



COURTESY OF CHILD. PHOTOGRAPHER, GRINNELL

WILLIAM C. ROBINSON

THE PALIMPSEST

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Billy Robinson, Bird-Man

It was in 1896 that Mrs. Franklin Robinson came with her three sons and a daughter to live in Grinnell. At that time Billy was no more than twelve years old, having been born in Redfield, North Dakota, on September 24, 1884. His father had died in Florida and the boys had to help support the family. Billy worked for the "handy man" at Grinnell, and lived with him after the rest of the family moved to Oskaloosa. When his brothers were killed in a mine explosion, his mother and sister returned to Grinnell.

Meanwhile Billy was learning the versatility of a general repair man. When the shop was sold he stayed on and worked for the new owner. Being of a mechanical disposition, he fixed bicycles with skill and imagination. When the motor age began he was well prepared to make recalcitrant one-cylinder automobile engines run, and well before the World

War ushered in the age of aviation he was dreaming and experimenting with heavier than air flying machines.

Billy Robinson, even in his maturity, was not a large man. Small of stature, he was nevertheless endowed with endurance much in excess of the physical proportions of his body. His quiet, courteous manner enabled him to meet his friends with dignified familiarity. And he had an innate enthusiasm that imparted a certain charm to his demeanor. Many who knew him remember the light which kindled in his eye when he spoke of his work and plans. Indeed, next to his mechanical genius, this enthusiasm for his profession, combined with unlimited courage, was the most prominent trait of his character.

Eventually Billy Robinson, in partnership with Charlie Hink, an expert mechanic, bought the repair shop. It was there, in that modest establishment, that he experimented with a revolving type of aeroplane engine. It was there he built his first flying machine, a monoplane of original design. Working alone, except for the assistance of his partner, he molded his own castings, welded the iron, and constructed both the motor and the plane according to his own ideas. His first engine went to pieces, but he profited by his early mistakes and finally produced a motor that became the pattern for modern airplane engines.

On June 17, 1910, a travelling show came to Grin-

nell. Billy had just completed his flying machine. Being anxious to exhibit the monoplane equipped with its home-made sixty horse power radial motor, he hauled it out to the fair grounds where the show was attracting a large crowd. Many of the people were more interested in the flying machine than the show. At least the manager of the show recognized the value of the plane as an advertising attraction, even though no flights were attempted. When the show pulled out early the next morning and went to another town, Billy Robinson and his monoplane went with it.

Realizing that he must learn to fly if his progress in aeronautics were to continue, Robinson made the acquaintance of Max Lily, an aviator of renown, and together they went to Florida for a year. There Lily taught him to fly. Upon his return he worked with his instructor in an aviation school in Chicago, teaching and experimenting. In the latter part of 1911 he became a partner in the National Aeroplane School where he stayed two years, returning to Grinnell in December, 1913.

During the years from 1914 to 1916, Billy Robinson, the bird-man, became well known in central Iowa. In his efforts to perfect his plane and motor he made many flights in the vicinity of Grinnell. He and his flying machine were familiar objects in every town within a radius of fifty miles. The roar of his motor never failed to bring people to their doors and into the street. In Grinnell the sight of

him sailing about in the sky became so common that he ceased to attract attention.

Nevertheless Grinnell was proud of Billy Robinson. A kind of glamour surrounded his achievements. Here was a Grinnell man who had won recognition as an inventor and become a premier flyer. On his own initiative and with his own tools he had pioneered in the conquest of the air. First in a monoplane and later in a biplane he toured the sky, not in the spirit of reckless adventure but for the sake of progress in a new style of transportation. He inspired confidence. When he organized the Grinnell Aeroplane Company citizens of Grinnell bought stock liberally. If he had lived a year or two longer Grinnell, with the advantage of an established airplane factory and flying school, might have been selected as the site of a military aviation training camp during the World War. And with such prestige the aviation center of the nation might have developed there. Billy Robinson's premature death was a distinct loss to Grinnell and to Iowa.

Billy Robinson achieved his greatest success on October 17, 1914. Sponsored by the Des Moines *Capital* and the Chicago *Tribune*, he took off from Des Moines that Saturday morning at 10:56 bound for Chicago on a non-stop flight. By the authority of the United States government he carried a package of letters from Des Moines and Grinnell.

The day was clear and calm when he set out. In approximately forty minutes he traversed the fifty-

five miles to Grinnell, sailing over his home town amid the blowing of whistles and the tumultuous applause of the people who crowded roofs and streets to cheer the daring aeronaut. At 12:57 he was sighted at Rochester and again over Clinton at 1:30. Farther east the sky was overcast and visibility steadily diminished. He was reported over Sycamore, about thirty miles west of Chicago, at 2:35. Then the clouds closed in so close to the earth that he dared not fly below them and, fearing that he might fly over Chicago and fall into Lake Michigan, he swung to the south and landed at Kentland, Indiana, about eighty miles southeast of Chicago. His gasoline was too low to risk going farther.

It was 3:40 when he came to earth, having been in the air four hours and forty-four minutes. During that time he travelled approximately three hundred and ninety miles, exceeding the American record by a hundred and twenty-five miles. He flew at the rate of eighty miles an hour. Sixteen years ago that was indeed a remarkable record — quite as significant as more recent transcontinental flights and refueling contests.

Having established a new non-stop flight record, Robinson turned his attention from the horizontal to the perpendicular and tried to fly higher than any one else. In 1916 the record was 17,000 feet, and Robinson had been up within 3000 feet of that height.

On March 11, 1916, he determined to enter the up-

per air and try again to beat the world's record if possible. It was 3:30 in the afternoon when a friend, Jesse Fellows, fastened a barograph to his machine and Billy started on his fatal flight. His wife and many others watched him. Up and up he climbed until his machine was lost in the blue of the sky. The general direction of his flight was southeast and about four o'clock the people near Ewart who were watching his flight heard a break in the steady throb of the engine and soon Billy's biplane was seen tossing hither and thither in an apparently aimless descent, like a piece of cardboard. Obviously the machine was out of control. Would the pilot be able to check his dizzy descent? Down, down, down, with ever increasing speed. And then, at the end, a hill mercifully hid the crash from the view of the spectators. When the first rescuers arrived the plane was ablaze and Robinson, horribly burned, was dead.

What happened away up in the rare atmosphere three or four miles above the earth? No one will ever know. Perhaps his heart failed under the strain of the high altitude. Maybe the motor ceased to function and in the too swift descent the plane could not be controlled. A physician expressed the opinion that the rapid descent caused high blood pressure which resulted in a cerebral hemorrhage. Probably he was unconscious before he hit the ground. His friends like to believe that he broke the altitude record and was returning elated over his

accomplishment when the accident occurred. The plane and instruments were completely wrecked, though the engine is preserved in the museum of Grinnell College as a memento of the mechanical genius of this pioneer aviator.

In Hazelwood Cemetery at Grinnell there stands a granite slab split from a lone boulder which the glacier deposited about a mile and a half from the city. It bears a bronze tablet on which are inscribed in gold letters these words:

This stone marks the resting place
of
William C. Robinson
Pioneer non-stop flier and second
authorized carrier of air mail
He met death in his plane a few
miles south of Grinnell when making
an altitude flight March 11, 1916
Erected by those who honor the
memory of Billy Robinson

The body of Billy Robinson was buried with high honors, while his spirit of youthful enthusiasm, confident resourcefulness, and dauntless courage go soaring on. In death as in life he was at once an inspiration and a symbol.

W. G. RAY