

“FILL ‘ER UP!”

AVIATION'S INCREASING POPULARITY DURING THE 1920s/1930s SAW NUMEROUS BUSINESS OWNERS TRYING TO CASH IN ON THE TREND BY UTILIZING EVERYTHING FROM ACTUAL AIRCRAFT TO LOOK-A-LIKES IN ORDER TO INCREASE PROFITS - PART ONE

BY ADAM STANTON

EDITOR'S NOTE: Adam Stanton's article "Fly-In Drive-In" in the February issue resulted in considerable reader response. Some readers had memories of the drive-ins while others appreciate the rather outlandish approach to American capitalism. The response has triggered the author to expand his "roadside" concept in order to share with readers how business owners attempted to utilize aviation as a growth tool. Needless to say, most of these enterprises lasted just a short time. If you have any photos or memories of such businesses, then please let us know. For example, I have early childhood memories of a stainless-steel Budd RB-1 being used as a gas station outside Fort Worth, Texas, and am attempting to find a photo for Part Two of Adam's article. I am sure there were plenty more aircraft attractions so let us know if you have something that will let us continue our history.

By the late 1920s, a full 80% of the world's automobiles could be found on the expanding highway system of the United States. That massive number just happened to coincide with the "air-mindedness" that was sweeping the nation following Charles Lindbergh's stunning 1927 solo New York to Paris flight. Suddenly, anything to do with aviation was invested with a certain glamor. Nearly every citizen

wanted to have an attachment to things that could take to the air. Businessmen along the growing network of roads realized that aviation could be utilized as "marketing tools" to increase profits. Accordingly, an increasing number of filling stations and roadside diners began to erect aviation motifs that could be used so drivers would pull in and "fill 'er up" — whether it would be their fuel tanks or their stomachs.

The history of roadside America is not particularly well-recorded so it is difficult to state when the usage of aviation themes first started. After the Great War, there were vast numbers of surplus aircraft available at minimal cost but we have not been able to find photos illustrating the use of machines such as Curtiss JN-4D Jennies as roadside attractions. It appears that the year 1927 and Lindbergh's

flight was really the pivotal point for such activities.

As with any business, the "bottom line" was all-important so the business owner was looking for the cheapest way to utilize aviation in promoting his product. Damaged or failed aircraft could be obtained for little money but there was also another option and that was the construction of aircraft "look-alikes." For minimal outlay, a builder could throw together something that had the appearance of the Ryan NYP monoplane and mount it on a gas station or diner. With the addition of electric or neon lights, owners suddenly had a sure-fire way of "pulling them in." Part of this increase in roadside commerce was the huge growth of neon lighting. Neon tubes could be bent into just about any sort of shape and the bright colors of the gases created eye-catching displays so businesses that did not have an aircraft — real or fake — could make



Bob Spenser had a station located on 5453 Wilshire Boulevard at the corner of Cochran Avenue. Business was okay but Bob reasoned that with some form of roadside attraction, business could really pick up. The passage of time has eliminated the facts behind the Fokker's acquisition but presumably Bob traveled to nearby Alhambra Airport and struck a deal with the management of Western, who were probably just glad to get rid of the F-32. Bob was an innovative fellow and his station had pioneered the use of mail-in reminders to motorists that it was time for servicing. The station could do all sorts of mechanical repairs and was well-placed on LA's famed "Miracle Mile." This F-32 was registered NC333N and we do not know how Bob got it from the airport to Wilshire since the wing was one-piece. Numerous floodlights were installed in the bottom of the wing to completely illuminate the area at night. This view shows how the exhaust system for the engines were in place and this would indicate that the Pratt & Whitney Wasp radials were still installed when Bob got his prize.



One of the most ambitious uses of an aircraft as a roadside business attraction was this Fokker F-32 airliner. For Fokker, the F-32 was a real flop. Built with fuselage of steel tubing with wood formers and fabric covering, the 99-ft wing was all-wood and that was a real point of weakness with all Fokker airliners of the period. The designation F-32 came about because the plane was designed to carry 32 passengers, which was a really big load for the time. Basically, all such aircraft were underpowered and the way Fokker figured out to get around this was to install back-to-back engines with one pulling and one pushing.

What seemed like a good idea did not work. The rear powerplant suffered from overheating and vibration due to the disturbed airflow from the puller propeller hitting the pusher propeller. Western Air Express was going to operate a number of the F-32s from their new airport at Alhambra but the type was a flop (famed football coach Knute Rockne had died in a Fokker crash when the plane shed its wooden wing so a grounding started to take effect on the wooden-winged airliners) and the line's aircraft were put up for sale. This is where gas station owner Bob Spenser entered the picture.