

THE DAREDEVIL AVIATOR ON PAGE 1

A Plane Chased History. On a Train, a Reporter Rumbled in Pursuit.

By **JESSE MCKINLEY**

It would have been a wondrous sight in 1910: a tiny aircraft, small to the naked eye, like a bird or a bat, swooping up and down, shuddering at moments and then effortlessly still, gliding down the Hudson River and, if all went well, into the history books.

Such was the scene on the morning of May 29 that year, when the dapper daredevil Glenn Curtiss attempted a seemingly improbable feat, flying a bamboo-framed biplane some 150 miles from Albany, New York's capital, to New York City, to try to capture a \$10,000 prize offered by The New York World, one of a bevy of local dailies at the time.

And following along, chugging away on a pair of steel tracks, was a special train chartered by The New York Times, an act of journalistic one-upsmanship and flood-the-zone brio, coverage that would eventually span a half-dozen pages, from A1 to A6, including The Times's first front-page photograph: a shot of Curtiss's takeoff from the outskirts of Albany.

The flight was just one of many acts of derring-do that captured the public imagination in the late 1800s and early

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THE NEW YORK TIMES AT 175

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1900s, a period of rapid discovery and new technological marvels. Carr Van Anda, The Times's managing editor during this era, was determined to document important "firsts" in science and exploration.

A year before Curtiss's trip, The Times sponsored Robert Peary's effort to reach the North Pole, even as another paper, The New York Herald, backed an expedition by Frederick Cook, a rival and one-time collaborator of Peary's. In the end, neither man is believed to have reached the pole, though both claimed to, prompting a correction in The Times nearly 80 years later. (Today, the paper would never undertake financial sponsorship of an expedition; paying for news is prohibited by The Times's code of ethics.)

In 1910, aviation was also a new frontier, often consisting of brief flights that were little more than stunts — joy rides at air shows. But Van Anda understood the higher stakes of Curtiss's flight — the longest undertaken in the United States to date and the first long-distance flight between two major cities. It was a landmark test for aviation as a viable mode of transportation and one that everyone understood could very easily end in tragedy.

Indeed, during this era, the pages of the paper were often filled with terrifying stories — and running counts of fatalities — from ill-fated flights: "HOXSEY'S PLUNGE TO DEATH," read one on Jan. 1, 1911, describing the grisly demise of Archibald Hoxsey, the then-holder of the world's altitude record, in an accident that left the aviator's dead body "broken and twisted," still sitting in his "telescoped" biplane.

Despite such tragedies — or maybe because of them — the nation raply followed the advent of air travel, making Curtiss and others up in the skies bold-face names.

The prize that Curtiss was seeking to claim had been backed by The World's famed publisher, Joseph Pulitzer, who, blind and in failing health, was living much of the time on an opulent yacht called Liberty. The terms were simple: \$10,000 for a trip from Albany to New York, or vice versa, by plane or dirigible, completed within a 24-hour period.

Pulitzer initially offered his prize in 1909, as part of the celebration to mark the tricentennial of Henry Hudson's discovery of his eponymous river. A year later, with the challenge still unmet, the publisher re-upped the offer, modifying the rules to allow two stops and travel either way between Albany and New York.

Though The Times had been preempted as a sponsor, Van Anda wasn't going to let The World win. He sent a team of reporters, assigning one to board the train in Albany, along with Curtiss's nervous wife, to follow the aviator's planned progress.

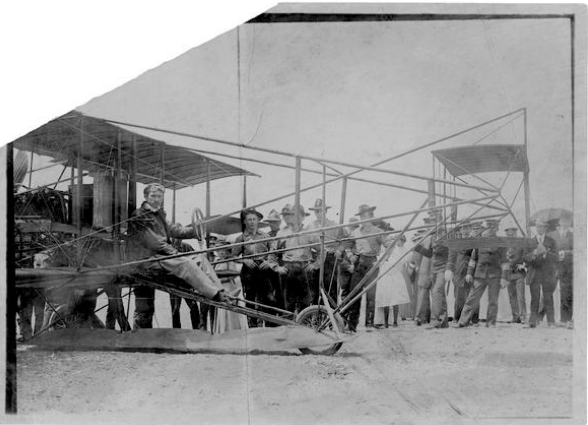
Curtiss, then 32, was something of an unlikely celebrity, a taciturn aviator who rarely smiled in photos or sketches at the time. He is not nearly as well known as the Wright Brothers, with whom he feuded, or later aeronautical trailblazers like Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart.

With an open-air cockpit equipped with a small wooden seat, the Curtiss



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Glenn Curtiss's 1910 trip from Albany to New York City, the first U.S. flight between two major cities, led to The Times's first front-page photograph, below left, which appeared in the May 30 edition.



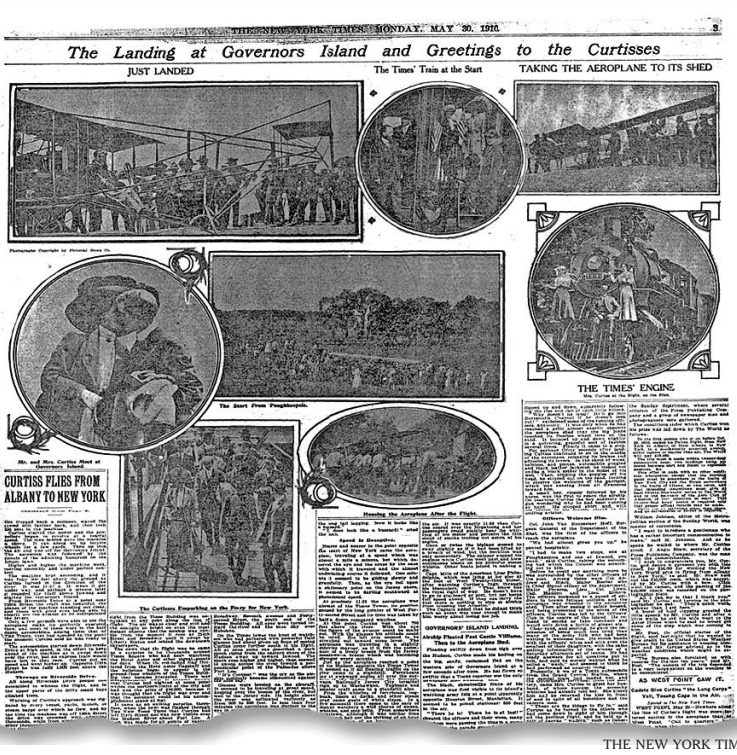
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Curtiss after his arrival at Governors Island. He piloted a bamboo-framed biplane about 150 miles, rising as high as 5,000 feet and averaging 54 m.p.h.



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A bulletin board at the Times Building at Broadway and 42nd Street displayed dispatches from a correspondent aboard a train that the paper had chartered. A team of journalists produced coverage that spanned six pages. There were photos from along the route, and an image of the aviator kissing his wife upon landing.



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