



MOTH TO THE FLAME

ONE OF THE FIRST HOLLYWOOD STUNT PILOTS,
LT. ORMER LOCKLEAR LED A SHORT BUT SPECTACULAR LIFE



Colorized postcard of Lt. Ormer Locklear with a Curtiss Jenny during 1919.

I recently returned from the greatest airshow on earth — the EAA AirVenture at Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I have been a regular attendee for years and I always marvel at the massive collection of aircraft and airshow performances. This year marked another record attendance and one of my personal observations was that there were a noticeable number of attendees and airshow acts from foreign countries. My

interactions with some of the foreign attendees were promptly addressed by their declaration that you cannot see such a magnificent collection of aircraft and airshow performances at any other venue in the world other than at Oshkosh. In fact, with the reduction of airshow events across the nation and the continued restrictions pronounced by the FAA, it just might be possible that Oshkosh becomes the only single airshow in the nation, or in

the world for that matter.

As a young aviator, I always marveled at the outlandishly dangerous airshow wing-walker. Originally, to me, it seemed that wing-walking involved gymnastic-like stunts on or between airplanes, but later it turned to lovely ladies floating atop the wings. Those acts have almost become extinct, maybe because wing-walking is actually outlandishly dangerous and the career life of those individuals has historically proven to be quite short.

One of the staples of today's airshow world has been the Franklin family from Neosho, Missouri. Kyle Franklin is a third-generation airshow performer, now in his mid-40s, and was the youngest professional wing-walker at the age of 17. His first wife, Amanda, was also a wing-walker but she was tragically killed at the age of 25 during a performance in 2011 when their biplane lost power. Carol Pilon from Third Strike Wingwalking in Quebec, Canada, recently performed in the 2025 Atlantic City Airshow and other venues across North America on her Stearman. Pilon has been a professional wing-walker since 2000 and is the first and only Canadian wing-walker.

The original wing-walker rode a magical meteor to fame but, like most meteors, his flame was quickly extinguished. Ormer Locklear was born on 28 October 1891 in Greenville, Texas, a small desert town outside of Ft. Worth. After his school years, Locklear worked as a carpenter and mechanic. Locklear was first introduced to aviation in late 1910 when an airshow came to Ft. Worth with six frail airplanes, three American and three French. The American team was led by John Moisant and the French team was led by Roland Garros, who would go on to become one of France's greatest pilots in WWI and would have a famous tennis venue named after him. Locklear marveled at the magic of flight, which had only been unleashed seven years prior by



Jenny crack-ups were an everyday occurrence at Barron Field where Locklear was learning to fly during the Great War.

the Wright Brothers. Locklear would not see another airplane for nearly a year.

On 17 October 1911, Locklear got to see an airplane that had flown halfway across the country. Calbraith Perry Rodgers started flying the Wright E-1 biplane named *Vin Fiz* (see *Air Classics* February 2023) in Long Island, New York, and he was on his way to Los Angeles in a failed attempt to capture a \$50,000 prize when he flew over Ft. Worth. The entire Locklear family and 4000 other Texans were looking to the sky to catch a glimpse of the fool attempting the first ever cross-country flight. As providence would demand, a clogged fuel line forced Rodgers to land near the Locklears. Ormer was in the lead of the on-lookers wanting to see the flying machine up close. Rodgers cleared out the fuel line and he was off in a dash, but Locklear's life was changed in that instant by the flying machine and the reaction of the crowd to the aviator's brief visit.

Locklear turned to his carpentry skills and designed and built a glider using wood, bamboo poles, and linen cloth. There were no controls and Locklear hung below the planes of the wings and shifted his body weight to force the glider in the desired direction. Locklear moved the glider on the back of the family's Maxwell automobile to various locations around Ft. Worth that he thought would be ideal for his test flights.

Similar to other early aviators, Locklear was drawn to riding and fixing motorcycles — he would often be seen about town performing stunts and jumps on his motorcycles. Some of those stunts included standing on the back of a motorcycle while an airplane flew overhead, and Locklear would reach up and grab the landing gear axle and pull



Locklear practicing one of his stunts on the wing of a Jenny over downtown Los Angeles

himself up and sit on the axle until the airplane landed. He loved the admiration and applause.

During April 1915, Locklear married Ruby Graves from Ft. Worth. Ruby laid down the family law that Locklear could no longer perform stunts on his motorcycles. But that law was soon broken when Harry Houdini came to town in January 1916 and sought out Locklear to perform daredevil motorcycle stunts to drum up business for Houdini's escape artist show at the Majestic Theater. At this point, Houdini's career was on a somewhat downhill slide and he had taken to performing in smaller towns such as Ft. Worth (population 105,000 at the time). Houdini wanted to have his shackled and padded body dragged down Ft. Worth's main street behind Locklear's motorcycle. After a couple of short blocks, Houdini was free from the shackles and he played to a packed house at the Majestic for his entire stay in

"Cow Town." Again, Locklear loved the admiration and applause.

The United States entered into the Great War in April 1917. Locklear took the opportunity to sign up for the Aviation Section of the Army Signal Corps at the new training center in Ft. Worth on 25 October 1917. Of the 20 inductees who took the three-day test to get into the Aviation Section, Locklear was the only one to pass. Locklear was assigned to Camp Dick, near Dallas, where most of the aspiring cadets attended ground school. Locklear was then assigned to Barron Field near Ft. Worth to complete his flying course with Air Service Squadron B. Only straight and level flight was taught at the field in order to keep accidents to a minimum. However, returning combat veterans boldly proclaimed that stunting was necessary to survive combat dog fights. Locklear knew that he would have to master stunting in his Curtiss JN-4D "Jenny" trainer,



A number of other daredevils quickly began to cut into Locklear's performances. Frank Clarke, who would become a top Hollywood pilot, is seen transferring between the wings of Canadian-built Canucks (they can be distinguished from the Curtiss-built examples by the more rounded vertical tails). This competition would force Locklear into more dangerous stunts.