

Ray W. Murrell

Information Sheet – July 31, 2015

Ray W. (William) Murrell.

He was born Oct 24, 1900, in Mansfield (Wright County), Missouri, and died Jan 6, 1937, in Springfield (Greene County), Missouri. He is my uncle, his brother being Roy M. (Mitchell) Murrell (deceased), my father. Ray Murrell was an aviator, barnstormer, and commercial pilot from approximately 1929, 1930, or 1931, although I'm not sure of these dates. His death certificate (Jan 6, 1937) stated he had been an aviator and commercial pilot for 6 years. I don't know when or where he learned to fly but perhaps in southeast Wyoming or northwest Nebraska (the geographical areas I mentioned in the request for information email).

He owned an aviation business in and was a resident of Pomona, California, at the time of his death. I don't know when he became a resident of Pomona or when he started his business there, but a register of voters shows him there in 1934. His business provided charter flights to locations in California, Nevada, and Arizona; student training; local sightseeing hops; and special flights (such as - altitude flights, aerial photography, motion picture flying, and acrobatic flying).

He flew as a stunt pilot in at least three movies (the movies are listed in endnoteⁱ) and in numerous airshows in western states in 1935 and 1936 (the airshows are listed in endnoteⁱⁱ). The plane he owned was a Travel Air D-4000 Speed Wing, Serial Number 1379, and Tail Number NC-477 N (later N477N). The initial delivery date of the plane was Feb 14, 1930. My uncle purchased the plane on Mar 4, 1935.

My father purchased the plane from my uncle's estate (my uncle died intestate) on Mar 18, 1937. It appears from the Box Butte County Court, Nebraska, probate records that my father took possession of the plane in Alliance, Nebraska, on Mar 22, 1937, but Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) documents state that the plane could be inspected for air worthiness at the Springfield Municipal Airport (Greene County), Springfield, Missouri. According to FAA records, my father sold the plane on Jun 17, 1937. The plane was probably flown to Springfield sometime after my father took possession, but I haven't confirmed this.

The plane has survived, has had numerous owners, and now resides in the Owl's Head Transportation Museum, Owl's Head, Maine (just outside Rockland, Maine). The plane is still flying, and, as such is listed in the FAA Registry. I have attached photographs of my uncle and the plane (probably taken sometime in 1934 to 1936) and the restored plane in its current colors. As a note, I plan on visiting Owl's Head Transportation Museum in early August this year. I have made arrangements to take a ride in my uncle's plane on August 10.

According to probate records, my uncle was treated for an illness in Alliance from early Sep to the end of Nov 1936. It appears from material in my uncle's scrapbook that he was flying in an airshow tour in South Dakota, Wyoming, and Nebraska at this time and had performed at an airshow in Alliance on Sep 27, 1936. He may not have had any real connection to Alliance, and it was only a coincidence that he was flying there when he became ill.

Dorothy Barden made a claim against the estate for 97 days as a practical nurse and for 97 days board. It appears that my uncle stayed at Dorothy Borden's residence during this period, but I don't know if that was located in Alliance or Scottsbluff. She also made a claim for transportation of my uncle 900 miles to Mansfield, Missouri. I don't know when this occurred, but it was probably sometime between Nov 30 and Dec 21, 1936. Nevertheless, I am trying to determine what happened to him while in Alliance from Sep to Nov 1936.

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Dorothy L. (La Vone) Barden.

She was born 1903 in Redington (Morrill County), Nebraska (perhaps not Wyoming as shown on your web site), and died Feb 15, 1993, in Bridgeport (Morrill County), Nebraska. She was a noted parachute jumper, and I believe that she jumped from my uncle's plane during numerous airshows in western states during the 1930s. However, I don't know the number of times or all the dates. I am trying to establish her connection to my uncle. I have three photographs showing her standing in front of my uncle's biplane. Two photos are unverified but the photo shows the same decorative striping as was on my uncle's plane, and one photo is verified to the extent that it shows the tail number of my uncle's plane.

Harry McCollom.

He was born in Weston County, Wyoming, near Newcastle, Wyoming, and was killed in an airplane crash on Aug 30, 1936, in an airshow in Crawford (Dawes County), Nebraska. A newspaper article about the crash stated, "For several years he and Mr. Murrell had been associated in the air games as flying partners and did stunt flying in Hollywood appearing in several important pictures among which are 'Devil Dogs of the Air' and 'Sky Parade.'" The article continued and stated, "Mr. McCollom's parents live in Newcastle [Wyoming] and in that section of the country he grew up on a ranch, and by a strange coincident he and Murrell had been brought into this section for circuses' where Wheatland [Wyoming] had at one time been the home of Ray Murrell." McCollom's parents and a brother lived in Newcastle, Wyoming, and a sister in Sundance (Crook County), Wyoming, at the time of his death in the crash.

Other Information.

I am not sure when or where my uncle learned to fly or how he met Dorothy Barden and Harry McCollom. My uncle was a Special Law Enforcement Officer with the Colorado Law Enforcement Department in late 1927 (I don't know long he served in this job), as newspaper articles from another scrapbook document his presence in putting down IWW miner's strikes in Colorado at that time. He may have moved to Wyoming from Colorado sometime after 1927.

I don't know when my uncle lived in Wheatland (Platte County), Wyoming, when he moved there, or why he lived there. In perhaps another coincidence, my father graduated from high school in 1931 in Casper (Natrona County), Wyoming. My grandfather's family (including my father) may have lived in Wheatland or close by. Again, I don't know what dates they lived there, when they moved there, or why they lived there.

So, perhaps my uncle met Dorothy Barden and Harry McCollom when he traveled in the area of northwest Nebraska and/or southeast Wyoming (the distances between location in this area are listed in endnoteⁱⁱⁱ) sometime between 1928 and 1931 and learned to fly during this time. Then, at some later date, he moved to California, but I don't know when. I found him listed on a register of voters for Pomona City in 1934. He may have acquired a taste for living in California far earlier as he was shown on a 1920 census as being assigned as a navy seaman to the USS Saturn, stationed at the Mare Island Navy Shipyard, Vallejo, California.

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ⁱ Movies were:

“Central Airport” – Initial release April 15, 1933

“Devil Dogs of the Air” – Initial release February 9, 1935

“Sky Parade” – Initial release April 17, 1936

ⁱⁱ Airshows were (this is only a partial list taken from newspaper clippings and airshow handbills):

Newcastle, Wyoming, July 26, 1935

Gillette, Wyoming, August 4, 1935

Bismarck, North Dakota, August 10-11

Safford, Arizona, February 5, 1936

Parker, Arizona, February 29, 1936

Ash Fork, Arizona, March 15, 1936

Mojave, California, March 22, 1936

Marysville, California, April 5, 1936

Burley, Idaho, June 20, 1936

Denver, Colorado, July 4-6, 1936 (Denver Mile High Air Races)

Spearfish, South Dakota, July 18-20, 1936

Deadwood, South Dakota, July 23, 1936 ?

Rapid City, South Dakota, July 24-26, 1936 (Black Hills Airfair at Black Hills Airport)

Gillette, Wyoming, August 2, 1936

Buffalo, Wyoming, August 9, 1936

Scottsbluff, Nebraska, August 23, 1936 (Second Annual American Legion air show)

From an unidentified newspaper clipping in my uncle’s scrapbook:

“Second, there are the Hollywood fliers – Harry McCollum and Ray Murrell, daredevils from the movie lots on the Pacific coast”

“Third, there is Dorothy Barden, who will make her 299th leap with a parachute from a plane.”

...

“1:30-1:50. Stunting by Harry McCollum, one of the Hollywood fliers.”

“1:50-2:10. Dorothy Barden, Scottsbluff, will make her 299th jump.”

“2:30-2:45. Ray Murrell, Hollywood flier, in spectacular flying exhibition.”

“McCollum was one of the Hollywood stunt fliers who thrilled 5,000 people at the Scottsbluff air show here Sunday, August 23. He and Ray Murrell, famed fliers of Hollywood, teamed with Joe Jacobsen to furnish the mammoth crowd with a full quota of air thrills”

Crawford, Nebraska, August 30, 1936

Alliance Municipal Airport, Nebraska, September 27, 1936

Needles, Arizona

Prescott, Arizona

Greenville, California

Chico, California, May 10-27, ??? (Butte County Spring Air Fiesta)

Bismarck, North Dakota

Wheatland, Wyoming, August ?, 1936?

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ⁱⁱⁱ Area Mileages – Northwest Nebraska and Southeast Wyoming:

Newcastle, Wyoming – north of Alliance, Nebraska – 175 miles

Wheatland, Wyoming (thru Scottsbluff) – west of Alliance, Nebraska – 161 miles

Casper, Wyoming – west of Alliance, Nebraska – 218 miles

Casper, Wyoming – northwest of Wheatland, Wyoming – 109 miles

Newcastle, Wyoming – north of Redington, Nebraska – 212 miles

Wheatland, Wyoming - northwest of Redington, Nebraska – 134 miles

Redington, Nebraska – south of Alliance, Nebraska – 51 miles