

Brian Duddy's "Wings Over Le Roy"

by Lynne Belluscio

Brian brought in a copy of his new book about the Woodward Airport. "I can't believe it took me fifteen years to finish this." Well it certainly is worth the wait. Filled with pictures - most of which are from the files here at the LeRoy Historical Society - the book is a tribute to the visionary, Donald Woodward and the daring pilot, Russell Holderman.

Brian has done some extraordinary research, which could be featured on "History Detectives." I have always heard rumors that the large tri-motor Fokker, The Friendship, was buried somewhere in the Florida swamps, but Brian says that the plane that nosedived off the runway in Florida was the Loening amphibian biplane. The Friendship - - well you'll have to read the book to find out what Brian thinks happened to the Friendship. He also suspects that Donald Woodward owned the Friendship before Amelia Earhart flew in it across the Atlantic on June 17, 1928.

The newspapers reported that Don Woodward bought the Friendship from Lady Amy Phipps Guest, the American wife of a British millionaire, but Brian's sleuthing leads to another story. There is plenty of evidence that Woodward was financially involved with Commander Richard Byrd's Antarctic expedition. Byrd initially planned to use the tri-motor Fokker Friendship, but then Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company decided to back the expedition and Byrd was "encouraged" to fly a Ford tri-motor. This was understandable since the Fokker had wooden wings that could not be disassembled during transport.

The Ford plane's wings could be broken into three sections. So Byrd decided to fly the Ford and Brian believes that Woodward bought the Friendship from Byrd, under the guise of the "Mechanical Science Corporation" which relieved Byrd of a financial burden. This is further

supported by the fact that Byrd named a mountain in Antarctica after Woodward in recognition of his support. It is located latitude 77 degrees 17 minutes south and longitude 145 degrees 30 minutes west and is a mountain with broad twin summits standing between Hammond Glacier and Boyd Glacier.

Eventually, Woodward decided to sell the Friendship in 1929 and it ended up in Brazil, was seized by the Chilean government, and was renamed the "El Avion Rojo, (the red airplane). The rest is a mystery. Somehow, Amelia Earhart's airplanes have a way of disappearing.

Brian's interest in the airport began in 1978, when he, along with many other Le Roy High School students, were involved with an oral history project and Brian interviewed a number of people who remembered the Woodward Airport. He interviewed Peter Brust who had worked at the airport in the 1920s.

Brian graduated in 1979 and attended the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and received a BS in Aeronautical Engineering. He received a MA in history from Wright State University. He served 24 years in the United States Air Force, and every time he came back to Le Roy to visit his dad, he'd

stop in at the Historical Society. Finally last year, after he had retired from the Air Force, he had a chance to pour over all the photographs and records here. He was able to identify the photographs and the people who were significant in the history of the airport - including Eddie Stinson, George Halderman, and Jimmy Doolittle as well as Otto Enderton, Tim McKay, Eddie Stafford, Lou Gordon and Roy Duval. There were women who made their fame and fortune during the Golden Age of Aviation and they all came to the Woodward Airport - Dolores Kelly, Ruth Nichols, Elinor Smith (who became famous for flying a WACO biplane underneath the four New York City bridges when she was only seventeen) Lady Mary Heath - and of

course, Amelia Earhart.

As Brian writes: "The colorful ships are gone. The flyers have almost all passed. But if you stand in front of the old hangar and close your eyes, you can still imagine the scene - the sound of the engines, the roar of the crowd, the music from the bands and the feel of excitement in the air at 'The Finest Private Airport in America.'"

Brian's book will be on sale at the Historical Society's tent this weekend. He will be in the tent on Sunday to autograph copies. The book sells for \$20 and will be available after the Festival at the Museum Shop at the Jell-O Gallery.

