

First Airplane Lands in Clark County



Many technological advancements occurred in the United States during the early twentieth century bringing about change in many phases of life, including transportation. Certainly the automobile comes to mind, but another new type of travel drew a lot of attention in Clark County when on Saturday, May 25, 1918, an airplane landed for the first time at Arkadelphia.

Arkadelphia's *Southern Standard* newspaper hinted at such an occasion in a May 2 headline which read, "Aeroplane May Come Here." Then, on May 23, the event was confirmed: "Aeroplane Here Next Saturday." The plane planned to travel from Eberts Field near Lonoke in an effort to boost support for the war effort and specifically, the Red Cross. The pilots, who were being trained for military service, would perform stunts that might be used in combat situations.

The big day came, and several thousand people gathered to watch the plane land in the "Meador pasture" south of the Arkadelphia Milling Company. The newspaper described the affair this way: "One of the largest crowds which has ever assembled in our city was here on last Saturday to witness the flights in the aeroplane which visited Arkadelphia on that day. The people came from miles around and the streets were crowded with people and automobiles all day long. And the people were certainly well rewarded for their coming, for the flying was done as well as any bird could do it and the stunts executed by the aviators were most inconceivable by those of us who had never seen such stunts attempted. The most any of us had ever seen done by the mechanical birds was to go up in the air, fly around in circles and then come down, but this machine, which by the way, resembled very much a bird in the air, not only soared and dipped but turned complete somersaults in the air, both backward and forward, turned completely over on its side, skimmed along on its side, and shot straight forward toward the earth revolving like a whirligig." When the plane departed, one man timed the flight, noting that traveling from Arkadelphia to Malvern took twenty-one minutes, and from Malvern to Benton, sixteen minutes.

Clark County's connection to air travel extends to an even earlier time. In 1909, almost ten years prior to the first plane's arrival in the county, two Gurdon men had constructed what some believe to have been the first airplane built in Arkansas.

Efforts to build an airport began in the midst of the Depression in 1933 when the federal government allocated \$25,000 for that purpose. The new airport was across the Ouachita River, east of Arkadelphia. In 1934, the first plane landed on the new airfield.

Another air service related "first" occurred in 1938, with the area's first airmail. A special postmark was printed on each envelope mailed, commemorating the event. Three bags of mail went on the plane: one from Arkadelphia, one from Amity, and one from Alpine, for a total of about 600 to 700 pieces.