

## IN THE MUSEUM: THE SOLBRIG BENOIST

by E. D. Weeks  
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*Evert "Hud" Weeks is a Des Moines Drug and Cosmetic manufacturer whose hobby is antique aeroplanes. He owned and flew the State's Bleriot before donating it to the Department of History and Archives. Mr. Weeks is co-owner of a 1914 Curtiss pusher which is housed and flown at the Des Moines airport today. He also has a large aero library and is the author of several published articles on historical aviation.*

*Accompanying photographs are courtesy of the author.*

To aid the reader in understanding the background of the Solbrig Benoist aeroplane, the following account is provided.

*Benoist (say BEN-WAH) aeroplanes were first built and flown from land in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1911 by the man who designed them, Tom W. Benoist. Benoist is credited by most historians as the first man to place the propeller on the front of an aeroplane. All had been pushers prior to his tractor plan. He is perhaps more famous, however, for his flying boats and float planes. In 1913 he advertised in *Aeronautics Magazine*: "World's hydro-aeroplane long distance record—Omaha to New Orleans 1963 miles."*

*On Jan. 5, 1914, the world's first scheduled airline was started at Tampa, Florida, and several flights were made daily between Tampa and St. Petersburg in a Benoist flying boat. The 50th anniversary of these first flights was celebrated in 1964.*

*By January, 1916, Benoist had moved to Chicago, the beehive of early aero activity, where he began building twin engine flying boats. The British bought several of these Benoist machines, and the records indicate they sunk German U-boats with them during the war.*

*Tom Benoist was killed in a trolley car accident in 1917, and his Chicago company floundered.*

The Iowa State Department of History and Archives recently doubled its airforce. For two years, the Department's 1909 Bleriot, the first successful monoplane, has captivated visitors to the museum with its pilotless flight in the rotunda. Now on display is a beautifully preserved Benoist type 1915 biplane, formerly owned by Iowa's pioneer pilot, Oscar Solbrig. Here is the story on the new ship.



Oscar Solbrig

Solbrig, one of three Iowa pilots who flew before 1916 and qualified as a member of the world famous "Early Bird" organization, learned to fly with America's second aircraft builder, Glenn Curtiss in 1912 at Curtiss' winter quarters in San Diego. Solbrig then flew exhibitions in the tri-city area in Iowa from 1912 to 1915 in a Curtiss pusher which he built himself in Davenport. (This aeroplane is now stored at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.)

In 1915 a Davenport newspaper article stated Solbrig had purchased a Benoist biplane in Chicago for the coming exhibition season. Another article said he was completing his new biplane for the 1915 season. It will require further research before it is known the exact origin of the airframe. It is known that the Roberts 2 cycle aero engine used in all Benoist aircraft and in Solbrig's ship is original in all respects, including the seldom preserved accessories. This engine could be started on the first pull of the propeller today.

The January 1962 issue of *Antique Airplane Association News* showed an identical aeroplane and stated it was built in Albia, Iowa, in 1915. The Solbrig Benoist and the Albia built plane are both short wingspan 4 strut single place aeroplanes which look like Benoists and have Roberts engines used by Benoist. One photograph—the cover of the October 1913 issue of *Aero Hydro Magazine*—shows a 5 bay Benoist. To the writer's knowledge, Benoist built only 2, 3 and 4 place larger ships with 6 to 8 front struts. Speculation is that one of the many aero magazines of the day published

a set of small biplane plans patterned after the popular Benoist aeroplane. Oscar Solbrig either bought a plane in Chicago built from the plan, built one from the plan himself or bought the one built in Albia.



**The Solbrig Benoist**

An article by Robert Scheppler of Davenport in the Summer 1962 issue of the *American Aviation Historical Journal* supports the idea of the Solbrig Benoist being a small model, original Benoist. In it he stated, "Oscar Solbrig's Benoist cost \$4000.00." In that same issue, this writer reported that Mrs. Oscar Solbrig, interviewed before her passing, revealed the aircraft was definitely a Benoist.

The little biplane was a fine performer and was exhibited by Solbrig regularly until 1920 at which time he retired from flying, dismantled and stored the plane until 1930. When it was reassembled, it was displayed for over 30 years in the Davenport City museum, an old church. Solbrig died in 1941.

In 1962 the Davenport museum was torn down. The Smithsonian wanted the ship but lacked budget funds to transport it to Washington. One of the top U.S. antique aero collectors, Louis Anderson of Mansfield, Missouri, was alerted by this author that the ship needed a home. Solbrig's heirs allowed Anderson to take the ship, refurbish it

and show it while they retained ownership. It was then displayed on loan at the National Antique Air Museum & Hall of Fame in Wichita, Kansas.

In 1968 the writer mentioned to the Iowa Aeronautics Commission the location of the Solbrig Benoist and Commission Chairman, Frank Berlin, negotiated its gift to the State from Solbrig's son and daughters, Mr. Alfred Solbrig of Quincy, Ill., Mrs. Hope Keller of San Jose, Calif. and Mrs. Ruth Adams of Davenport. The restoration cost was a gift to the State from Mr. Anderson who is a native Iowan from Denison. The Commission paid only for its transportation to the Historical Building.

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## LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

by Charles E. Bessey

*The following article is a portion of the original "College Day" address delivered by Charles E. Bessey (1845-1915) in the college chapel, Oct. 20, 1908, at the fortieth anniversary of the opening of the Iowa State College (now Iowa State University) in Ames, Iowa. Mr. Bessey was professor of botany in the Iowa Agricultural College from 1870 to 1884 and served as acting president during the year 1882. A copy of the complete address is in the Annals office.*

A half century seems like a long time to us today, and yet I shall have to ask you to go back a little further still to find the beginnings of this college, when a few earnest men secured the passage of a bill by the legislature providing for the selection of a proper site on which to build an agricultural college. Among those early advocates of the college was Suel Foster of Muscatine. I remember him as a spare little man with a sparkling eye, and a quick, incisive speech. Always in earnest, always thinking of the good of the community, not self-seeking, he was a model citizen. The spirit of this pioneer still lives on this beautiful campus and here we should perennially honor his memory.

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