

# SHOOTING



*Jimmie Ward and his Hearst Pathfinder at Corning, New York, during his transcontinental-flight attempt, September 1911*

# STAR

## Aviator Jimmie Ward of Crookston

*Steven R. Hoffbeck*

Crookston has no monuments to honor hometown boy James J. Ward, Minnesota's first aviation hero who in 1911 and 1912 made headlines across the nation. Like Charles Lindbergh Jr., Ward left his boyhood home for the life of an aviator in a big city. But unlike Lindbergh, he severed his connections to his home state, and Minnesota all but lost track of him. Nevertheless, the aviator from Crookston played a significant role in the early history and promotion of powered flight.

Jimmie Ward, as he was known, was a star during the brief early period of barnstorming from 1910 to 1914, an era marked by dangerous limitations in airplane materials and designs. During his heyday, sensational exhibition flights featuring speed and feats of derring-do helped popularize aviation and promoted its technical development. Ward survived the era, but many aviators died or soon retired for fear of their lives. (Early airplanes were so undependable that they were shipped by rail to exhibition sites.)

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Only after improvements spurred by military uses in World War I did airplanes become reliable. From 1919 to 1925, the second wave of barnstorming, pilots took paying customers for short rides in the safer and more maneuverable planes. Men such as Lindbergh flew from town to town, free from the constraints of rail transportation.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Jimmie Ward began as the story of Jens P. Wilson. Born in Denmark in 1886, young Jens and his parents, Hans and Barbara, emigrated to Minnesota in 1888. The Wilsons settled in Crookston in northern Minnesota, where Hans labored as a well digger. There three daughters—Christina, Thomena, and Louisa—were born; another boy, Louis, died in infancy. Crookston's early prosperity was based on wheat, railroads, and lumber. The slashing blades of the Crookston Lumber Company's mill turned white pine into inexpensive lumber for America's houses and barns at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup>

Little Jens Wilson sought to leave his immigrant roots behind him. His first name became Americanized. While his father spoke Danish, Jimmie spoke English, his accent washed away by his elementary-school teachers. The young man saw that it was most often recent immigrants who did the hardest labor in the wheat fields and the local sawmill. He did not want to endure the drudgery of digging wells for area farmers, and the prospect of working in the Crookston sawmill was equally unappealing. Disagreements with his father over assimilating into American culture left a void between them. Between 1898 and 1900, when Jimmie was 12 or 14 years old, he decided to leave Crookston, his father, and his family far behind him.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson slipped away to Chicago, a city described by writer Lincoln Steffens as "loud, lawless, [and] unlovely," but still a city of opportu-

nities. There he eventually became a chauffeur. His affinity for speed soon caused him to take on a new last name, because his police record for speeding stood in the way of keeping his license. The process of gaining a new identity was complete: Jimmie Ward had emerged.<sup>4</sup>

Details of Ward's early career are sketchy, at best. Between 1907 and 1908, he did some work in the Pullman automobile factory in Illinois and apparently came to understand machines. His love of acceleration led him to enter "speed contests" in the Chicago area, racing in Thomas, Olds, American, and American Mors automobiles. With the success of internal combustion engines and the development of airplanes, however, greater freedom and speed could be found among the clouds. After the Wright brothers soared over Kitty Hawk in their flying machine in 1903, the whisper of adventure beckoned intrepid souls into the air. The daring exploits of the Wright brothers and their rival, Glenn H. Curtiss, had captured headlines across America by 1909. The bravest individuals sought to imitate the pioneers of flight.<sup>5</sup>

Various Minnesotans caught flying fever. In Minneapolis, Edward M. LaPenotiere responded to the challenge by designing a heavier-than-air craft in 1907. Although he never made a full-size model, the idea of flight had taken hold in the state. Two years later, Ashley C. Bennett and Ralph D. Wilcox made short hops on the ice of Lake Minnetonka in the first Minnesota-built airplane. In January 1910, John O. Johnson made a brief flight, taking off from frozen White Bear Lake. These Minnesotans, however, merely tinkered with powered flight.<sup>6</sup>

Runaway Jimmie Ward also looked to the skies for glory. The dusty racetracks in Illinois had given him a taste of speed, mechanical power, and fame. Now he launched himself headlong into

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie L. Schroeder, "Fifty Years of Flight," *Minnesota History* 33 (Summer 1953): 237–39. Some barnstormers took passengers in 1911, but the \$25–\$50 charge limited customers; "The Business Side of Aviation," *Scientific American*, Oct. 14, 1911, p. 356. In the 1920s barnstormers charged only \$5 for a 15-minute ride; see Bruce L. Larson, "Barnstorming With Lindbergh," *Minnesota History* 52 (Summer 1991): 234; Paul O'Neil, *Barnstormers & Speed Kings* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1981), 21–39.

<sup>2</sup> *Fargo Forum*, July 23, 1912, p. 1; Minnesota Manuscript Census Schedules, 1895, roll 82, Polk County, City of Crookston, p. 13–14.

<sup>3</sup> *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 19, 1911, p. 2; Theresa Andringa (Ward's niece), interview by the author, Crookston, Nov. 29, 1993, notes in author's possession; Mrs. Fred Hanson (Ward's sister Louisa) to Glen Messer (aviator), Jan. 19, 1956, copy in author's possession.

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln Steffens, "Chicago: Half Free and Fighting On," *McClure's Magazine* 21 (Oct. 1903): 563; *Thief River Falls News*, Aug. 24, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 18; G. N. Georgano, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Motorcars, 1885 to the Present* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982), 43, 506, 613–14.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald N. Sandvick, "The Birth of Powered Flight in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 48 (Summer 1982): 48–50; Noel E. Allard and Gerald N. Sandvick, *Minnesota Aviation History 1857–1945* (Chaska: MAHB Publishing, Inc., 1993), 10–12.



Postcard from Ward, lower right, to his sister Christina, 1910

flight training. He began his career in August 1910 in a “typically American way,” according to Augustus Post, one of his contemporaries; that is, he just “got in and flew, trusting to Providence,”

his quick reflexes, and the “luck of the American eagle to keep [him] from breaking [his] neck.” He practiced on a vacant lot near the south Chicago line in a machine manufactured by Carl Bates in Chicago.<sup>7</sup>

Ward had a wonderful talent for flying. He was what other aviators called “a natural-born flyer,” who instinctively made the correct adjustments to winds and weather. With the limited power of early aircraft engines, Ward, weighing only 122 pounds, also had an advantage getting aloft and staying there. The young aviator’s skill attracted the attention of James E. Plew, a wealthy Chicagoan and president of the Aero Club of Illinois. Plew, who had purchased an early Curtiss airplane in the summer of 1910, hired Ward to pilot it. The biplane, powered by a four-cylinder, 25-horsepower Curtiss engine, proved to be a steady performer. Pilot Ward proved to be quite spectacular.<sup>8</sup>

When Glenn Curtiss performed in Chicago, Plew told him of Ward’s ability. Curtiss, wishing to concentrate on airplane manufacturing, needed skilled pilots to perform for his aircraft company at an increasing number of fairs and air shows across the nation. Thus Ward sat in the pilot’s seat as the newest member of the Curtiss Exhibition Company upon the invitation of the owner himself. After his first shows in Galesburg, Illinois, and Lewiston, Idaho, in October 1910, he posed for a Chicago photographer as part of the Curtiss stable of fliers.<sup>9</sup>

Ward’s first major flights for the company were in Birmingham, Alabama, on November 21–22, with experienced aviator Eugene Ely. In December he flew in New Orleans at an exhibition with three Curtiss pilots—Ely, Jack McCurdy, and Augustus Post. Ward learned quickly and began making headlines of his own. New Orleans honored him for his altitude flights—he attained a height of 4,000 feet—presenting him with the Coleman E. Adler World’s Altitude Record Trophy for 24-horsepower biplanes.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Ward assumed a position among the best “bird men” of the day, becoming one of the

<sup>7</sup> Augustus Post, “How To Learn To Fly,” *World’s Work* (New York) 20 (Sept. 1910): 13,390; *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1911, p. 9; *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 13, 1911, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Harold E. Morehouse, “James J. Ward, Early Curtiss Exhibition Pilot,” in “Flying Pioneers Biographies of Harold Morehouse,” unpublished, n.d., p. 1, and Merrill Stickler, *The “Great” Transcontinental Air Race* (Corning, N.Y.: Corning-Painted Post Historical Society, 1971), 3, both courtesy the Glenn H. Curtiss Museum, Hammondsport, N.Y.; *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Stickler, *Air Race*, 2, 3; postcards from Jimmie Ward to Thomena Wilson, Oct. 12, 1910, and to Christina Wilson, Oct. 25, 1910, both in possession of Theresa Andringa.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1910, p. 1; Stickler, *Air Race*, 3; Morehouse, “James J. Ward,” 1. Altitude record inscribed on trophy, in Andringa’s possession.

Curtiss Exhibition Company's experts. These pilots leased their airplanes from Curtiss, who shared a percentage of the cost of repairs and of the earnings. An informed source estimated in 1911 that each of the best aviators in the world took in an average of \$25,000 per year for their exploits—very good money in those days.<sup>11</sup>

In January 1911, after just five months as an aeronaut, Ward broke his world's record for low-power flying machines at Charleston, South Carolina, coaxing his Curtiss 24-horsepower airplane, dubbed the *Shooting Star*, to an altitude of 5,300 feet. His flight over Fort Sumter put his assumed name on the front page of the *New York Times*. Claiming to be only 18 years old, the 25-year-old James Ward basked in the limelight of national fame, collecting a \$5,000 prize for his feats.<sup>12</sup>

Early exhibition flights were conducted at three levels of renown and skill. Most prestigious were the competitive air shows and the cross-country distance competitions, to which only the best pilots were invited. During his first year with Curtiss, Ward flew in Atlanta (December 15–18, 1910); Shreveport, Louisiana (January 14–15, 1911); St. Augustine, Florida (April 2–5, 1911); Nashville (April 27–29, 1911); Dallas (May 17–20, 1911); and at Canadian expositions at Winnipeg and Regina (July 1911).<sup>13</sup>

In the second echelon of shows were exhibitions at state fairs and in cities that were willing to put up enough cash to get Curtiss or Wright Brothers aviators. Some of Ward's early flights were in this category, too. For example, from May to early August 1911 he flew at Hot Springs and Fort Smith, Arkansas; Joplin, Missouri; Topeka and Ottawa, Kansas; Hastings, Nebraska; Mason City, Iowa; and Rockford, Illinois.

The third level consisted of flight demonstrations at county fairs. In 1911 these fairs offered substantial amounts of money for any kind of airplane and aviator. That year, North Dakota's first

pilot, independent aviator Tom McGoey of Grand Forks, was the first to fly in a number of Minnesota cities in his homemade Farman-type biplane. In Rochester, Little Falls, Thief River Falls, and Superior, Wisconsin, for example, crowds thrilled at their first sight of powered flight. Thus, McGoey managed to steal the show from big-time aviators such as Ward, even though the North Dakotan's career lasted only from June until October, when he retired to quell his family's fears that he would perish.<sup>14</sup>

Uninterested in such small-time exhibitions, Ward enjoyed the challenge and acclaim found at the major shows and distance competitions. The energetic aviator followed his triumph in South Carolina with international success, becoming the first pilot to fly in Cuba on January 28, 1911. "All of Havana" turned out to see him "defy a thirty-mile [per hour] wind," reported the *New York Times*. Buffeted by "fierce gusts," Jimmie received the enthusiastic adulation of the Cubans, their president, Jose Miguel Gomez, and other notables.<sup>15</sup>

While Ward was busy in Chicago, his family had moved 20 miles from Crookston to tiny Wylie by 1900 and then to nearby St. Hilaire in 1907. There, the Wilsons tried running a grocery store and a small restaurant (by 1910, all but Louisa, the youngest daughter, worked there), and Hans continued to dig wells. Ward first reestablished contact with his three sisters, sending postcards adorned with images of himself in his *Shooting Star*. The wayward son started his reconciliation with his parents by sending them his trophies and awards. According to a local newspaper, the Wilsons and citizens of Crookston and St. Hilaire grew "very proud of his record as a birdman."<sup>16</sup>

Ward attracted the attention of crowds and reporters wherever he flew. At an air show in Nashville, he attained the height of 4,700 feet, topping all other entrants. Here the young aviator met and wooed Maud Mauger, the daughter of an east Chicago coal merchant. The two impulsively eloped at the conclusion of the April 1911 competition.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> C. R. Roseberry, *Glenn Curtiss: Pioneer of Flight* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 228, 286; *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 20, 1911, sec. 5, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, Jan. 7, 1911, p. 1. See also clippings in Jimmie Ward Biographical File (CW-152000-01), National Air and Space Museum Library, Washington, D.C.

<sup>13</sup> Here and below, see Morehouse, "James J. Ward," 2, 3; "Thrilling Flights at Nashville Aero Meet," clipping, Ward biographical file.

<sup>14</sup> *Thief River Fall News*, Aug. 10, 1911, p. 1; *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Sept. 2, 1911, p. 1; *Little Falls Herald*, Sept. 22, 1911, p. 1; *Grand Forks Herald*, Sept. 28, Oct. 7, both 1911, p. 8, June 9, 1931, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 1911, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Manuscript Census Schedules, 1910, roll 710, Pennington County, St. Hilaire Village, 17B; *Thief River Falls News*, Aug. 24, 1911, p. 1; *St. Hilaire Spectator*, Mar. 30, 1907, p. 3, July 18, 1908, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> "Thrilling Flights at Nashville Aero Meet," Ward biographical file; *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 19, 1911, p. 2; *Chicago American*, Aug. 18, 1911, p. 1.

When Chicago's business leaders sponsored a major international aviation meet that August, Ward also became the favorite son of his adopted hometown. Backed by the wealth of Harold McCormick of reaper fame, the meet offered \$80,000 in prizes and attracted the "greatest galaxy of aviators ever assembled" from seven nations. In order to compete, Ward had to pass the license test administered by the Aero Club of America, an official branch of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale of France. Under the watchful eyes of his mentor, Glenn Curtiss, Ward succeeded with flying colors. Obtaining

license number 52, he joined the elite group of American flyers that included Wilbur and Orville Wright.<sup>18</sup>

Jimmie Ward and his *Shooting Star* did well in the Chicago air show. The slim aviator dazzled huge crowds with his "Merry Widow Waltz" in the air—"a torturous zigzagging dance over the field." He placed fifth in the 15-mile cross-country race over water and in the overall-duration flights competition; fourth in another cross-country race; and third in the 20-mile biplane speed race and an open speed contest. Winning a total of \$2,900, he placed tenth among 21 prize winners.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 11, 12, 1911, both p. 1; Eileen F. Lebow, *Cal Rodgers and the Vin Fiz: The First Transcontinental Flight* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 42–44; *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 18; *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 9; Bill Robie, *For the Greatest Achievement: A History of the Aero Club of America and the National Aeronautic Association* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 264–85.

<sup>19</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 13, 21, 1911, both p. 2; *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 14, 1911, p. 3.



*The Wilsons, posed outside their St. Hilaire house with Ward's trophies and portrait*

Ward's name appeared in newspapers across the nation as well as in Chicago, where Margaret Warner, a clerk in a dry-goods store, was startled to see his picture. Claiming that the aeronaut was her husband and the father of her two-year-old child, she filed charges of abandonment and non-support and arranged to have him arrested "as he stepped from his flying machine" in Grant Park during the international air show. Readers eager for scandal ate up the headlines of abandonment. Ward soon appeared in court and denied that he had ever legally married Margaret, slipping out of the bigamy charge with his career intact. Warner accepted a \$250 settlement for nonsupport and a quiet divorce.<sup>20</sup>

**T**he Chicago air show affected James Ward in ways other than celebrity and scandal. The dangers of aviation were deeply impressed upon all who attended and saw William Badger crash and die when his airplane's 300-pound engine landed on his neck. With the expensive, hand-crafted engines located directly behind the pilots, it was a standing joke and fear among early aeronauts that in a crash landing the pilot would die but the engine would survive undamaged, cushioned by his body.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, as the numbers of exhibition flights increased after the advent of air meets in 1910, the numbers of deaths also rose. In 1908, only one aviator died; in 1909, just 4 perished. In 1910, a total of 32 American pilots were killed, and the death toll rose to 77 worldwide. Comedians of the time defined an aviator as "one who flies like a bird and comes down like a stone." Tom McGoeysaid it often took "body English and a prayer" to keep a "flying crate" in the air.<sup>22</sup>

In 1911 newspapers across the nation not only extolled Jimmie Ward's exploits but also told of the many aviators who perished in that aerial season. Phil Parmalee, one of the Wright brothers' exhibition flyers, claimed that "fifty per cent of the men who were doing the actual flying" in 1910 were dead by the summer of 1911. Parmalee insisted that the hazards increased as an aviator became more experienced and confident. The



*Grounded for repairs, September 1911; note broken metal struts, extra-capacity gas tank (behind the radiator), and pails used to bring water to the radiator.*

seasoned pilot would dare to fly on inclement days when amateurs would not and could then fall prey to treacherous winds. Ward himself had a few close calls. When his propeller disintegrated into splinters at the Chicago air meet, he calmly turned off the airplane's engine and glided to a safe landing.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For a sampling of coverage, see *Thief River Falls News*, Aug. 24, 1911, p. 1; "The International Aviation Meet at Chicago," *Leslie's Weekly*, Aug. 24, 1911, p. 202, clipping, Ward biographical file; *Fargo Forum*, Aug. 18, 1911, p. 1; *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 18, 1911, p. 2; *Chicago American*, Aug. 29, 1911, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 16, 17, 1911, both p. 2; *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 16, 1911, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Grand Forks Herald*, Dec. 17, 1911, p. 2, and Mar. 14, 1937, *Herald* clipping file on McGoeys; *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 14, 1911, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Evening Times* (Grand Forks), July 24, 1911, p. 5; *Chicago Record-Herald*, Aug. 19, 1911, p. 1, 2.



Soon after his solid showing in Chicago, birdman Ward set his eyes on the William Randolph Hearst Prize—a whopping \$50,000 for the first transcontinental flight across the United States. The famous publisher announced the prize as publicity for his newspaper empire and as an incentive to produce flights of longer duration. The rules allowed 30 days in which to fly from coast to coast; the flight had to be completed by October 10, 1911, and a stop had to be made in Chicago. The airplane could be repaired as often

as necessary, but the winner would have to use the same machine throughout the flight.<sup>24</sup>

Ward, the second of three aviators to declare his intentions to capture the prize, had the advantage of being the lightest in weight. With a new Curtiss airplane and a dose of his usual luck, he was considered a good bet to succeed. The night before he began his attempt at aviation immortality, he and Maud stayed at New York City's deluxe Hotel Astor. Now at the height of his career, a celebrity, and one of only 31 recognized pilots in the United States, Ward was a long way from Crookston.<sup>25</sup>

Ward set out from Governors Island in New York City on September 13, 1911, filled with hopes of reaching Buffalo in a single day and San Francisco within the allotted thirty. Reporters called him an "aerial pathfinder," and maps in the *New York Times* began to chart his progress toward the Pacific.<sup>26</sup>

The first glimpse of an aeronaut conquering gravity often left a deep impression upon earth-bound viewers. Hundreds of people waited "on the hills, on tops of buildings and other points of vantage," for the Chicago birdman to appear; thousands gathered in small New York towns along the way. Ward impressed the spectators as he flew the latest-model Curtiss biplane, dubbed the *Hearst Pathfinder*, powered by a 50-horsepower motor. He hoped to cruise at 60 miles an hour in the 26-foot-wide aircraft, which had been specially reinforced with doubled and tripled wires. Two mechanics, named in the newspapers as Horton and Swain, preceded his course. Lacking enough money, he had to cancel special arrangements with the New York railroads to carry a spare motor and other parts.<sup>27</sup>

Ward held the early lead in the great race. His airplane responded superbly, at times speeding him along at almost 120 miles per hour, "exceed[ing] all American records," according to the *Chicago Evening American*. The flimsy nature of the early machines and mechanical problems, however, doomed him to a snail's pace of progress. One motor stopped on September 16, causing him to crash land from a low altitude. The other engine lost all of its oil the next day, completely ruining it and almost ruining the pilot.

<sup>24</sup> *Grand Forks Herald*, Sept. 8, 1911, p. 4; Lebow, *Cal Rodgers*, 70–76.

<sup>25</sup> "The Transcontinental Flight," *Scientific American*, Sept. 16, 1911, p. 267; "Lessons of the Transcontinental Flight," *Scientific American*, Sept. 30, 1911, p. 290; *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 1911, p. 4; William Menkel, "The Aeroplane—A Year's Marvelous Progress," *American Review of Reviews* 44 (Aug. 1911): 181.

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1911, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *New York Times*, Sept. 12, p. 4, Sept. 13, p. 3, Sept. 14, p. 2, Sept. 15, p. 11—all 1911; *Chicago Daily News*, Sept. 14, 1911, p. 2; *Chicago Evening American*, Sept. 13, 1911, p. 1, 2.

After numerous delays and repairs, Ward hoped to continue his quest. Just west of Addison, New York, however, only 328 miles from Governors Island, his engine stopped at an altitude of 1,000 feet. He managed to guide the biplane to a landing, but it struck a tree and was wrecked beyond repair. Ward walked to the nearest town, humbled and earthbound. As he told a reporter from the *Chicago American*, “The string of hard luck I have encountered was too much for me and I am through.”<sup>28</sup>

Rival Calbraith Perry Rodgers had been close on Ward’s tailwings. The two were as dissimilar as any men could be. Rodgers stood six feet four inches tall and weighed nearly 200 pounds. He came from a well-off military family and had attended prep school, where he participated in football and, later, yachting. Ward, of course, never graduated from high school, learning his lessons, as he said, in the “university of knocks and practical experience.”<sup>29</sup>

The glory for completing the first transcontinental flight fell to Rodgers, flying a Wright machine. Although he established a new distance record, he did not reach the West Coast by October 10, nor was his flight accomplished within the required 30-day limit. His 49-day journey included 24 days lost to repairs and bad weather. (By comparison, an automobile covered the distance in 1906 in just 15 days.) Nevertheless, Rodgers received national recognition and the Aero Club of America gold medal for his efforts.<sup>30</sup>

**J**immie Ward dusted himself off and continued to fly after his failed transcontinental venture. In the spring of 1912, the Ward Aviation and Exhibition Company opened its doors, arranging flights from its main offices in Chicago. Ward, the firm’s sole flyer, owned one-third of the business in partnership with Ed “Ike” Bloom who had been his man-

ager on the Hearst flight. The aviator planned to do extensive flying in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest, for he had become fully reconciled to his family in St. Hilaire. Ward and his wife visited at his parents’ house in January, marking the first time he had seen them in 12 years. (The *Thief River Falls News* noted that he wore “\$2,000 worth of diamonds when here.”) Maud stayed for two weeks, and her proud in-laws hosted parties in her honor.<sup>31</sup>

Although the company scheduled numerous flights in Minnesota, Canada, Wisconsin, and Illinois during 1912, Ward complained that there were “fewer exhibition flights this year than . . . last” because the promoters were demanding a “no flight, no pay” clause. Establishing that provision as his own trademark, he gained a reputation as the best aviator in the business because he could—and would—fly under almost any conditions.<sup>32</sup>

To his dismay, however, Ward found that the demand for exhibition flying quickly declined in 1912. Historian John H. Morrow Jr. points to the many cross-country flights of 1911, which showed the potential of aircraft for military use, as a turning point. While the early exhibition flights had helped popularize aviation and aided its technical development, true progress would come only from concentrating energies on the practical side of aeronautics rather than the sensational. As the U.S. government began to realize the value of airplanes for wartime, Glen Curtiss devoted his energies to producing amphibious airplanes and military biplanes beginning in 1911, giving Ward’s transcontinental-flight attempt “only passing attention.” The Wright brothers, too, discontinued their aerial exhibition teams in 1912 after two years of support, preferring to work toward substantial advances in flight.<sup>33</sup>

The demand for exhibition flying declined for other reasons, as well. The novelty of watching an aviator performing a few tricks faded rapidly, and, furthermore, spectators quickly figured out that

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<sup>28</sup> *New York Times*, Sept. 17, p. 9, Sept. 19, p. 3, Sept. 23, p. 1—all 1911; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 17, 1911, p. 2; *Chicago Evening American*, Sept. 22, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Lebow, *Cal Rodgers*, 4–5, 19–22, 78–208.

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1906, p. 5, Nov. 6, 1911, p. 1, Dec. 16, 1911, p. 14; “The First Trans-continental Aeroplane Flight,” *Scientific American*, Nov. 18, 1911, p. 449. Rodgers died the following spring when his aircraft plunged into the Pacific Ocean after striking a flock of seagulls; Lebow, *Cal Rodgers*, 244. The third pilot competing for the Hearst prize, Robert G. Fowler, started from San Francisco Sept. 11 in a Wright airplane and reached Jacksonville, Florida, on Jan. 10, 1912, 121 days later; Stickler, *Air-Race*, p. 28; Lebow, *Cal Rodgers*, 76, 77, 115.

<sup>31</sup> *St. Hilaire Spectator*, Jan. 20, 27, 1912, both p. 3; *Thief River Falls News*, Jan. 25, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Mankato Daily Free Press*, Aug. 17, 1912, p. 2, Aug. 19, 1912, p. 1; *Fargo Courier-News*, Aug. 6, 1912, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> John H. Morrow Jr., *The Great War In The Air: Military Aviation from 1909 to 1921* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 29; Menkel, “The Aeroplane,” 174–78; *New York Times*, May 1, p. 8, May 9, p. 9, Dec. 17, p. 9, Dec. 22, p. 15—all 1911; Lee Kennett, *The First Air War, 1914–1918* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 8–9, 16–20; “Duel of Bird Men on Again,” *Chicago Evening American*, Sept. 20, 1911, p. 1–2.



Ward in his Shooting Star, Rockford, Illinois, August 1911

they could see the aeronauts without paying for a grandstand seat. In addition, the new cross-country flights, free to the public, offered the suspense of a long-distance race. By October 1911, *Scientific American*, an important chronicler of the aviation story, concluded, "Exhibition flying . . . has begun to decline, although races if sufficiently exciting are likely to persist." The airshow pilots and their financial backers also found that expenses were growing greater than the aeronautical prizes of the day.<sup>34</sup>

Although Curtiss and the Wrights had given up exhibition flying, other entrepreneurs were launching new companies. Some, such as the National Aeroplane Company of Chicago, were national in scope, while others were regional. A decreasing amount of business was split between an increasing number of firms, some of whose aviators would fly for less money than Ward. In Minnesota and in North Dakota, he competed for business with "Lucky Bob" St. Henry (formerly a Curtiss aviator), the Kenworthy Aviation Com-

pany in Grand Forks, and the touring Frenchman George Mestach. Rank amateurs such as Frederick J. Southard, a Minneapolis mortgage banker, bought airplanes with hopes of reaping financial rewards from flying.<sup>35</sup>

Events staged at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds mirror the trajectory of exhibition flying and Ward's place within it. Great excitement had accompanied the first Twin City Aviation Meet in June 1910 when Glenn Curtiss himself performed. That September, before Ward joined the aeronaut's team, the state fair featured both a Curtiss and a Wright aviator. Ward could not perform at the fair in 1911, as he was preparing for his coast-to-coast flight. The National Aeroplane Company, featuring Paul Studensky, won the contract for 1912, and no aerial exhibitions were staged at the fair in 1913. Thus, Ward missed the recognition of the state's largest audience.<sup>36</sup>

Trying to adjust to these changing trends, Ward picked up exhibition dates, banking on the publicity from his attempted transcontinental flight. Taking liberties with the truth, he billed himself as the "death-defying daredevil boy aviator" and "America's youngest and most daring aviator"; at age 26, he looked the part because he was so small and slight. While his promotions garnered plenty of contracts for the company, the cities were of lesser caliber than in his glorious summer of 1911, except for dates in St. Louis, Chicago, and Birmingham, Alabama. Nevertheless, Ward asked for—and got—top pay, collecting, for example, \$1,500 for two days of flights above thousands of earthbound mortals in Regina, Saskatchewan, in August.<sup>37</sup>

As Ward competed for exhibition dates, he increasingly played up his Minnesota roots. A reporter for the *Fargo Forum* emphasized Ward's Crookston upbringing while extolling the aviator's exploits at the North Dakota State Fair in late July. Ward's parents were a part of the promotion for flights in Winnipeg, where they first witnessed a flight by their son, who established a Manitoba altitude record. The press in Mankato publicized

<sup>34</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 17, 1911, p. 8; "The Business Side of Aviation," *Scientific American*, Oct. 14, 1911, p. 337, 356; Edward Hungerford, "Dollars and the Airmen," *Harper's Weekly*, Oct. 28, 1911, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> On St. Henry, see Clara Studer, *Sky Storming Yankee: The Life of Glenn Curtiss* (New York: Stackpole Sons, 1937), 288, 291; *Minot Daily Optic*, Aug. 1, 1911, p. 1. For Mestach, *Fargo Forum*, evening ed., July 26, 27, 31, 1912—all p. 1; *Crookston Press*, May 30, 1912, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Sandvick, "Birth of Powered Flight," 52–55, 57–59; Allard and Sandvick, *Minnesota Aviation History*, 13, 15, 23. Exhibitions at the Minnesota State Fair resumed after 1914; Allard and Sandvick, 23, 24.

<sup>37</sup> *Mankato Daily Free Press*, Aug. 1, p. 3, Aug. 14, p. 3, Aug. 16, p. 2—all 1912; *Crookston Times*, Jan. 27, 1912, p. 3; *St. Hilaire Spectator*, Dec. 10, 1910, p. 5; Morehouse, "James J. Ward," 3, 4; *Fargo Forum*, evening ed., July 22, 1912, p. 6; *Evening Times* (Grand Forks), July 29, 1912, p. 8; *Morning Leader* (Regina, Saskatchewan), July 31, Aug. 1, 1912, both p. 1.

him as “a product of Minnesota” to increase attendance at his flights in that city in August.<sup>38</sup>

Birdman Ward needed the home-state boost. In several Minnesota cities, he found his drawing power diminished because customers had already seen aviator Tom McGoey. While 1,500 citizens of Duluth purchased tickets to watch Ward fly in August 1912, for example, some 15,000 had paid to see McGoey the previous October. Even though McGoey’s talents and reputation could not match those of Ward, he had been there first.<sup>39</sup>

The shadow of McGoey’s wings also dampened enthusiasm for what should have been a triumphant homecoming flight in Crookston. Ward got a hero’s welcome from his family and, during a private warm-up flight for his relatives and friends, whizzed above the Crookston Lumber Company’s sawmill and over his boyhood haunts. His exhibition flight was canceled, however, when only 120 faithful souls purchased the 50-cent tickets. Three thousand others stood outside the fence, unwilling to pay to see the local birdman fly. The reason: McGoey had flown in nearby Thief River Falls the previous summer.<sup>40</sup>

Ward’s greatest personal success in his home state occurred in Mankato. On the weekend of August 17–18, 1912, the city showered praise and publicity upon the daring Minnesota-bred pilot. On Saturday, about 900 paid to see him; some 1,880 admissions were recorded the following day when Ward delivered more of his promised “spectacular spiral dips and glides.” Arthur Graham of Janesville stood in awe as Ward zoomed skyward, declaring, “I’ve lived sixty-five years to see this!” Other Mankato residents responded differently, however. Many sidestepped the admission fee, and the hills along the river valley were “jammed with people who did not pay.” The Mankato Fair Association cleared only \$350 for its efforts.<sup>41</sup>

In January, Ward had announced that 1912 would be his last year of exhibition flying; he, too, wanted to design and manufacture airplanes. Finding no good prospects, however, he contin-



Mankato Daily Free Press, August 16, 1912

ued to fly—for fewer customers—in 1913. At a return engagement in Mankato, only 600 people paid 50 cents apiece to see Ward fly each day, while a larger percentage of the populace again viewed his flights from the Minnesota River bluffs. This experience revealed the economics of exhibition aviation’s decline: Ward received \$1,600 for two days of exhibitions; he was guaranteed \$500 a day and a percentage of the paid admissions. The Mankato sponsors did not get enough money to justify their efforts and turned to other forms of fundraising.<sup>42</sup>

As public interest in exhibition flying declined, the 28-year-old aviator turned to other pursuits in and near Chicago. Perhaps inspired by Glenn Curtiss’s inventiveness, he put his mechanical talents to use in a new automotive enterprise. While his Ward Cycle Car Company, headquartered in Milwaukee, gained financial backing to produce compact cars built with motorcycle engines and wheels, the venture lasted only from 1913 to 1914.<sup>43</sup>

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, James J. Ward found that his aviation skills were once again appreciated and need-

<sup>38</sup> *Fargo Forum*, evening ed., July 23, 26, 27, 1912—all p. 1; *Manitoba Free Press*, July 13, 1912, p. 3; *Mankato Free Press*, Aug. 17, 19, 1912, both p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Morehouse, “James J. Ward,” 4; *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 16, 1911, p. 5, Aug. 5, 1912, p. 6; *Crookston Times*, Aug. 10, 1912, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> On McGoey, see, for example, *Thief River Falls News*, Aug. 10, 1911, p. 1; *Grand Forks Herald*, Aug. 1, 1911, p. 10, Aug. 3, 1911, p. 8. On Ward, see *St. Hilaire Spectator*, July 27, 1912, p. 3, Aug. 3, 1912, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Mankato Daily Free Press*, Aug. 19, p. 1, 4, Aug. 16, p. 2, Aug. 20, p. 5—all 1912.

<sup>42</sup> *Thief River Falls News*, Jan. 25, 1912, p. 1; *Crookston Times*, Jan. 27, 1912, p. 3; Morehouse, “James J. Ward,” 4; *Mankato Daily Free Press*, July 28, 1913, p. 3, Sept. 10, 1913, p. 1. The Blue Earth County Fair in 1913 offered no aviators; see *Mankato Daily Free Press*, Sept. 11, 1913, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Morehouse, “James J. Ward,” 4; Georganio, ed., *New Encyclopedia of Motorcars*, 656. On cyclecars, see “The Progress Of The Cycle-Car,” *Literary Digest* 48 (Feb. 28, 1914): 443, 445; Alan Ominsky, “A Catalog of Minnesota-Made Cars and Trucks,” *Minnesota History* 43 (Fall 1972): 102, 104, 106, 107.

ed. In order to send a massive contingent of airplanes and pilots to the Great War in Europe, the military required great numbers of flight instructors. Ward was hired as a senior-grade civilian flying instructor and began working in Dayton, Ohio, at Wilbur Wright Field, described by journalist Burton J. Hendrick as “the largest flying school in the world and probably the best.” The air service later assigned Ward to a training school in San Antonio, where a contemporary described him as an excellent instructor. He served for a total of 16 months and proudly sent his Minnesota family several photographs of himself in uniform. Other Minnesotans ventured away from their home state and found glory in air combat in Europe; three men—Murray Guthrie of Minneapolis, Martinus Stenseth of Twin Valley, and George Furlow of Rochester—became aces. Jimmie Ward labored far from the public eye.<sup>44</sup>

After the war Ward flew a few exhibitions, making him one of the rare pilots who participated in both the pre- and post-war barnstorming periods, but his career was virtually over. Even his family lost sight of him, as he apparently severed the connection he had reestablished during his glory years. He moved from place to place during his service in the Great War, and his whereabouts in the ensuing years are not precisely known.<sup>45</sup>

According to Glenn E. Messer, an early exhibition pilot, civilian aviation instructor during World War I, and a friend of Ward’s, a “family tragedy occurred which greatly depressed him.” After his wife perished in a Kansas City fire, he became “distracted and in a bad physical condition.” Ward traveled to Daytona Beach, Florida, where Messer was racing automobiles and flying float planes from the beach. Alarmed at his friend’s mental state, Messer quickly telephoned Glenn Curtiss in Miami, placing Ward in his care. Curtiss provided shelter for his former protégé, according to Messer, because the Minnesotan

had been “of great service.” Ward’s depression deepened, and Curtiss finally had him committed to the Florida State Hospital at Chattahoochee on January 7, 1923. He died there from a cerebral hemorrhage on December 3 and was interred the next day in the hospital’s burial ground without fanfare or relatives present. He was 37 years old. His family told others that he had died in a sanitarium, and the *St. Hilaire* newspaper headline simply read “Jens Wilson Is Dead.”<sup>46</sup>

Messer, a member of the Early Birds, an organization of aviators who had flown solo before 1914, said that none of Ward’s friends “knew anything about his family connections” because his “origin and his family were things that were never discussed very much.” Ashamed of his working-class, immigrant background, the aviator in 1911 had told Chicago reporters that he had been born in the Windy City and his family had moved to “a ranch” near St. Hilaire.<sup>47</sup>

In 1956 the Early Birds placed a monument to pioneering pilots on Governors Island in New York. For this occasion, Messer, representing the group, located Ward’s three sisters in northern Minnesota and told them that their brother’s name was included. Hoping to “pay tribute to his early accomplishments,” Messer wrote that Ward “contributed a great deal toward the progress of early aviation.” In this way, Christina, Thomena, and Louisa learned about their brother’s last years and membership in the Early Birds.<sup>48</sup>

Jimmie Ward’s short life and career were meteoric. Unlike the permanent aviation star Charles Lindbergh Jr., Ward merely flashed across the horizon. Like a falling star that breaks up and burns brightly before disappearing from sight, Jimmie Ward, the “Shooting Star” from Crookston, won no enduring fame. Nevertheless, his feats as an early barnstormer earned him a place among the daredevil pioneers of American aviation history.

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<sup>44</sup> Burton J. Hendrick, “Teaching American Boys To Fly,” *World’s Work* 34 (Sept. 1917): 522; Morehouse, “James J. Ward,” 4; telephone interview by the author with Glenn Messer, Aug. 30, 1994, notes in author’s possession; Allard and Sandvick, *Minnesota Aviation History*, 27. For an overview of training, see Kennett, *First Air War*, 122–31.

<sup>45</sup> Messer interview.

<sup>46</sup> Glenn E. Messer to Mrs. Fred Hanson, Nov. 28, 1956; Messer interview; telephone interview by the author with Theresa Andringa, Nov. 29, 1993, notes in author’s possession; Roseberry, *Glenn Curtiss*, 424, 425, 430–32; Martha Griffin, medical record administrator, Florida State Hospital, to the author, May 6, 1994; *St. Hilaire Spectator*, Dec. 6, 1923, p. 1. Andringa believes that Ward married an actress; Messer concurred, leading to the conclusion that Ward and Mauger had divorced, and it was his third wife who died in the fire.

<sup>47</sup> Messer to Hanson, Oct. 8, 1955, p. 1, Nov. 28, 1955, p. 1; *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Messer to Hanson, Oct. 8, Nov. 28, 1955.



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