg.

In 1905, LeRoy is listed as a laborer on the farm of James and Jane Colvin on Harrington Hill. That same year Floyd is listed as living on Harrington Hill with his uncle and aunt, (James) Warren and Mary Elizabeth Bennett Stanton. A photograph of this rustic old house has been reproduced on scores of souvenir postcards over the years

When Floyd became a teenager, he grew tired of living upon the side of the mountain and he convinced his uncle and aunt to move to town. They lived for many years in Warrenburgh at 6 Fourth Avenue, in the house where Sheriff Baker and his daughter Mrs. Ashsah Richardson later resided.

In 1907, Floyd left home to work in a lumber camp to earn money for studying at an automobile engineering school. He completed a six-month course in mechanics in just two months and went to work at the People's Garage at Ticonderoga and later Dick Bolton's garage at Hague. He had an auto repair and taxi business at Plattsburgh.

When he was in Ticonderoga, he met Cora Orkins and they were married in Virginia on February 9, 1917. Floyd was her second husband. He enlisted in the Navy on December 15, 1917 in Burlington, Vermont and was placed in the new Naval Aviation Wing.

Herman Bennett was one of the children that went to the County Home in 1901. He was placed up for adoption by the Children's Aid Society of New York and was unofficially adopted by E.D. Foree, Attorney, of Rockwell, Texas. Herman died April 4, 1918 of pneumonia while in training at Fort Sill.

Floyd received aviation training at Bay Shore, Long Island and at Pensacola, Florida. In 1920, he was assigned catapult testing aboard the USS Richmond, the Navy's first aircraft carrier.

Floyd's aunt, Mary Stanton had been ill for a long time with a host of illnesses. She died at her home on Fourth Avenue on February 21, 1921 and the funeral was held at the Warrensburgh Baptist Church. About the same time as the funeral was going on, her brother, Wallace Bennett, 61, dropped dead at Norfolk, Virginia, where he was employed delivering telegrams. He was known as 'the oldest messenger boy in America". Neither brother nor sister knew that the other had died. As soon as Mary was decently buried, her husband, Warren Stanton lost no time in packing his belongings and moving back up to the old homestead on Harrington Hill.

On December 14, 1922, Effie Mae Bennett married Frank Russell of Lake George. In 1932, she was listed as living in Johnsburgh. LeRoy Bennett served overseas with the U.S. Army during World War I. He married Letha Decker and they resided in Hague. Their six children are Jean Bennett, Lucille Macomber, Lura Hunter, Betty Lou Hardy, Joyce Denno, and LeRoy Bennett Jr. He died in 1966.

In 1925, Floyd accompanied Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd to Greenland where he acted as his mechanic and pilot. Byrd was himself a fully qualified aviator, but he had sustained leg injuries playing sports while at the Naval Academy. On May 29, 1926, they flew over the North Pole in a three-motored plane known as the Josephine Ford. Floyd remained at the controls for fifteen and a half hours while Byrd navigated the ship. It was the first time that men had ever actually flown over the top of the world. There is controversy today about whether they actually

Floyd Bennett, right, receives medal from President Coolidge. Richard Byrd is to the left of Coolidge.

made it over the pole or not but we have no reason to believe they didn't. Congress awarded Floyd the Congressional Medal of Honor and on February 25, 1927, it was personally given to him by President Calvin Coolidge. He was also honored by the National Geographic Society.

On July 16, 1926 Floyd returned home to Warrensburgh as a hero. These were his short-lived days of glory. Festive ceremonies were given in his honor which included a banquet at the Adirondack Hotel (Colonial Arms) followed by another one in Lake George. A parade was organized and he was driven through in a convertible, wearing his dazzling white uniform, with his mother at his side. People sat on High Rock, across from the Judd Bridge and cheered as their hero passed on the road below. Poor boy Floyd Bennett had indeed come a long way.

Floyd was advanced to Warrant Machinist in the Navy. He intended to fly Byrd's plane, America, across the Atlantic in 1927. The plane crashed during a trial flight and he received injuries that confined him to a hospital bed for months. He was far from well when he started making plans to accompany Byrd on an expedition to the South Pole.

He held the country spellbound as he rushed from his Detroit hospital bed to the aid of German-Irish fliers that were stranded after they were forced to land on lonely Greenly Island in the North Atlantic near Labrador. He was accompanied by flyer Brent Balchen. Landing on Lake St. Agnes, he was too ill to continue and was sent to a Quebec hospital in another plane.

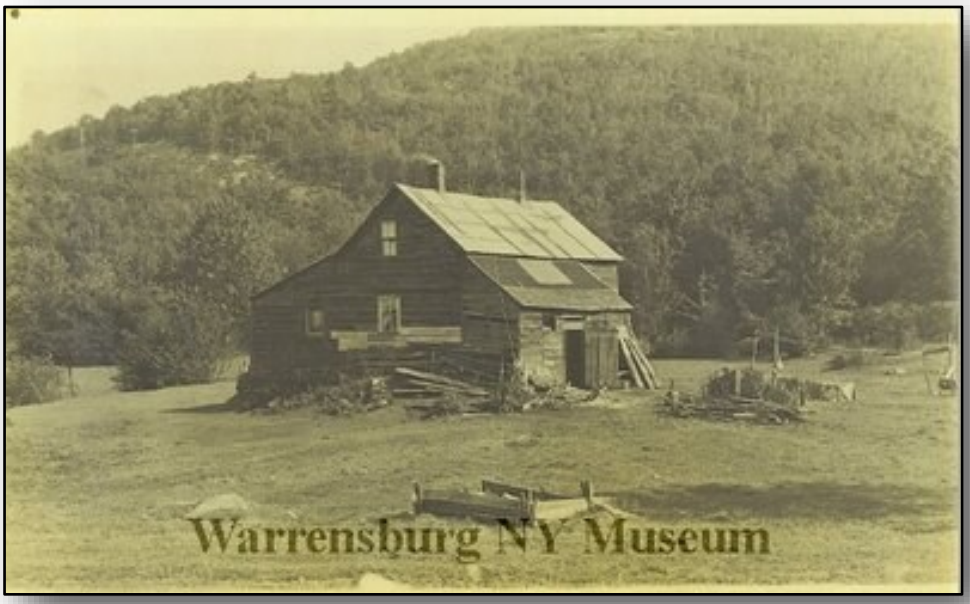
It was discovered that he had double pneumonia and it was felt by doctors that an antibody serum prepared by the Rockefeller Foundation might save him. Col. Charles A. Lindbergh managed to get the serum and flew over Lake George on his way from New York to the Plains of Abraham at Quebec's door, in three hours and forty five minutes. When he arrived with the life-saving medicine it was discovered that Floyd was dying of 'type 3" pneumonia which was a type not covered by the serum brought so far by Lindbergh. Admiral Byrd was at Floyd's bedside when he died on April 25, 1928, and walked behind his coffin as it was drawn on a gun carriage through the streets of Quebec on the way to the station. Floyd was thirty-seven years old.Floyd Bennett, the poor boy from Warrensburgh who had come so far, was buried in Arlington National Cemetery with full honors. The nation wept!

Henrietta Bennett attempted to attend Floyd's funeral in Arlington, Virginia, but was too ill to leave the train with Cora when they reached Washington. When she reached Union Station in Albany, on her way home, she was met by her faithful son, Ben T. Patrick and was provided

Floyd Bennett standing in front of the Adirondack Hotel in Warrensburg, NY

Photo of Floyd Bennett, Charles Pelot. Summerall (Secretary of War), R.E. Byrd and Douglas RobinsonPhoto of Floyd Bennett, Charles Pelot. Summerall (Secretary of War), R.E. Byrd and Douglas Robinson

with an escort of motorcycle police that returned her to her home in the Virgin Hollow section (now Sewell Street) of Lake George. Henrietta continued to live in Lake George until her stomach cancer would allow her to live alone no longer. She moved into Ben's comfortable home at 13 Mountain Avenue in Warrensburgh. On Memorial Day, 1931 she managed to unveil the tablet on the Floyd Bennett memorial flagpole base in the new park in his honor. Paul Gurney designed the bandstand. Henrietta died October 24, 1931. The next day would have been Floyd's 41st birthday. Ben died in 1956 and is buried beside his mother on the new side of the Warrensburgh Cemetery, faithful in death, as he was faithful in life.



Floyd Bennett's boyhood home on Harrington Hill.

The childhood home of Floyd Bennett was believed to have been built before 1835 and a hundred years later, it was owned by Gene Mosher. He exchanged it for a piece of property in Hamilton County with a Mrs. Pasco from Hudson Falls. She hadn't moved in yet when, on March 18, 1935, Caretaker Robert Fuller filled the woodstove and went out to work in the bam. When he came back, he discovered the roof to be on fire. He was unable to save Mrs. Pasco's furniture. By 11:30 a.m., the best-known landmark in Warren County was gone forever.

The three B's of Aviation: (from left to right) (Floyd) Bennett, (Admiral) Bird and Balchen, with Igloo, the dog, which will be taken to the Antarctic on Commander Byrd's Expedition Next year in conference in Boston over their plans for Aerial Exploration at South Pole. Note: Before 1928 when Floyd Bennett died, therefore, he did not go on flight

Flyers were not considered to be good insurance risks so, after Floyd's death, Cora was left nearly destitute. She moved to Brooklyn where she got a job selling, of all things, insurance. She married Arthur Hoffman, a music publisher's agent and wrote a book about Floyd's life. To promote it she took flying lessons. In 1942, she was on hand when the destroyer Bennett was launched in Boston. She died March 1, 1962 and is buried in Nassau Knolls Cemetery, in Port Washington, Long Island. She would be pleased to know, I'm sure, that now, seventy years after Floyd Bennett's death, plans have been made to name an airport in Glens Falls after him. He is truly gone on yet another great adventure, and will not be forgotten.