

Seagull Auction

by Capt. Bob Cerullo

On April 13, 2010, a piece of history went on the auction block in New York City. The 1917 Curtiss MF "Seagull" Hydroaeroplane is truly a part of the early dawn of aviation in America. Glenn H. Curtiss has been called a genius and a scoundrel. Certainly the Wright brothers had no love for Curtiss, who shared the spotlight with men who turned the dream of flying into a reality. While Curtiss did not, as many believe, invent the hydroaeroplane (seaplane), he was among the first to experiment with pontoons and flying boat hulls. He certainly perfected it.



Glenn H. Curtiss. Courtesy of Glenn H. Curtiss Museum, Hammondsport, NY.

The 1917 Curtiss MF Seagull flying boat offered at the Bonham auction is significant in that it represents the perfection of the seaplane. The Curtiss flying boat carried the designation MF, standing for "Modernized F-boat (MF). Its predecessor, the F model, had been in use by the U.S. Navy since 1912. When the MF Seagull came out, Charlie Chaplin bought one for his brother, Sid Chaplin. Sid became

a Curtiss Hydroaeroplane distributor for Southern California, selling the craft to sportsmen and commercial operators. He flew one himself and used it to start a passenger air service to Catalina between July and September of 1919.

On the East Coast, the Seagull was used by former naval flight instructor Capt. Harry Rogers to establish Rogers Air Lines, believed to be the first commercial operation on the East Coast to use Seagulls. Rogers had a fleet of five, which he used for charter work and for flight instruction on the beaches of Rye, N.Y. and Lake George and in Port Washington, NY. In the winter months, Rogers took his operation to Miami, FL. From Miami he provided air service to the Bahamas and was assigned to fly the colonial governor, Sir

Charles Orr, and other officials around the island. The first aerial photos of the island of San Salvador, the island where Columbus made his first landfall, were taken from a MF Seagull.

Prohibition, ordered by the Volstead Act of 1919, created a whole new market for the MF Seagull. The versatile craft was perfect for picking up illegal liquor in the Bahamas and flying it to remote watery locations in the U.S. Both Curtiss models F and MF flying boats were used

in the lucrative business of rum-running.

There was a great rivalry, if not a battle, between Glenn H. Curtiss and the Wright brothers. Historians believed Henry Ford saw in Curtiss his counterpart in the field of aviation. Ford was sued and spent many years fighting the Seldon patent claims to the invention of the automobile. Curtiss spent years fighting lawsuits from the Wright brothers until his company and the Wrights merged to form Curtiss-Wright. Ford gave Curtiss lots of advice on how to deal with patent lawsuits. They shared the same patent lawyer.

Curtiss and Henry Ford were great friends and spent a lot of time together. On several of those infa-

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1917 Curtiss MF "Seagull". Wing span: 49 ft., 9 in. LOA: 28 feet, 10 3/16 inches. Weight: 1,796 pounds.

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