



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Sixteen and Free as a Bird

In 1931 I turned sixteen, and my family made its usual summer migration by train from Annapolis to Falmouth. My best summer friend, Sylvia Draper, arrived in her new red Ford convertible, soon followed by our friend, Conny Wyatt, in a secondhand Chevy coupe, yellow with a rumble seat. I knew that I would never have a car of my own; my parents couldn't even afford to buy one for themselves.

One day, Conny suggested we three go out to the landing field at Coonamesett Inn. We drove to the wide open meadows [of Hatchville] and stopped in front of a small cottage, where two young men lounged on the front porch. Across the dirt road, two small biplanes sat at ease; to my eyes they were two very exciting objects. "Can we go look at them?" Conny asked.



Top: Postcard, ca. 1930. In Museums' archives.

Middle: Photo, Coonamesett Inn, Hatchville, ca. 1940. In Museums' archives.

Bottom: 1930 Chevy coupe with rumble seat. Image from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

“Why not,” one lanky young man answered. “May I sit in it?” I dared ask. “Sure, but you have to be careful where you put your foot.” He pointed to a foot mark on the wing. “Put your right foot here, then swing your left leg over the side of the cockpit.” These delicate little planes were nothing more than thin airplane cloth stretched over a lightweight frame and painted with aluminum paint. Each plane had two open cockpits, one for the passenger in back, one in front for the pilot, and two sets of wings, one overhead, the other on cockpit level, held together with metal struts. I had never been in a plane before and, of course, had never been airborne.

Our pilot’s name was Guy Ham. By now, his buddy had joined us, three awestruck sixteen-year-olds. “Want to go up for a short spin?” Guy asked, winking at his friend. Sylvia went first. Conny and I watched her take off and never took our eyes off the small plane until it became no bigger than a sparrow in the blue expanse above. We saw



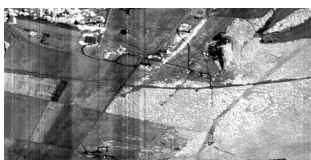
Top: Biplane, similar to the one Rene flew in. Image from [Library of Congress](#).

The other three photos, from the archives at the Museums, show the runway at the Hatchville airfield, and the Inn and the fields around it. These photos were taken perhaps 10-15 years after Rene’s flight.

it fly up and down like a roller coaster. It disappeared for a few minutes and returned to perform a loop-the-loop. It swooped down and taxied across the field. Syl climbed out of the cockpit and played it cool — no jumping up and down with girlish enthusiasm.

I was next. I put on the white canvas helmet she had worn and the goggles, then put my right foot on the wing and swung left my leg into the cockpit. I buckled the seat belt, absolutely agog with curiosity and anticipation. After Guy had settled himself into the forward cockpit, his friend, Jason, turned the propeller over a few times and, when the motor started, he stepped back. We rode to the end of the field and turned, then raced back lickety-split across the field into the wind, and we lifted into the wind.

As we rose, the horizon changed at every level, ponds hidden in wooded areas were visible, cranberry bogs showed flat and lighter green and the many tidal ponds were bigger than the fingers of land in between—these ob-

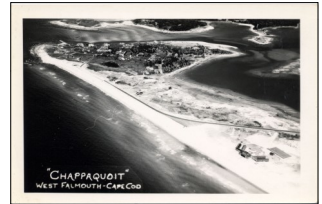


Top: Biplane, flying over the beach at Atlantic City, ca. 1911. Image from [Library of Congress](#).

The other two photos, from the Museums' collection, show farms and fields in East Falmouth, ca. 1940.

servations were secondary to the noise of the motor and the wind rushing by. I stuck my arm out and it almost blew away. It was an effort to pull it back in. We passed a cloudlet on our left. Guy headed the plane straight down toward the ground, and my stomach dropped ahead of it. A cranberry bog rushed towards us, and I shouted to the heavens “I'm dying! I'm dying!” and yes—it was to die for! Guy pulled the stick back and the little plane forced itself against gravity to head straight up. I felt cemented to the seat, unable to move a muscle. Like an elevator out of control, we rushed straight downward again, this time a pine woods rushed towards us. We flew level for a moment, then the “wingovers” started. Guy turned the plane upside down to the left then followed with an upside down to the right. I looked dumbly at the ponds and woodlands over my head and the sky beneath us. How could this be? There was no sensation of being upside down?

I don't remember our drive home. I

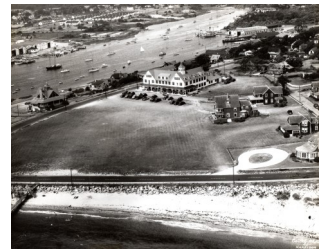
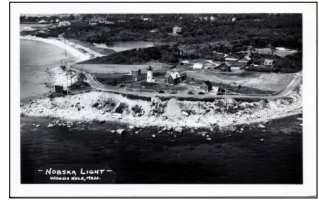


Aerial photos taken by Benjamin Harrison ca. 1950, from the archives at the Museums. Top to bottom are Woods Hole, Chappaquiddet, and Waquoit Bay.

must have been wild-eyed and incoherent. Dad told me I was not to go to the airport again—not a suitable place for young girls, and who knew how safe the planes were? But the pull of another flight was too much, and my friends and I went back a week later. Maybe my father's sense of adventure made him understand, and his ban on the airport was not mentioned again.

As a dramatic way to end the summer, Guy and Jason flew us over to Martha's Vineyard in formation. Conny and Sylvia each rode in the small biplanes and I was in the middle, in an unfamiliar monoplane, with an enclosed cabin. My pilot was an older man, a relative of friends. At Edgartown, we were offered a ride into town in a beach buggy. After ice cream cones, we returned. That was our last flight of the summer. I don't remember ever going back to the airport in the summers that followed. Each summer there were other interests, boys, I guess.

Rene (Dillingham) Washburn (1915-2006)



*Photos by Benjamin Harrison, taken
ca. 1950, in the Museums' archives.
Top to bottom: Nobska Point, Quisset
Harbor, and Falmouth Harbor with the
Tower House Hotel and "kite field."*