

Cornwall Township Historical Society

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www.cornwalltwphistorical.ca

Editor: Don McIntosh

Bonville Airport: The Municipal Airport That Never Took-Off

Bonville was once famous for its cheese, being the home of Glenco Cheese factory. And if destiny had been on its side, it would have become even more well-known as the home of Cornwall's municipal airport. In the mid 1950s and in light of the fact that Cornwall was about to become the headquarters for the St. Lawrence Seaway and the location of a major Hydro power plant, consideration was given for the importance of Cornwall having its own municipal airport. The federal government carried out extensive investigations for the establishment of an airport and it was determined that a site near Bonville was the most advantageous. At that time the usual procedure for the establishment of an airport was for the municipality to provide the land and cover operating cost with the federal government shouldering the full cost of construction. But because of Cornwall's strategic importance as the Canadian centre for the new Seaway project, many local politicians felt that the federal government should pay the full cost of an airport. Negotiations ended in a stalemate and inevitably no agreement was ever reached on cost sharing and no airport got built.

It wasn't until the late 1950s that a Toronto businessman came forward with his own plans. John Fletcher was a Toronto businessman and pilot who was aware that Cornwall was not serviced by a municipal airport. Municipal officials in both the city of Cornwall and the Township had hoped for an airport that they felt would be the key to industrial development and prosperity so the Fletcher venture was welcome news. Seeing a commercial opportunity and with backing from other business partners, in August of 1959 Fletcher conducted preliminary surveys with local officials to determine needs. Following those consultations, and with the studies of local topography and air maps previously completed by the federal government in hand, Fletcher chose a 350 acre site in Cornwall Township, known as the Stewart Tract. Located about three miles east of Bonville on McPhail Road near Sandfield Mills, the land consisted of heavy firm clay overburden covering a limestone base, ideally suited for larger aircraft.

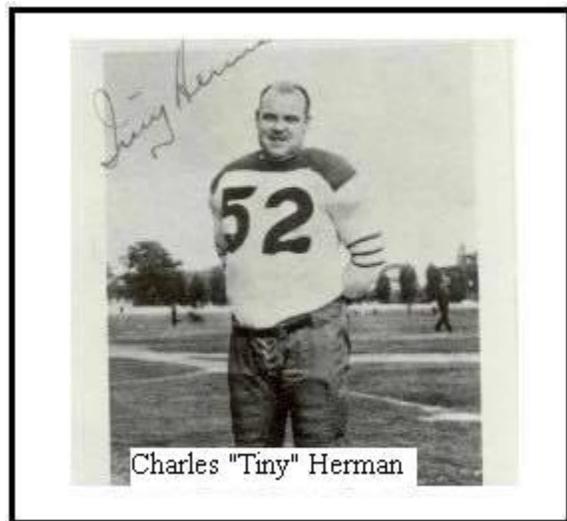


John Fletcher president of Cornwall Airways Ltd. looks over plans for proposed airport located east of Bonville. His intent was to work closely with municipal officials to give the best possible service to the community.

The new company that Fletcher and his backers formed was called Cornwall Airways Ltd and ambitious plans called for regular airline passenger service provided by a commercial airline, chartered flights and a school for student pilots. In the fall of 1959 work began on an emergency grass runway that could be extended in the future to as much as 4,000 feet. Additional plans also called for another strip 3,500 feet long and one of the two runways was to be paved and suitably constructed to accommodate an aircraft such as a DC-3. With regards to facilities, structures were to be built to serve as a passenger waiting room, a restaurant, administration offices and even a Customs and Immigration office. Total estimated cost of the project was \$350,000 (over \$3M in today's dollars).

Needless to say, Fletcher's ambitious plans for an airport never got off the ground. When financing failed to materialize, not much was accomplished except for some bulldozing done in November of that year to clear brush and level the ground for a grass runway. Even though the site was never developed as planned, it still remained on the radar through the 1970s as a possible location for Cornwall's municipal airport. Unfortunately the proposed airport again became a political issue and elected officials eventually opted to invest in the private airport located in Summerstown.

Unintended consequences lead to tragedy: At six feet two inches tall and weighing 280 pounds, Charles "Tiny" Herman was a star football player for the Ottawa Rough Riders during the 1930s. During his time with the Rough Riders he was also an RCMP and in 1940 he joined the Royal Canadian Navy serving in WWII. After the war, he turned his attention to another of his favorite sports, curling. As an avid curler Tiny participated in and organized many curling events throughout the area. The Brier curling championship event was to be held in Ottawa in March of 1967; an elite curling event that Tiny co-chaired. Serving on the organizing committee, in November of 1966 Tiny made plans to fly his single engine Beachcraft Bonanza plane from Ottawa to Cornwall to pick up some prizes at Chalet Glass for the upcoming event and return home the same day. On the morning of November 30 he called friends from the Cornwall Curling Club and informed them that he had checked a log of area landing strips and determined that there was a 2,400 foot strip located in Bonville. Could someone meet him there and bring him to the Cornwall Club? Two members of the Curling Club went to Bonville to locate the airstrip that Tiny said was there but what they found was nothing more than a cow pasture; an airstrip that was started years ago but never completed. What they did see was Tiny's plane circling overhead trying to locate the airstrip. After an extended period flying in ever enlarging circles that took him as far south as St. Andrews, all the while burning precious fuel, the plane headed north. With relatively little flying experience, having only received his private pilot's licence a year prior, Tiny decided to abandon his plan and head back towards Ottawa.



The return flight took him as far as Metcalfe when witnesses on the ground said they heard the plane's engine begin to sputter. After making a couple of circles near the town he chose an open farmer's field to make an emergency landing. Seconds before the plane went down Uplands airport heard Mayday radio distress calls indicating an impending emergency. The plane plowed into a field of mud killing 60 year old Tiny Herman and critically injuring his male passenger.

We may never know what caused the plane to go down. But we do know that if Tiny Herman had accurate information, the Bonville site would *not* be indicated in official logs as a serviceable airstrip and he would have made alternate plans to travel to Cornwall on that fateful day. It was just a tragic end to an airport that somehow existed in official government airport data but in reality was just someone's vision of an airport that never took flight.

Editor's Note: The Department of Transport investigated the crash. You can read their report at www.cornwalltwphistorical.ca/DOTReport.pdf

Ken McDonald provides us with this interesting story about School Section #23 located on the 9th Concession (now Willy Allen Rd.) of the former Cornwall Township. The story from the *Standard Freeholder* recounts how the school was razed by fire in November, 1938. The good news is that a new building was up and running by June of the following year. It's amazing how volunteers can rally behind a great cause and accomplish the task at hand. The school was eventually closed on the early '60s and students transferred to the new school in Bonville.

THE STANDARD-FREEHOLDER

Incorporating The Cornwall Freeholder and The Cornwall Standard

CORNWALL, ONTARIO, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 1938

Pupils Flee As School Destroyed

Lack of Water Prevents Saving of Building; Origin of Blaze Not Yet Determined

Fire of mysterious origin completely destroyed Separate School No. 23, in the Ninth Concession of Cornwall township, seven miles east of Northfield Station, Monday afternoon. The fire originated in the woodshed, which is attached to the north side of the school, and was discovered by one of the pupils who went outside about 2 o'clock. What caused the fire will probably never be known.

The school is situated on the farm of Hugh D. McDonald, whose home and farm buildings are about three acres away, to the east of the school.

The fire had gained considerable
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Pupils Flee As Rural School Razed By Fire

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headway when discovered and the 14 cords of cedar and hardwood in the shed were blazing fiercely. Miss Imelda McDonald, the teacher, a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. H. D. McDonald, and her 28 pupils, had ample time to make their exit from the school, as the fire had not reached their quarters when the pupil who made the discovery rushed to the room and gave alarm. Teacher and pupils saved all their belongings and the blackboard and seats were also removed by people who arrived. There is no well on the school grounds and those who assembled could do nothing but stand by and see the building consumed by the flames. The closest supply of water is at the home of Mr. McDonald, three acres away. Had water been available when the fire was first discovered, there might have been some chance of saving the main building. The school was well equipped and was modern in every respect. The loss is estimated at \$2,000, partly covered by insurance.

It was fortunate the strong wind which prevailed at the time was blowing from the north. Had it been blowing from the west, the home and farm buildings of Mr. McDonald would have been in danger.

Hugh D. McDonald is secretary-treasurer of the school. The trustees are Angus Harrison, W. J. McDonald and Angus Chisholm. It is likely they will rebuild the school, but no definite arrangements have yet been completed regarding this or the securing of quarters in which classes may be resumed. The latter will probably be a difficult problem to solve. The trustees expect to meet some time today or this evening to consider what action will be taken.



Canada Post has issued a new commemorative stamp marking the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice. For those members who receive their newsletter by regular mail, you'll see that we used this stamp on your envelope. Hang on to it; it may be a collector's item one day. The stamp depicts a white dove above barbed wire on a bleak war torn background. The stamp was first unveiled at the Rideau Veterans' Health Centre in Ottawa. More than 650,000 Canadians,

served in the First World War and many young brave men from Cornwall Township enlisted. Of those who served in the war, more than 66,000 were killed and 172,000 were wounded. The Armistice was signed on the morning of November 11, 1918 in a railcar near Compiègne France silencing, the guns on the Western Front at 11:00 am.

Happy St. Patrick's Day

Fun Fact: Where the shamrock came from

According to folklore, St. Patrick used the shamrock, the familiar three-leafed clover, to explain the Christian Holy Trinity. The word "shamrock" comes from the Irish word "seamróg," meaning "little clover." It is the symbol of Ireland, and wearing and displaying shamrocks has become a widespread practice on St. Patrick's Day.



Here is the schedule of our meetings for the upcoming spring session:

Tuesday March 26, 7:00 pm; Tuesday April 23, 7:00 pm; May 28, 7:00 pm. All meetings are held at the community room in the St. Andrews Fire Hall. At our March meeting representative Kevin Amelotte from South Stormont Township will give us an update on what's happening with the Heritage Centre. Our new council has reviewed the file on the Centre and is in the process of looking at all the options available to them.

We are pleased to welcome Councilor Andrew Guindon as our appointed representative from the township to CTHS.

Pics from the past



This sponsorship ad ran in the Standard Freeholder in the 1930s. A cheese convention was being held in Cornwall and many local cheese factories participated. After a devastating fire McMILLAN'S Corners Cheese Factory eventually became Glenco Cheese operating out of Bonville.