

RAIN-MAKER TEXANS

HOW A MIDWEST FARMER DECIDED TO UTILIZE TWO SURPLUS
NORTH AMERICAN AT-6 TEXANS TO SEE IF HE COULD CHANGE THE WEATHER

BY JOHN BYBEE

The Grand Canyon is so immense that it creates its own weather. On 13 November 1946, a trio of General Electric scientists comprising Dr. Irving Lanmuir, Dr. Vincent J. Schaefer, and Dr. Bernard Vonnegut (older brother of novelist Kurt Vonnegut) determined that, for the first time in history, they would modify the weather. At 9:30 that morning a rented Fairchild 24 monoplane equipped with Chrysler door handles and automotive-type roll down windows taxied

away from the General Electric hangar at the Schenectady County Airport, New York. In the left seat was GE Flight Test Division test pilot Curtiss G. Talbot. In the right seat was GE research chemist and meteorologist 40-year-old Dr. Vincent J. Schaefer. Doctor Schaefer held a camera, while a cardboard box containing six-pounds of crushed dry ice pellets rested at his feet. Talbot made his takeoff from the east-west runway and banked southeast towards northwestern Massachusetts and Mt. Greylock (at 3491 feet the highest peak in that state) and initiated a climb to 14,000 feet.

At 10:37 am, Dr. Schaefer spotted a darkening stratocumulus cloud above Mt. Greylock. The Fairchild bored into the spine of the four-mile-long cloud. Schaefer dispensed three pounds of dry ice from the electric dry ice dispenser mounted on the bottom of the Fairchild's cabin floor. Talbot turned south and Dr. Schaefer glanced back and was rewarded by the sight of long tendrils of snow falling from the base of the cloud. Talbot then turned the Fairchild around for a second run. The ice

dispenser jammed so Dr. Schaefer rolled down his window and let the suction pull out the remaining three pounds of dry ice. In scant minutes, bands of falling snow dusted the upper flanks of Mt. Greylock. Sixteen months earlier at the Trinity atomic test site in New Mexico, man had demonstrated his control of the nuclear process. Dr. Schaefer's field experiment had forced Mother Nature to yield a second secret.

In early 1947, 50-year-old Lester John Pfister's brown eyes twinkled as he read of the successful cloud-seeding experiments conducted by GE in New York and the supplemental tests undertaken by the Army and Navy. Lester's formerly black hair was now white and gave testimony that he had been scarred and

starved but not defeated by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. The droughts of 1934 and 1936 had reduced his growing family to a steady diet of corn mush and nearly bankrupted his fledgling Pfister Hybrid Seed Corn Company headquartered at El Paso, Illinois. In the tradition of Horatio Alger, Lester had persevered and by 1940 his 187 varieties of premier hybrid seed corn dominated the markets in 44 states and 30 foreign countries. In 1947, the weather still controlled his fortunes and the dank specter of drought (including an 88-day drought in neighboring Champaign County) still shadowed his 4000 acres of seed corn fields in Woodford County. Lester seized on the hope of freedom from drought promised by the new science of weather modification. Lester Pfister determined to create his own

rainfall and the Pfister Hybrid Seed Company moved forward into a new and uncharted frontier.

Project *Pfister* began as a private venture sponsored solely by Pfister Seed Corn. In the summer of 1947, Lester Pfister contacted the SWS (Illinois State Water Survey) at Urbana, Illinois, and informed the agency that he was preparing to conduct rain making experiments during the 1948 growing season and the SWS was welcome to join Project *Pfister* on a weather consultant basis. Lester was very active in planning and working out the details and schedules for his weather modification operations. He determined that the annual natural rainfall totals would be recorded from 1 May to 15 September. Cloud seeding would begin on 1 July and conclude at the end of the growing season on 1 September. The Illinois State Water Survey responded by saying they would partner with Project *Pfister* for a least a year and appropriated \$22,000 for staffing and facilities.



Preparing to go aloft in the second Pfister Texan for a seeding mission. This was the aircraft modified by Vest with a turbosupercharger out of a B-17 or B-24. If it rained on the Pfister airfield, the pilots noted that it would turn to mud and become unusable.

The T-shaped Pfister airstrip was literally carved out of the company's corn fields. Various buildings related to the company operation are on the lower left.