

IOWA HISTORY



(Photo Courtesy Library of Congress)

Iowa's World-known Air King

"Eugene Ely Fatally Injured in Airship Accident"

In July 1910 newspaper headlines announced the death of the Iowa native. However, it turned out the reports were greatly exaggerated.

Ely had been making an exhibition flight in Winnipeg, Canada, when his plane was caught by a gust of wind; and he crashed 60 feet to the ground. In reality, he escaped with only slight injuries.

Ely was born on a farm near Williamstown, Iowa, in 1886. Growing up with his attorney father in Davenport, he spent time working in a garage and honed his skills as a mechanic. He also became an expert automobile driver; and in August 1904, Ely broke a record driving from Davenport to Iowa City. The previous record had been set by Ely himself when he made the trip in two hours and 26 seconds. Ely's new record was two hours and 10 seconds.

By 1910 Ely's passion for automobiles had taken him to Portland, Ore., where he worked for an auto dealer named E. Harry Wemme, who also happened to be an agent for Curtiss Aviation. Wemme owned a Curtiss biplane but had never flown it. Ely had never flown but offered to take to the skies with his employer's plane. It didn't end well.

The inexperienced Ely crashed the plane but escaped injury. But the short flight awakened his interest in flying. He purchased the damaged plane from Wemme and taught himself to fly, entering exhibitions in Canada and the United States.

Eventually he met Glenn Curtiss, who would become known as “Founder of the American Aircraft Industry.” Curtiss offered Ely a job on his exhibition team, performing in air shows around the country, including Sioux City.

In October 1910 Ely had entered a competition to fly from Chicago to New York in six days. Two local newspapers offered a \$30,000 prize for a successful flight. However, after three attempts and two crash landings, Ely was forced to give up.

Only a month later Ely made aviation history by taking off from the deck of a US Navy cruiser, the *USS Birmingham*. It was the first time an aviator had accomplished such a feat, and the Iowa native became known throughout the country. Only a few weeks later, in January 1911, Ely again made history when he landed on the deck of a warship in San Francisco Bay. “It was easy enough,” he said as he stepped from the plane to the cheers of the sailors.

In September 1911 Ely, described as the “world-known air king,” was injured when his plane encountered a “treacherous wind” that caused him to fall 100 feet to the ground in a show in Ohio. He managed to crawl from the wreckage without assistance. He sustained a few bruises and a cut to the head.

The “air king” was wined and dined back home in Davenport in October 1911 where he performed a little air show for his friends and relatives. He demonstrated his “spiral,” “swung around in circles,” dipped and “toyed with his machine” giving the spectators “thrill after thrill.” In an interview with the local newspaper, Ely admitted that the aviation business could be “a little dangerous.”

Shortly after Ely’s Iowa visit, a terrible mishap proved his words to be an understatement. Performing at the state fair in Macon, Ga., Ely was just completing a circuit of the fair grounds and starting on his “dip” when something happened. Gliding down “at a terrific speed,” and as 8,000 spectators watched in horror, Ely’s plane plunged to the ground. He was thrown “nearly 50 feet.” Ely did not survive.

The young Iowan’s body was returned to his home state, where a funeral was held at the home of his mother in Oxford. He was only 24 years old.

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