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AN AIRFIELD AND AN AVIATOR

THE STORY OF WINSTON-SALEM'S MAYNARD FIELD

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Levie Smith Shelton poses with daughters Barbara (left) and Nancy in the yard of her home that was located at the end of a Maynard Field runway.

AN AIRFIELD AND AN AVIATOR

THE STORY OF WINSTON-SALEM'S MAYNARD FIELD

BY JENNIFER HAN DUNN

Winston-Salem will go on record as being the first North Carolina city to establish a municipal field without government aid - Aerial Age Weekly, February 2, 1920

Today, an airplane in flight is a common sight. The sound of its engines is as familiar as a songbird. People no longer bound outside when they hear its roar, or cast their eyes skyward in hope of seeing the manmade wonder. In 1919, however, the opposite was true. Most North Carolinians had never seen an airplane and its approach evoked excitement—and in some cases fear.

Levie Smith was ten years old in the summer of 1919. While playing on her father's farm, which was located off Kernersville Road in Winston-Salem, she heard an unfamiliar sound in the distance. At the same time, her older

brother rushed out of their house and shouted: "Run, Levie, run! There's an aeroplane coming and it's going to fall on your head!"

Terrified, the little girl ran inside and crouched beside her bed. After several long minutes and no apparent crash, Levie realized her brother had tricked her. The false warning had prevented Levie from seeing her very first airplane. Nevertheless, her days would soon be filled with the comings and goings of flying machines.

Before the end of World War I, the Winston-Salem Board of Trade realized that attracting aviation industries to their city could prove highly profitable. In 1918, the board tried to attract an aviation company to Winston-Salem, but it could not be obtained due to the city's lack of an acceptable flying field.

Courtesy of the Forsyth County Public Library Photograph Collection



Trixie, Lt. Belvin Womble Maynard, and Sgt. William Klein, were photographed in Raleigh, North Carolina, November 1, 1919.

The city's need for an airfield became more evident in September 1919, when James Kuykendall, secretary and treasurer of the board, learned that fliers were willing to pay \$10 a day for the privilege of landing on an adequate airfield. He also heard that an airmail route was going to be established between Washington, D.C., and Atlanta, Georgia, and that a midway stopping point was needed in North Carolina. Without an airfield, the city would prosper from neither. Eager to remedy the situation, the board set out to establish a first-class commercial airfield—an airfield that would be the first of its kind in the state.

In October 1919, the board leased 35 acres of land off Kernersville Road from William P. Stockton. Located approximately seven miles from the center of Winston-Salem, the land partially bordered the farm of John R. Smith—Levie's father. Articles of Incorporation for the Winston-Salem Aviation Company were drawn and the task of preparing the airfield was underway. Enthusiastic volunteers gave their time, money, and resources, to ensure the field would be ready if the airmail route became a reality.

By the end of November, the United States government had approved Winston-Salem's new commercial airfield. The Board of Trade named the field in honor of Lieutenant Belvin Womble Maynard, a native North Carolinian and pioneer aviator.

Born in Anson County, North Carolina, in 1892, Belvin W. Maynard was "the first North Carolinian to become a world figure."

In 1905, Maynard moved with his family to Sampson County. At an early age, he demonstrated an innate mechanical ability. "When he was 17 years of age," said William C. Goodson in the October 12, 1919, edition of *The News and Observer*, "he could take an automobile completely to pieces and put it back together with the greatest ease."

Yet, despite his talent for all things mechanical, Maynard's passion was the pulpit. He studied for the ministry at Dell School in Delway, North Carolina, and was voted "Best Preacher" by his peers. In 1913, Maynard married Essie Goodson, and a year later enrolled at Wake Forest College.

When America was thrust into World War I, Maynard was compelled to join the Army and withdrew from college. Because of his intelligence and mechanical skills, Maynard was placed in the air service and sent to France. There, he achieved the rank of lieutenant and became a chief test pilot. Maynard tested hundreds of airplanes and was heralded

for his flying abilities. At the end of the war—and prior to leaving France—Maynard set a world record for completing 318 loop-the-loops in sixty-seven minutes.

When Maynard returned to North Carolina, he re-enrolled at Wake Forest College and continued to serve in the aviation reserves. Although he planned to complete his course of study, a reliability air race—a competition that sought to show the safety and commercial ability of airplanes—from New York to Toronto grabbed his attention. As a result, he delayed his studies, entered the race and won. Not long after, the press discovered that Maynard was a Baptist preacher and dubbed him the "Flying Parson."

In September 1919, Maynard returned to his studies, but left again in October to compete in the First Transcontinental Air Race. It was a flight that would take him from New York to California and back again. Maynard's airplane, a de Havilland DH-4, was christened *Hello Frisco* for the occasion. He was accompanied on the flight by Sergeant William Klein, a skilled mechanic, and Trixie, a German shepherd pup.

The Transcontinental Air Race was a new and dangerous undertaking. Many pilots died along the

5,400-mile route while countless others endured non-fatal crashes and mechanical failures. Maynard had his own share of problems including hazardous storms, a blown radiator, and a flat tire. Despite the difficulties, Maynard prevailed and on October 19, 1919, was declared the winner of the race. Maynard's name was emblazoned on the front pages of newspapers across the country. He was the "greatest pilot on earth" and every one in America knew his name.

Throughout the country—and particularly in North Carolina—parades and other festive events were held to honor the new national celebrity. In November, Maynard flew to Raleigh where he gave Governor Thomas Walter Bickett his first ride in an airplane. On takeoff, Bickett shouted: "Give my regards to [Lieutenant Governor] Max Gardner and tell him go make the best Governor he can."

The two men had planned to fly to Wake Forest for a reception, but the designated landing field was too short and they had to return to Raleigh. Maynard and the governor eventually arrived at the event by way of an automobile.

In Sampson County, the field that had been plowed for Maynard's "homecoming" was also inadequate. Against his better judgment, Maynard attempted to land, as he did not want to disappoint the crowd. When the airplane touched

Lt. Belvin Womble Maynard stands next to his airplane, a de Havilland DH-4 named Hello Frisco, in 1919. He was the first pilot to land on his namesake airfield.



Courtesy of the Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

earth, however, the soft ground held fast its tires, cast its nose into the muck, and sent its tail skyward. Maynard, Klein, and Trixie were unharmed, but the same could not be said for the airplane. In the article, "Bad Landing Field Causes Accident to Maynard Plane," which appeared in *The News and Observer* on November 5, 1919, the writer stated: "The Flying Parson was not in good humor when he was greeted by the reception committee...but for his religious training it is not improbable that he would have cussed."

"The field," said Maynard "is not fit for a parachute jumper to land in."

Such was the case throughout North Carolina. So-called "airfields" dotted the landscape, but were nothing more than golf courses, country club lawns, agricultural fields, and other patches of land that had been cleared to allow space for landings and takeoffs. Although these fields were selected and put into shape by the United States government, most were plagued with stumps, ruts, and mud.

The Winston-Salem Board of Trade, along with their supporters, recognized these issues and set forth to create an airfield unlike any other in the state. At

its completion, Maynard Field consisted of intersecting runways that allowed fliers to take off and land from any direction. The field was cleared and smoothed; the top surface was softened and compressed against the second layer; and a sandy soil, which prevented the accumulation of mud in bad weather, was spread over the top. Fifteen-foot-wide letters that spelled out Maynard Field were erected for the purpose of aerial navigation and directional markers were posted at each end of the runways; a wind indicator was erected on a 30-foot pole. In addition to safe and durable runways, Maynard Field provided hangar space, gasoline, telephone service, a mechanic and two parking areas for automobiles.

On December 6, 1919, the field was officially dedicated and Maynard was the first flier to land on its runway. Unlike his recent landing in Sampson County, Maynard landed in smooth form and found the field to be perfect in every regard. When Maynard addressed the crowd he

stated that Winston-Salem had taken the lead in the advancement of commercial aviation and encouraged its citizens to "keep up the good work."

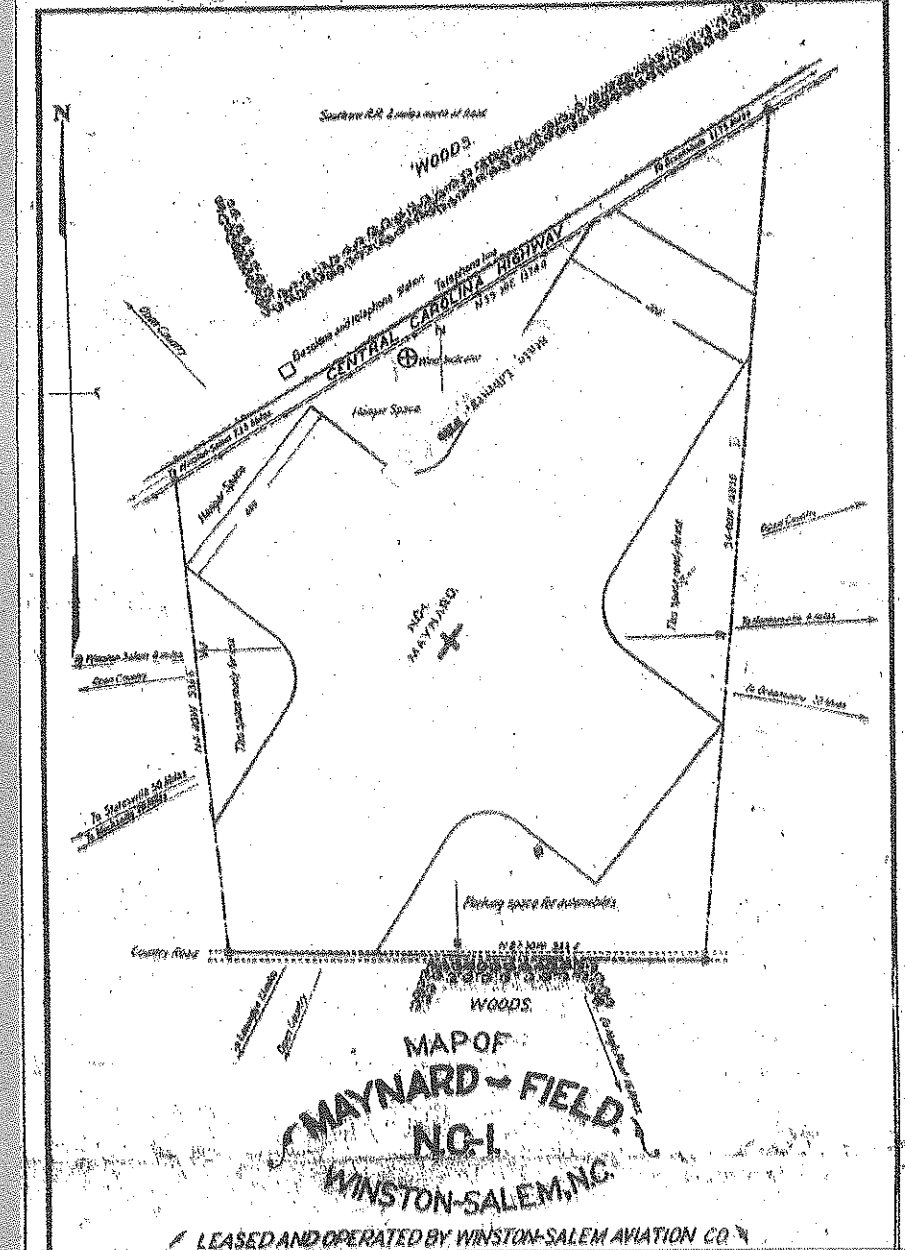
The city soon gained "fame as a pioneer in the science of aviation," according to the December 30, 1919, edition of the *Winston-Salem Journal*. The February 2, 1920, edition of *Aerial Age Weekly* echoed the sentiment. It reported that: "Winston-Salem will go on record as being the first North Carolina city to establish a municipal field without government aid. An insight into the prestige gained through the move is seen in a letter received by Mayor Gorrell [of Winston-Salem] from the Boston Chamber of Commerce in which the intellectual metropolis of America asks advice on how it should go about securing a similar field."

Famous aviators Harry Runser and Roscoe Turner—who were staunch promoters of commercial aviation—also publicized the success of Maynard Field. The June 17, 1920, edition of the *Stauton News-Leader*, documented the men as saying: "Winston-Salem has a fine airfield and it is a mecca for all airmen flying in the south."

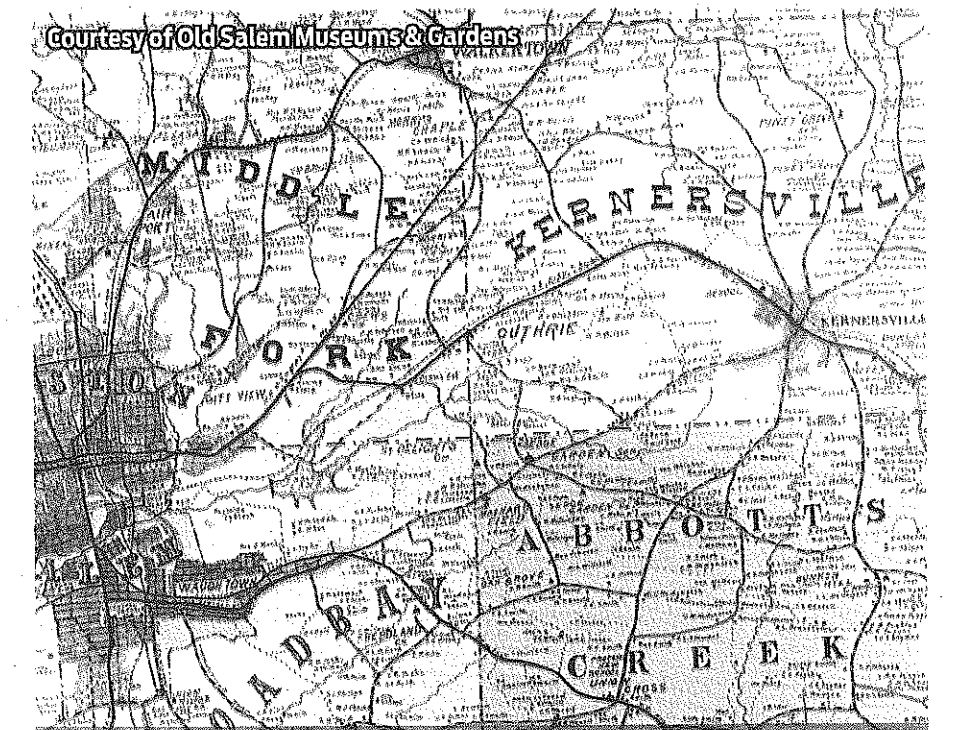
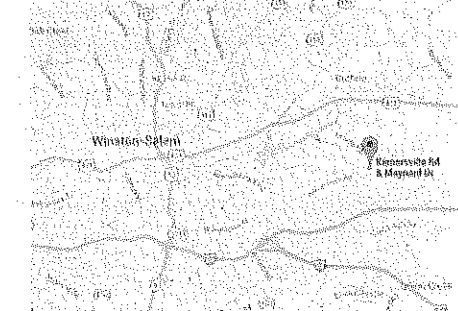
Runser and Turner often performed "hair-raising" stunts at Maynard Field. One of Turner's feats included walking on the wings of the airplane and hanging from the steering gear. A young man from Winston-Salem witnessed the act and later wrote about in a letter to his friend. He said: "...one of the fellows

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Maynard Field, Named In Honor of North Carolina's "Flying Parson," Who Will Dedicate It Saturday



Map of Maynard Field from the December 5, 1919, edition of the Winston-Salem Journal.



Maynard Field (below center right) and the farm of John R. Smith are noted on C. M. Miller's 1927 Map of Forsyth County, North Carolina.

who must have been weak in his upper story walked on the wings of the plane while flying, then he swung on the ladder under neath [sic] the plane. I bet his feet felt as if they were flying on reputation."

Lieutenant Lynn D. Merrill offered airplane rides over Winston-Salem during the winter of 1919. The cost to fly with Merrill was \$20, but for an additional \$5, he would treat passengers to a loop or tailspin. Merrill's first customer—and the first local citizen to fly out of Maynard Field—was Carl M. Spry. When asked about the experience, Spry said that since the Prohibition Amendment had become effective, aviation now offered the only manner of "getting high."

But Maynard Field was created for more than aerial fun. Its purpose was to bring aviation businesses to Winston-Salem and prove the commercial viability of airplanes. On November 24, 1920, Harry Runser and Winston-Salem journalist William Dull flew out of Maynard Field with an airplane full of wrapped newspapers. The *Winston-Salem Air Messenger*, which was specifically printed to promote air service in Winston-Salem, was dropped on all cities within a 60-mile radius.

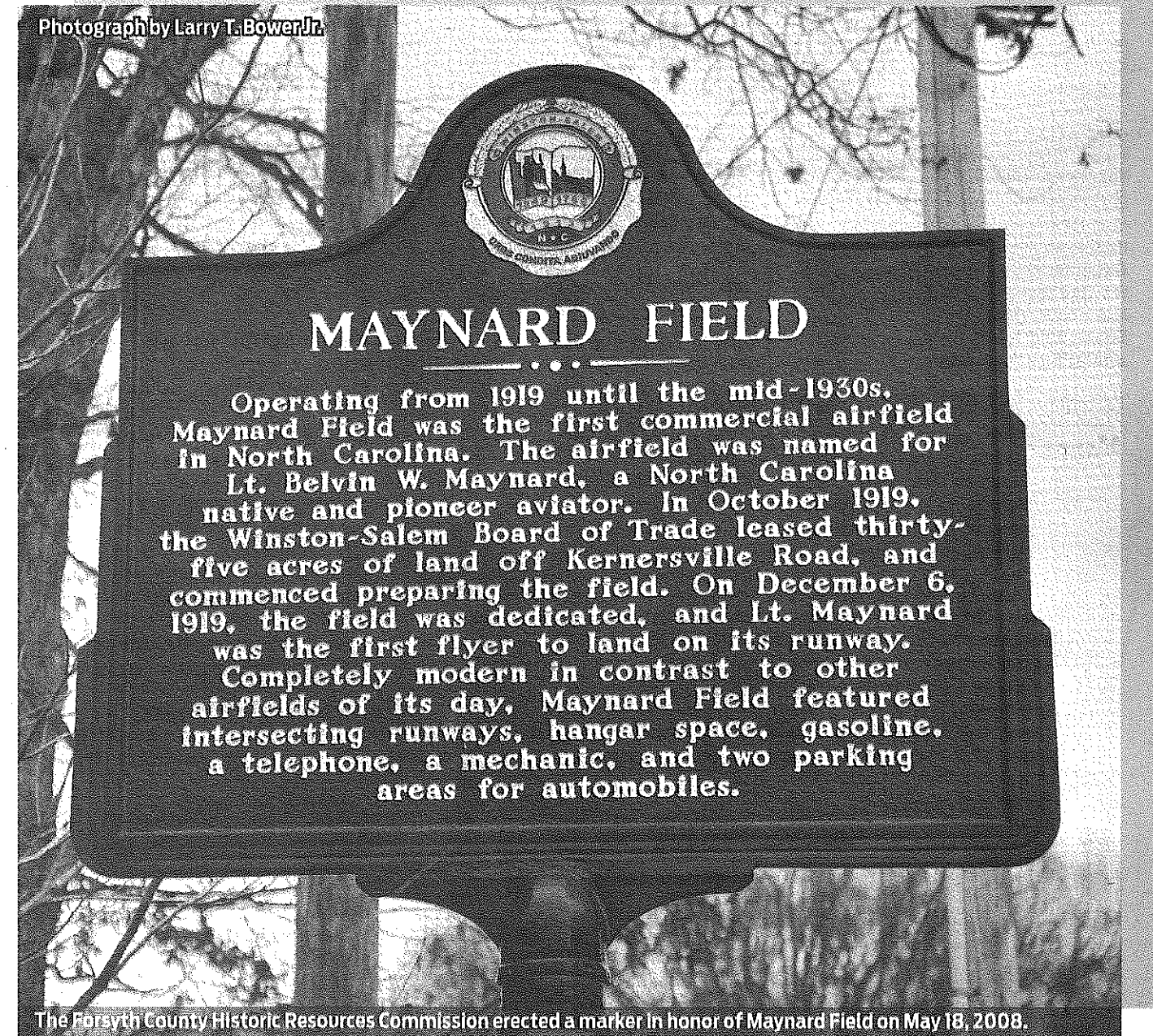
The following day a large air carnival was held at Maynard Field. Aviators from across the country landed at the field, including Monte Rolfe of the Augusta, Georgia, Aviation Company and James Dunn and J. I. Menefee, who were both Curtiss Airplane salesmen from Lynchburg, Virginia. Runser and Turner were also there and decided to hold an air race over Winston-Salem. Runser's airplane, a British Avro, outdistanced the others, and according to the *Winston-Salem Journal*, took "victory in the first airplane race ever held in the state."

Maynard Field had become so popular that in December 1920, Santa Claus exchanged his sleigh for a "modern mechanical air bird" and hangered it in Winston-Salem. Gilmer's, Inc. hired the "jolly old elf," along with Monte Rolfe, to fly over each of its 14 stores. The merchandise store was determined "to make the 1920 Christmas season, the best, the happiest and most interesting in recent years."

In September 1922, however, a black cloud of sadness hovered around Maynard Field. While performing an aerial routine at a fair in Rutland, Vermont, Lt. Belvin W. Maynard's engine failed and his airplane dived into the ground. North Carolina's beloved son was dead.

The "Flying Parson" enjoyed a short but eventful life and such was the case for his namesake airfield too. Aerial activities continued to occur at Maynard Field for years after its creation. But in

Photograph by Larry T. Bower Jr.



1927, the field began a slow descent to closure. City leaders were informed that Charles A. Lindbergh, who had completed the first solo, non-stop transatlantic flight, would be flying the *Spirit of St. Louis* to Winston-Salem as part of his nationwide tour. Because Maynard Field could not be expanded and the roads leading to it were in poor condition, it was determined that a new and modern airfield should be built. A site was chosen off Liberty Street, and Miller Municipal Field—renamed Smith-Reynolds in 1942—was quickly constructed.

Although the new field greatly diminished the use of Maynard Field, it continued to operate until the mid-1930s. Today, the area that was once the site of North Carolina's most modern airfield is covered by homes. At the end of 1919, a newspaper reporter for the *Winston-Sa-*

lem Journal proudly stated that Winston-Salem would always be remembered for creating the first commercial airfield in the state. Unfortunately, Maynard Field and those behind its creation were all but forgotten. That changed on May 18, 2008, when the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission unveiled a marker honoring the achievements of Maynard Field and the progressive-thinking citizens of Winston-Salem. On the day of its unveiling, several members of the community, including one who had flown an airplane out of Maynard Field, gathered at the site and recounted fond remembrances. For others, it was a day of learning about a place they never knew existed.

Levie Smith—the little girl who missed seeing her first airplane—died before the marker's unveiling. She had grown up in

the presence of Maynard Field and it was an integral part of her life. She witnessed a daily barrage of airplanes and walked across the field on her way to school. When Smith married, she and her husband built their home on a parcel of land located at the end of a Maynard Field runway. She never forgot her memories of Maynard Field and shared them freely throughout her 93 years. Remarkably, Smith loved to watch the airplanes, but her feet never left the ground.

In Memory of Lt. Belvin Womble Maynard 1892-1922, and Levie Smith Shelton 1908-2002. 🕊

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