Pittsburgh’s Betti

The center of early aviation in the Pittsburgh area was Bettis Field, overlooking the Monongahela River in West Mifflin. Huge crowds were drawn there to barnstorming events throughout the 1920s. Also offered were rides, instruction, and service, which augmented one of the first 11 privately run U.S. airmail services, launched by Bettis’s owners.
ELMER Best, 86, has seen an awful lot of change in West Mifflin since he moved from neighboring Lincoln Place at age 2. What was once farmland is now an industrial and commercial landscape, anchored on its ends by Kennywood Park and Century III Mall. The community is now filled with industry — Fisher Body, USX Irvin Works, Harbison-Walker Refractories, Westinghouse’s Bettis Atomic Power Lab — but none of them were there when Best roamed these fields in his youth.

The Bettis plant probably seems the strangest addition, for when he was growing up nearby, this site wasn’t the fenced-in, high security laboratory of today but rather the scene of non-stop adventures. This was Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport, only a dirt runway when it opened in June 1925, but the region’s principal commercial aviation facility. In 1927, the airport became Bettis Field (Airport), named for a pioneering Army Air Corps pilot named Cyrus Bettis.

Flying was still new and exciting, and aviation
celebrities of the day all made it to Bettis, as did a steady stream of acrobats and balloonists. Even the regular pilots who flew into Bettis seemed like dashing adventurers, and they were, for there were few licensed pilots when Best first started watching the sky. The industry was in its infancy, and unlike the government-owned facilities of today, Bettis Field was typical in being developed by private interests hoping to profit from aerial exhibitions. The Army was also very keen on aviation and sponsored airshows to promote and encourage flying.

In only a few years it was obvious that a city the size of Pittsburgh would need better facilities than Bettis or any of the other small local air strips could provide. When Allegheny County Airport opened nearby in 1931, Bettis was reduced to a field for student pilots. Then Westinghouse bought Bettis in 1948 and built its atomic power laboratories on the site. The old terminal building and two of the hangars remain, in use.

Elmer Best first recorded the following story for the Aero Club of Pittsburgh, one of many such clubs across the country that promote aviation. The clubs were originally chartered to establish flying fields and facilities. Founded in 1909, the Pittsburgh organization is the oldest continually operating Aero club. Best's recollections, which aired a few years ago on a cable television show in the West Mifflin area, are presented here in a shortened form with his own additions or corrections, indicated by brackets.

When younger, Best helped farm his parents' 32 acres which were adjacent to Bettis Airport. He took an aviation around school course at the airport's Curtiss-Wright school which gave him access to the field, and he spent all his evenings and weekends there working on planes and going along on flights. Many aircraft manufacturers promoted aviation by sponsoring their own exhibition companies to perform around the country. Each company was always trying to outdo the others, and Best recalls many of the planes by their manufacturer such as Fokker, Curtiss, Jennings, Lockheed, and Northrop.

Best spent most of his life as a carpenter, working all over the area on different projects, including the Civic Arena construction. After retiring in 1975, he and his wife of 57 years, Mildred, have tended to the place where he grew up, a century-old white wood frame house with most of the original doors and windows intact, and a fireplace in every room. The road he crossed to the airport when younger was an 8-foot-wide dirt road; the paved two-lane now carries 1,000 cars per hour — according to his own count.

I grew up at 902 Thompson Run Road, West Mifflin, where I still live. Our farm adjoined the Bettis Airport property on the northeast end of the field, and at that particular time everything was farm-land. You could stand at our place and look all the way around 360 degrees and everything was level and farms.

Now my first experience with anything that flew was in 1910. McKeesport had a celebration — they called it Old Home Week — and they had a dirigible. It made several flights a day, and as I recall, the man sat right out in the open. From one end of the airship to the other there was like a ladder turned on edge, and I may be wrong about this, but my interpretation was that to control the airship he would walk back and forth or “jimmy” back and forth on this ladder to point the nose up or down, whichever he saw fit.

And then, about the same time, one of our hobbies on the Fourth of July was trying to catch paper balloons. This is probably unheard of to many people and I just can’t imagine that they let it go on.

Some companies manufactured paper balloons — I’d say they were 5 or 6 feet in diameter — and they had a kerosene wick at the bottom that would burn and heat the air. They would go aloft and as the kerosene ran out, the balloon would naturally descend, and most of the time when it descended they would still have this fire in them and set fields on fire and cause a lot of damage. I think they were eventually outlawed, probably about 1912.

I recall, as a kid, that at Homestead Park every year they had a merchants' picnic and there were several hot air balloons. We weren't allowed to go out to the park, although it was only a couple of miles away, so we would go up on our hill and sit there all afternoon to watch these balloons go up and a man would jump out in a parachute. I think once he had three different parachutes on him — he would jump out and open one, descend several hundred feet and cut that one loose and open the second, and then the same with the third.

I think the first airplane I ever saw was about 1916 when me and another boy were driving cows up Thompson Run Road and we heard this noise and
noise and noise, and the strange thing as I look back on it was we never had enough sense to look up to see the plane until it had actually gone over our heads. It seems to me it was orange in color and that was the first plane I saw.

The next two airplanes I saw were in 1920. My father had a team of horses hauling dirt, building what they called the Carnegie Plan, which are houses right behind what is now the Great American Federal Savings and Loan on Main Street in Munhall, which at that time was the Homestead and Mifflin [streetcar] car barn. A horse pulled a shoe, so we went down to Hays to get the horse’s shoe repaired and while we were there two Jennings airplanes went over and they were naturally from World War I. I recall that every once in a while these guys would frighten people, or for a sensation, would cut their motors out.

And then in 1920 the first flyers to come around the area of Bettis Field were the Zenith Flyers, [independent barnstormers — they had two planes, two pilots, and at least one mechanic] and looking back on it, I don’t know how in the world they ever took off or landed, but when you come up Pittsburgh-McKeensport Boulevard from Lincoln Place towards Dravosburg, just as you approach the brow of the hill where the Bettis Lounge was [it burned down in early 1991], if you look off to the right at about a 15 degree angle, that’s the way they went in. This property is now occupied by the Harbison-Walker Co. [across the road from the Bettis site], but this land sloped uphill and to the left and right, and in addition to all this there was a gas well in the center, up on top. Regardless of wind direction, they took off south to north and landed north to south. But they flew out there all summer long. They charged $15 for 15 minutes of straight flight and $25 for 15 minutes of tail spins and loops and so on.

Now I still have my brother’s ticket somewhere when he took his first ride and it was July the Fourth, 1920. The fact that they [the Zenith Flyers] were there all summer, my sister and her cousins naturally went up to look around. They got acquainted with these flyers and went out on a date to Kennywood Park. Strange as it may seem, these fellows who flew these planes under these hazardous conditions wouldn’t ride the rollcoasters with them.

Shortly after that, in a year or two, the planes start coming to Bettis Field and I’ll give you the topography of what Bettis Field looked like. There was a rail fence that ran right through the center of the field from the road parallel to the Union Railroad, and out on the left of the field there was a large hill that looked sort of like a chocolate drop or an ice cream cone.

Some of the personalities involved were D. Barr Peat, William “Zip” Richmond, and Cliff Ball. The pilot of the first plane was Romer Weyant. They start hauling passengers and naturally they could get a crowd every day of the week and it wasn’t too long til, I think, the first airplane crash around this area was where one of these planes ran into this rail fence. They had only taken it about 100 or so feet when it went down.

And then with D. Barr Peat and Clyde Kelly [a Republican congressman] from McKeensport they promoted an airshow in 1925. I have the original program and had it reproduced and given to all members of the local Aero Club. The Army put on quite a show [the Army Air Corps brought transports, bombers, and pursuit planes], parachute jumping and so on, and they had a triangular course, oh probably 10 or 15 miles around. I remember one pylon, about 30 feet high, was at the intersection of Brierly Lane and Homestead-Duquesne Road. I can’t recall where the other pylons were located, but as I look back on this, the thing that I remember most is the sound of the engines — high pursuit planes — as they approached you and went away, the difference in the change of sound. And I would like to read something from this program. I don’t know whether
Promoters hired daredevil acts to attract spectators to the airport, where flying's novelty provoked millions to pay for a ride. One local wing walker was Honus Skelton, above left. Less often than you'd expect, early pilots went down, such as Jack Feery, on May 6, 1926, at Fox Chapel Golf Club north of Pittsburgh.
of the planes was a Fokker single-engine monoplane that carried eight passengers and had a radial engine. The thing about it was that the passengers were enclosed, but the pilot sat outside in the weather. Then Northrop had a long metal plane that was just about the same thing only it was all metal. [The normal then was wooden frames covered with fabric.]

Well, just about this time, I took a trip down to Mayer Field in Bridgeville with some of the first people who had a car around our place and they packed a picnic basket to go [about 12 miles] from West Mifflin to Bridgeville. I recall it was a field with lots of airplanes and lots of flying, but somehow, I guess, when Bettis got started, Mayer Field went "kerplunk" and Bettis kept going. It became the site of the Great Southern Shopping Center after 1940. I did some research at the library and have five pictures from the field, one of Leo Leech, a roller in the mill, with his own Curtiss-Wright plane in 1916!

Some of the local pilots I was personally acquainted with were Romer Weyant, Dewey Noyes, Curly Lovejoy, Cammy Venay, Ted Taney, Chester Pickup, Harry Smith, Skippy Taylor, Tro Seabreeze, Bob Trader, and Hal Bazley. About this time, Roscoe Turner came to Bettis Field and he had the largest biplane in the world. It was a Sikorsky twin-engined bomber and its sponsor, United Cigar Stores, was as popular as McDonald's is today; Turner had this airplane all fixed up like a cigar store. You walked in there, and they had cigars and cigarettes and everything on display. Roscoe was the ultimate in looks and so on. His good looks, his mustache, his tan boots — he was really the envy of all the women who ever looked at him — and his crew stayed around there for probably a couple weeks before they left.

I went down to the air races quite a few times and I'd particularly like to comment on those in 1931. I had arrangements with friends of mine to go with them by car and I think we were hoping to leave about 6 o'clock, but I had provision that I would try and get a ride to Cleveland from Bettis. [The Cleveland Air Races were the aerial equivalent of the Indy 500, showcasing the latest and best in aviation.] It was about a five minute walk from my home up to the field, and just as I got to the brow of the hill there were some guys wheeling a Lockheed Vega, just like [famous pilot] Wiley Post's, out of the hangar, and it was owned by the McClear Polish Co. McClear Polish was in every magazine, every newspaper. I think it was automobile polish and their trademark was black and yellow checkered squares, each square about three inches high. So when I got over to the plane, they were gassing it up and I asked the pilot if they were going to Cleveland, and he said yes. I said, "Can I go along?" and he said, "Well, you ask that fellow there — he's the president for McClear Polish." So I asked him and he made motions to get in the plane; for some reason this fellow flew about 100 feet high all the way to Cleveland and you could read the names on the gasoline stations. So we were going along — it was a rather hot day in the fall — over green pasture land and all of a sudden there was a great big plowed field and when that plane crossed that barrier from the green field to the plowed field, that plane was made of wood and it just cracked. I have never been in such a downdraft or updraft — I flew up to the roof and I almost fainted!

There were certain individuals, like Roscoe Turner, who had everything money could buy, and then there were other guys who were just poor mechanics, working to rebuild their planes. They would go to the air races in Cleveland year after year, and maybe lag behind 5 or 10 miles per hour, and that was pretty remarkable.

Around this time there was a gentleman by the name of Tragio and he had a son Bob. This Bobby never had any flying experience — I suppose he was about 20 years old. He took this brand new plane, got it out on top of this chocolate drop or mound, and made an attempt to take off. Instead of staying on the field, he sort of veered off to the right and he was flying but the propeller, which was wooden, hit a fencepost and broke about a foot off of it, and you never heard such a screaming noise in all your life as that broken propeller at full revolution. Bob went down over the hill and landed in a bunch of locust trees and never got hurt but junked the airplane.

Curtiss-Wright Corp. took over Bettis Airport and they graded the field, made it level. They did quite a bit of grading and finally got what it looks like today.

One of the owners of Bettis Field, Cliff Ball, had a barn north of my house, very close to where the Thompson Run Athletic Club is now on Ball Avenue.
In fact, that club was started in Ball’s barn. There was a mechanic from Bettis who worked a long, long time to build an airplane [in the barn]. I used to come home late at night and look across the hollow and see flashes from his electric welding machine. He made a monoplane similar to the size of Lindbergh’s. When it was ready, I don’t know how he got it over as far as our place, but he got permission to take it through our property and onto the field. The plane had a German engine, and it took off and had just gained a little bit of altitude when the motor stopped on him. He crashed over to the right of Bettis Road, which is now the Riverview plan of housing, at that time just a cow pasture. Naturally the plane was wrecked, but it was probably the first all-metal plane — that is, the wings, instead of wood, were all metal, and I often think if that plane hadn’t crashed this guy might have been another McDonnell-Douglas.

There was also a Bellanca plane, named after its famous Italian designer and builder. It was quite large and the fuselage was the shape of a large airfoil.

It was large enough that they had a piano in it. Instead of having seats, it was arranged like a living room. It was powered by two Packard engines and the pilots also sat outside in the weather. The Hudson Motor Car Co. had just come out with a new model called the Terraplane, and for a promotional stunt, they made arrangements to fasten this Terraplane automobile under the belly of this Bellanca in the landing gear. They took off, went a couple of thousand feet, and when the engine was started lights or something flashed on.

The Stanley and Penn theaters had just opened up about this time and they had prominent entertainer and actor Dick Powell as a master of ceremonies. And the airfields would do anything to get the crowds out there to try to sell rides. So Mr. Beyler, who was [airport manager] Hal Bazley’s assistant, brought Dick Powell out there one afternoon. Powell had never been in an airplane before, but they trained him in a Curtiss Fledgling, which is a very large airplane, probably 165 horsepower motor, and inside of three hours Dick Powell soloed in that plane. Now, he was all over the sky — I put a parachute on him — but he got up and down within three or four hours one Sunday afternoon.

By this point, Cliff Ball was probably getting into his second fleet of airplanes. He got a Standard and the question came up about how much it could haul. I verified this story with a son of one of the people involved, John Skelton. Tro Seabreaze was the pilot. He had Kenny Scholter on his lap, three people in the cockpit, and two guys standing on the end of each wing. One was Skelton and the other was a guy by the name of Dugan. This plane could just about stay in the air and that was all, so they flew up and down the Mon River for quite a while to get rid of some of the gas and they finally got back on Bettis Field. But they proved their point, that it could haul nine people.

It may seem ridiculous, but there was a theory back then that if you were hard of hearing and you took a dive in an airplane, it might help. A man with this problem came up to Bettis Field one afternoon and he wanted this ride and a dive, but the Travel Air biplane that was capable of diving was out on another mission. They didn’t like to see this $50 get away, so they decided to try the same thing, only using a Curtiss Robin, which was the same plane that Wrong Way Corrigan used. [Wrong Way was a pilot who wanted to make a flight in 1938 to Ireland but couldn’t get permission to land there. He instead took off for California, said his compass went haywire, and landed in Ireland!] I was getting out of my car at home after work. It was a nice clear day and I heard the faint buzzing of an airplane, just like a bumblebee, and I looked and looked and couldn’t see anything. All at once there was this terrific roar of

Bob Trader’s School of Aeronautics was one firm which sprang up to train pioneers in Pittsburgh’s industry; pilot Helen Richey (in uniform) was among the area’s earliest and Chester Pickup among many with a colorful name; a Bettis regular was Roscoe Turner’s flying stogie store, sponsored nationally by United Cigar Stores.
a plane in a power dive. I saw stuff flying around in the air and I thought I’d looked so long that I had gotten spots in front of my eyes. So I went in the house and got my dinner and then went up on the field and found out what actually happened.

I’m going to tell this as it was told to me by Chester Pickup, the pilot, without any exaggeration. They got in this Curtiss Robin, they both had parachutes, and Chester told me he went up to about 14,000 feet and put this Curtiss Robin in a dive, and when he got up to 150 miles an hour the windshield flew back and hit him in the head and probably dazed him for a little bit. He said when he pulled back on the stick nothing happened, so he made motions for this mute to get out. The throttle on the Curtiss Robin was on the left, and you pushed it forward and backward, and to get out Chester had to put his right shoulder on the door and his foot on the side of the plane to force himself out, and when he did he pushed the throttle wide open. Chester got out at about 10,000 feet and the passenger was still in the plane when it went below the horizon at Bettis Airport. But he did get out. The plane landed down on top of the [Duquesne steel] mill roof and I don’t think it improved the guy’s hearing. Chester lost his license over that deal.

This Bellanca, the Italian designer, designed a very large passenger plane, to hold about 20 people. Its distinguishing feature was it had a Wright Whirlwind engine, and then from the engine back to where the fuselage started was about 10 feet — like a cylinder. That was the baggage compartment. For the passengers, there was a sign on the wall and pictures: for so many people, under so many conditions with so much payload, you sit there, and I sit there, and so on. In other words, with this long neck, people just couldn’t sit anywhere without disturbing the aerodynamics of the plane. But it didn’t go anywhere, and it was the only one I ever saw. Just about that time the airlines came out with their twin engine planes.

I don’t think many people know that Standard Steel Propeller Co. was located in Homestead, down around Sixth or Seventh Avenue. Anyhow, just think what that would have meant to the community if they’d have stayed. [Ed. note: According to William F. Trimble’s High Frontier (Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), Standard was bought by United Aircraft for $14 million in 1929, for their license to manufacture a steel propeller with solid alloy blades. After building a new three-story plant in West Homestead in 1930, United moved their operations to Connecticut a year later.]

At that time there was somebody trying to make an automatic pilot on a biplane. There was a metal cone on each wing about 30 inches long, attached to each wing strut, and then there was a cable that went through a series of pulleys and eventually back to the stick and the idea was that as the plane veered, the cone would stay in its permanent position and guide the airplane. Of course, that never went anywhere.
I heard of a fellow in Pleasant Hills who had quite a large [gambling] number hit, and he bought an airplane, a five-place [five seats for passengers] Travel Air or something like that. He got hooked up with Donahoe to haul fish daily from Lake Erie to Donahoe’s store downtown. After about six days, the guy came in for a landing about six feet too low. The wheels caught on the bank of Bettis, spilled the fish and junked the plane, and that was the end of that.

I was at Bettis Field with about 100 other people when the first Transcontinental & Western Air [later Trans World Airlines] coast to coast flight landed. At that time Ogden Mills was the postmaster general; he was one of the great orators of the day, when people could talk off the cuff without reading it. Mills made a very stirring speech about transportation, which started with Indians dragging something on two poles behind a horse, then the Pony Express, and so forth.

Curtiss-Wright brought a large airplane to Bettis called the Curtiss Condor. It had a 90 foot wingspread and two D-12, 625 horsepower engines, and I think it would haul about 30 people. By that time I had scraped up $50, and was taking a [mechanics] course from Curtiss-Wright, and of course that way we learned the ins and outs in the field. I don’t know just how I did it, but I managed to get the job collecting the tickets on this particular plane. When it came in, it made about five passes over the field before it landed. I later became acquainted with the pilot, by the name of Andrews, and he said his theory of landing was to pick out a place on the field and if he wasn’t down, then he went around again. He didn’t care if it was one, two, or how many [passes].

There was a young roustabout from Dravosburg, Chilly Thomas, who worked on the river barges. I don’t know whether they asked for volunteers or not, but there was this contest [a sort of “chicken” game] and they jumped out at about 10 or 12,000 feet. I don’t know who won, but Chilly opened up his parachute about 300 feet from the ground right in front of the hangar. It nearly tore him apart. I went out and helped pick up his parachute and brought him into the hangar and when he took off his shirt he just had a band of blood from his wrist right up to his shoulder from that parachute opening.

Of all the experiences I had at Bettis — I saw and talked to most of the aviation greats except Lindbergh — but my most treasured moment is a conversation I had with Wiley Post, just him and me one on one in a hangar for about five minutes. [Post gained fame in 1931 by being the first to circle the globe, with stops, by airplane.] I also talked to Gatty [Harold Gatty, his navigator], and for about five minutes I went in the Winnie Mae [Post’s plane]. Gatty, he sat back, and I mean this in all sincerity, he sat on a little 6-inch board, no padding. He had to have his legs crossed; he couldn’t straighten them out. There was a slot on the bottom of the plane about an inch wide, about 18 inches long with a Pioneer Drift meter, where he would take observations. They couldn’t talk to each other — they had a little windlass where they would write messages down on paper, stick them on a line, turn a crank, and move it back and forth. There was a massive gasoline tank that took all of the interior of the plane, from Post right up to Gatty. Then there was a little 6-inch shelf which was Gatty’s desk, and as I talked to him about the [around the world] flight, I asked him what particular part he remembered. He told me that when they had to make the decision to leave Japan and head for Nome, Alaska, he made his calculations and decided that with good luck and so on, they might get to Nome with a few gallons of gas left. He wrote that all down on paper and sent it to Post, and Wiley looked at it and gave motion to keep going with his right shoulder. Talking to Post and Gatty was my most pleasurable moment.

I don’t know just what year, but there was a sailplane [a glider, pulled behind a powered airplane, and then let go in flight] up at Bettis, and they had it there all summer long. I recall once being out in the yard and seeing a plane about 200 or 300 feet [up] which I thought was going to land. Then I looked back about five minutes later and it had an altitude of about 5,000 feet. The end to that sailplane happened with Bob Trader. My brother was coming up from Dravosburg [in his car] and Bob Trader was coming in parallel in this sailplane. My brother could look over and see the expression on Bob’s face, and he was about 20 feet too low to get on the field and powerless to make the glider go up. My brother saw Bob Trader crash and he didn’t get hurt very bad, but that was the end of the sailplane. When I look back and see some of the flying that was done at Bettis, under the conditions, you’d wonder how anybody wouldn’t crash.
Aero Club Luncheon
Aug. 21, 1924
In honor
of Members who returned from two weeks training at Langley Field, Va.
I was down at the house playing tennis [Best had a tennis court from 1927 to 1988] and I was just going over to the corner to pick up a ball and this very nice monoplane was [flying] over Pittsburgh-McKeesport Boulevard down toward Duquesne to turn around and make a landing. All of a sudden, without banking or anything, the plane just spun around and I could see the sun shining on the prop and it straightened out again and then it started to dive. It started to go absolutely upside down, and I said to my partner, “He’s finished.” We started to run down towards the eventual site of the crash, and he came from upside down to straight down like a plumb bob, with the engine roaring wide open, and hit on Thompson Run Road right where the screen is for the [Woodland] drive-in movies, and the propeller screwed a hole in the ground about a foot deep, and [the plane] bounced up in the air. My friend and I were the first ones to get there. [The pilot] was lying upside down on a fence and I looked in and the passenger was dead, but much to my surprise this pilot was living, and he lived for about three hours.

Along about that time there was a company — I think they called themselves Pennsylvania Central Airlines — and they were flying Lockheed Vegas and Orions to New York every two hours. Working in the hangar one night, I heard a plane flying around. The motor would go on and off, on and off, and I said to whoever I was with, “I believe that guy’s scared to come down — let’s go out and watch.” So we stood there a little bit and the plane came in for a landing, and it was a short runway across Lebanon Church Road, and a Lockheed Orion had a pretty high landing speed, and he made his landing and slid a little bit sideways and down the runway for 500 or 600 feet. So the passengers got out and we got the plane in. The pilot says, “Well, I know I don’t have a job, but I can hear the birds sing tomorrow morning!” He had wires hanging from his landing gear where he had pulled the wires from a telegraph pole [while coming down].

I saw my first dirigible about 1925; I had gotten off a street car in Lincoln Place and was cutting down through the field to Playmor Bowl, and this dirigible was coming right head on. It was the Los Angeles and I thought it was a big cloud. They started building [them] down in Akron, the Akron and the Macon, and I wanted to see these dirigibles so bad that one day we drove down to Akron, and I’ll never forget it. The building impressed me so much that the airship itself became insignificant. The hangar was bigger than several football fields — clouds actually formed in it and so on, and that really impressed me very much.

We went out to the air races in ’46, and I had just parked my car and was closing the door and locking it when the first jet went over, the first jet I ever saw. Of course when I saw the jet I realized
there was a different age, that these [old] planes were really out of the picture.

So that’s just about my experiences at Bettis. Some people say, “Well, why didn’t you learn to fly?” Well, I had friends who spent probably $1,500, which was a lot of money. I was working for 75 cents an hour, and all they could say was, well, “I flew an airplane.” But I realize that I lived through a wonderful era and had a lot of wonderful experiences and a lot of wonderful memories.

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**Some A-B-Cs of Local Aviation**

by Brian Butko, *Editorial Assistant*
and Paul Roberts, *Editor*

**THE AIRPORT**

ELMER Best, in the memoir just finished, and Kenneth Scholter, in the upcoming interview, recall Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport, later called Bettis Field, as the main stage for the area’s early aviation antics and advances. As both men note, its location in West Mifflin was preceded by years of airplanes landing across the street in a farm field. Two local men inspired by these early flyers’ feats were David Barr Peat and William “Zip” Richmond. In 1924, Richmond bought a Curtiss biplane, and it was flown in for him by Romer Weyant. Richmond and Peat began a small exhibition and sightseeing service with Weyant as pilot at the future airport site. In 1925, Peat joined with Clifford Ball, a Hudson Essex car dealer from McKeesport, to purchase the 40-acre tract.

When the Air Mail Act of 1925 (sponsored by local Representative M. Clyde Kelly) turned airmail over from the government to private contractors, among the first to receive a contract was Ball. His Pittsburgh to Cleveland run began in April 1927. The next year, passengers could ride along for $20, though they often sat atop mail sacks. Ball’s transport business was good enough that in 1929 he sold the field to a subsidiary of Curtiss Aviation, which was soon merged into the huge Curtiss-Wright Corp. Local aviation needs, however, soon outgrew Bettis, and in 1931 the Allegheny County Airport opened one mile to the west, relegating Bettis to second-hand status.

In 1948, Westinghouse Electric bought the Bettis site and converted it into an atomic laboratory. Among its accomplishments were the building of reactors for the first nuclear-powered submarine (U.S.S. Nautilus), the first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier (U.S.S. Enterprise), and the first commercial nuclear power plant for generating electricity at Shippingport, Pa. Westinghouse currently employs about 2,500 at their “Bettis Laboratory.” Westinghouse kept and adapted the old runways, terminal, and two hangars, but a close look at the old hangars reveals cement-relief images of airplane propellers.

**BETTIS, THE MAN IT’S NAMED FOR**

Bettis Field was named for Lt. Cyrus Bettis of the U.S. Army Air Corps, who won the Pulitzer Trophy in 1925 with a world record flying speed of 249.342 miles per hour. He participated in the opening ceremonies for Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport in June 1925.

On August 12, 1926, Bettis was leading a formation of three Army airplanes from Philadelphia to Michigan when they encountered fog near Bellefonte, Pa. Bettis hit a treetop and crashed in the mountains. After regaining consciousness, Bettis stayed with his plane as he could hear search planes overhead, but they failed to find him in the dense woods. He was too weak and injured to signal — he had a broken leg, a fractured nose, two fractures of the jaw, plus cuts and bruises.

Bettis began crawling towards the sound of automobiles but did not reach the road that day. The next morning it began raining and Bettis cupped a part of his outfit to collect water to drink. He finally made it the two and a half miles to the road, where he was rescued. He seemed to be recovering when complications set in and he died September 1, 1926. West Mifflin’s airport was renamed Bettis Airport two months later.

**CURTISS-WRIGHT, AND THE SCHOOL IT SPAWNEd**

One of a chain of Curtiss-Wright Corp. sales, service, and flight in-