



Jimmie Angel preparing to go aloft in the Zenith Albatross.



Angel had five siblings and most were involved with the Air Circus. Brother Eddie was a pilot and did stunts like wing walking.

LOST RIVER OF GOLD

THE IMPROBABLE STORY OF JIMMIE ANGEL



Angel and Virginia with the two-seat Fokker D.VII that he rebuilt and in which he obtained his air transport license.

Back in 2018, Publisher Michael O'Leary took me to the Portal of the Folded Wings — Shrine to Aviation near the Burbank Airport north of Los Angeles, now nearly a forgotten memory of aviation history in the clutter of homeless humanity in this unfortunate sanctuary city. There are currently 30 giants of aviation history laid to rest or commemorated in the Portal of the Folded Wings including Charles E. Taylor, mechanic for the Wright Brothers and for Cal Roger's transcontinental *Vin Fiz* flight of 1911; Bobbie Trout, record setting aviatrix of the late 1920s; and Roy Knabenshue, America's first dirigible pilot of the early 1900s. The ashes of Jimmie Angel were once interred here after his death in 1956. He was given credit for discovering the world's highest waterfall in Venezuela (really, he just made it famous to the world at large). His ashes were later removed and scattered over this waterfall, now named in his memory as Angel Falls. But Jimmie just happened to accidentally come across this waterfall in 1933 as he was searching for the Lost River of Gold.

James Crawford Angel was born 1 August 1899 in Cedar Valley, Missouri, near St. Louis. His grandfather was named James Edward Angel, so to avoid confusion in his early years he went by the name Crawford. In his 20s, he adopted the nickname of "Jimmie," which stuck for the rest of his life. Jimmie's brother Parker later recounted, "Our mother had a homestead when she married Dad. Dad traded the homestead for a team of mules. He then traded the mules for a hunting rifle. Then, he lost the rifle. Between 1917 and 1936 we moved 24 times."

The new concept of flight seemed to fascinate the family. When living in Oregon during 1912, Jimmie (age 13) and brother Clifford (4), lashed sister Goldie (4) to a homemade box kite. They then pushed the contraption off a bluff and it collapsed "like a gun-shattered duck." Goldie was taken unconscious from the wreck and then hauled to a doctor in a passing wagon. Clifford would later state that "I can still feel the sting of Dad's belt as he let the two of us know what he thought of young aviators. And I remember Jimmie fighting back the tears and yelling 'Okay! I'm sorry! But damnit, I'm going to fly! We'll all be flyers!'"

According to his own statements, Jimmie taught himself how to fly an airplane at age 14, and fantastical stories of his accomplishments and fame followed him for the rest of his life. Some might even say that several of these stories could have been fabricated.

For example, it is documented that he joined the Arkansas National Guard in 1917 when he was 18. The 94th Aero Squadron formed at Kelly Field, Texas, during 1918 and in their roster Jimmie is listed as "crew chief." However, he claimed to have trained top WWI ace Eddie Rickenbacker how to fly. It seemed the Jimmie picked up knowledge from listening to the pilots talk. He also then fashioned their stories into his own. A 1920 US Census lists him as "mechanic/welder" and still with the 94th in Texas. Time has blurred the actual facts, but he apparently made a flight in a Curtiss Jenny, landing in a nearby field to "impress girls." In May 1921, his sister Goldie died and he "borrowed" an Air Service Se.5a and



The Angel family with one of the Air Circus biplanes. From the left: Clifford, Parker, Eddie, and Jimmie with parents Glenn and Bell Youngest. Clyde is in the front.

landed it on an Oklahoma street so he could attend the funeral. For these two transgressions, he was fined six months' pay and confined to quarters.

By late 1921, he had obtained a surplus Curtiss Jenny and flew it to Independence, Kansas, where he gave rides to his parents. From that point, he flew as a barnstormer through 1926. He claimed to have carried aloft a parachutist by the name of Charles Lindbergh for airshow acts. He was described as a "good-looking, skinny little runt." He would branch out into the Angel Brothers Air Circus and this

included younger brother Eddie (also a pilot), and brothers Clifford and Parker who worked as mechanics, parachutists, and wing-walkers.

He also claimed, without any supporting substantiation, that he trained Chinese aviators how to fly, that he flew bombers over China and Russia (see "Cap'n Tommy" in this issue for similar claims), and that he served as an aerial scout for Lawrence of Arabia. But who are we to question the veracity of a tall-tale-spinning pilot who described himself as a daredevil and hell-raising soldier of fortune?



The Bach C-S-4 monoplane at Clover Field in Santa Monica. Jimmie attempted an ill-fated flight to the bottom of South America in this aircraft.



The massive and underpowered Zenith Albatross.