Early Aviation in Western Pennsylvania Uncovered:  
The Kenneth Scholter Collection

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Resident Kenneth W. Scholter contributed a collection of photographs and personal papers that adds a unique and fascinating dimension to the research materials in the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania's Archives. His collection focuses on the founding and growth of the aviation industry in Western Pennsylvania during the twentieth century. Such personal papers provide insight into various aspects of the social and economic history of the region that cannot be found in other sources. In my work as an archivist, I have spoken to a wide range of people whose experiences contributed to the region's history, but none were more engaging, energetic, and informed than Mr. Scholter.

Scholter, who lives in Butler, Pa., 30 miles north of Pittsburgh, made such a mark on the region's history that the Butler County Airport is named in his honor. Scholter was born in the Monongahela River Valley town of Duquesne on August 6, 1910. His father was employed at the Duquesne Works power house but later started his own electrical repair business which left him little time at home.

As a young teenager, Kenneth Scholter discovered the Pittsburgh-McKeesport Airport when he spotted a plane overhead near his family's house and followed it down Lebanon Church Road. He then began to ride his bike to the airport, even when school was in session; he often skipped school, he said, because his mother was occupied with all the other children and did not have time to notice his absence.

By age 14, Scholter was spending most of his free time at the airport. He often slept in the hangar, using parachutes as bedding, so that he could be around the planes and pilots as much as possible. He learned how to maintain planes and to fly, while serving as extra weight on many experimental flights. Thus began his career in aviation.

One of the airport’s owners, D. Barr Peat, lived nearby with his wife, and they took care of Scholter by giving him meals. In return, Scholter did chores around the house. The chores included going down over the hill for water, since the Peat home had no electricity or running water. Peat helped Scholter in many ways. When Charles Lindbergh came to Bettis, Peat bought Scholter a suit for the occasion, so he would not have to wear his mechanics' overalls. Scholter discusses in detail his meeting with Lindbergh, and other amazing events, in the interview that follows.

Many of the photographs in this section of the magazine are part of the vast, well-documented Scholter collection now part of the Historical Society's Archives. We received the collection in three donations. The first includes scrapbooks from the Aero Club of Pittsburgh, 1922-1956, a photograph album of Graham Aviation of Butler, plus miscellaneous pictures of Butler-based Scholter Aviation Co., Bettis Field, Rogers Field (one of the earliest local air fields, in Aspinwall), Butler County Airport, and hundreds of planes and aviators from the area. The second donation includes albums from the Aero Club of Pittsburgh with photographs by E.L. Shyrock, photographs of Allegheny County Airport in West Mifflin and various plane crash sites in the area, aviation articles and publications, "Plane News—A.E.F. 1917-1919," and a copy of the U.S. Army Air Service Pilots, November 12, 1919. The third, photographs and brochures, deals with the Butler airport specifically. Many of the photographs in the collection Scholter took himself—an avid lensman, he seems to have usually been present at important aviation events.

The Historical Society Library and Archives is currently expanding the collections that document the lives of people, families, and businesses that played a role in the social, cultural, and economic life of the region. Typically the forgotten materials are stored in attics, basements, garages, and warehouses and are rediscovered when an individual, organization, or business is moving out or remodeling. Then is the time to contact the Historical Society, so that the materials may be prepared and preserved for research and reference.

Not all collections are as rich or as large as Kenneth Scholter's. (For instance, one that is much smaller but is also aviation-related contains photographs and documents from the late Clifford Ball, one of Bettis Field's founders.) Scholter's collection contains some 5 linear feet of material. But each contribution, no matter its size, helps us fulfill our mission to interpret the region's history.