

L.L. Walker, Sr., took this photo of the first airplane flight in Houston made by French aviator Louis Paulhan on February 18, 1910. All photographs are courtesy of the Lesley Lewis Walker Collection, HMRC.

1910: The Year the Air Age Came to Houston*

L. L. Walker, Jr.

Man's first powered flight in a heavier-than-air craft was made by Wilbur and Orville Wright of Dayton, Ohio. Although many other people over the world have claimed to be the first, no responsible historian of aviation today denies the Wright Brothers that distinction. The history of flight in Houston, as it does throughout the world, begins with that fact.

On the morning of December 17, 1903, at an isolated place called the Kill Devil Hills near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the Wright Brothers made a total of four flights, the first of which lasted 12 seconds and covered a distance of 120 feet, and the fourth of which lasted 59 seconds and covered a distance of 852 feet. We may smile at such figures, but the significance is not in the time of flight or the distance covered, but in the fact that man had for the first time risen from the ground under mechanical power and propelled himself through the air in controlled flight.

For the next several years the Wright Brothers conducted their flight experiments and developed the art of flying from a prairie near Dayton, and by October of 1905 they had made a flight of slightly more than twenty-four miles in about thirty-eight minutes. Despite the fact that they never sought publicity, word of their developments had spread, to a greater extent in Europe than in their own country, and the brothers had already received overtures from several European governments. On the other hand, the United States Army had rejected their offer of a demonstration without making any effort to investigate their accomplishments or the capabilities of their aircraft.

Beginning around 1907, the center of interest in aviation and in the development of aircraft and aircraft engines shifted to France. It is scarcely possible to overestimate the rapid growth of aviation in that country. For example, by early 1912 the French Army was reported to have just over two hundred aircraft of all types. The United States Army Signal Corps had three. *Jane's* for 1913 estimated that as many as 1,500 aircraft had been built in France up to that time. Not all were successful, of course, but the figure does

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*This photo essay was first presented in the form of a talk before the Harris County Historical

indicate the intensity of activity. It is not surprising, then, that some of the greatest successes of the Wright Brothers should have come when they went to France and made public demonstrations of their aircraft and their flying skills.

Due to this growth and the consequent great number of qualified French aviators, some of these pilots were among the first to make regular public flights in this country. Americans were beginning to be air-minded, and newspapers, businesses and public-spirited citizens were willing to put up money for demonstrations. So it was that the first airplane flight in Houston, and almost certainly the first in Texas, was made by a Frenchman. On February 18, 1910, Louis Paulhan, who held the Aero Club of France License No. 10, flew a Farman biplane from a field in South Houston to earn a fee of \$20,000.

It will be noted that I have spoken of this flight with the careful reservation, "almost certainly the first in Texas." The claim has been made that this was the first flight in Texas, but I know of no one who has done sufficient systematic research to assure historical verification of that claim. Certainly, I have not. However, I am inclined to accept the claim as fact. The army at that time had a Wright biplane at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, but the record seems to indicate that it did not become operational earlier than March. Dallas, the only other city in the state likely to have had an early exhibition flight, seems unable to provide a date for the first flight there or in that area. Inquiries to both the Dallas Public Library and the Aviation Department of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce have failed to produce concrete information.

The money which induced Paulhan to come to Houston was, according to the files of the Houston Post, offered by that newspaper and by the Western Land Company, land promoters and developers of the town of South Houston, each putting up one-half. Due to the promotional nature of the flight, the site was in South Houston, near the southeast corner of what is today the intersection of Old Galveston Road and Spencer Highway. Western Land Company had developed there what we would now call an industrial park, and among the tenants were the Texas Fireworks Factory and South Houston Iron Works, manufacturers of stoves. Some of their facilities would be used by the early aviators. The GH&H (Galveston, Houston and Henderson) Railroad tracks ran parallel to Galveston Road, as they do today, and the tracks of the Galveston-Houston interurban railway ran parallel to both about one mile to the west.

Louis Paulhan had dominated an aviation meet held near Los Angeles during January, with winnings of \$20,000, according to some sources. As he came back east he stopped in Denver for flights there, and late in January, he plowed into a snowbank on landing, suffering substantial damage to the aircraft. Nevertheless, repairs were made and he was in Houston by about the middle of February.

The flight was first scheduled February 17, 1910, but high winds or inclement weather, or both, caused postponement to the following day, the

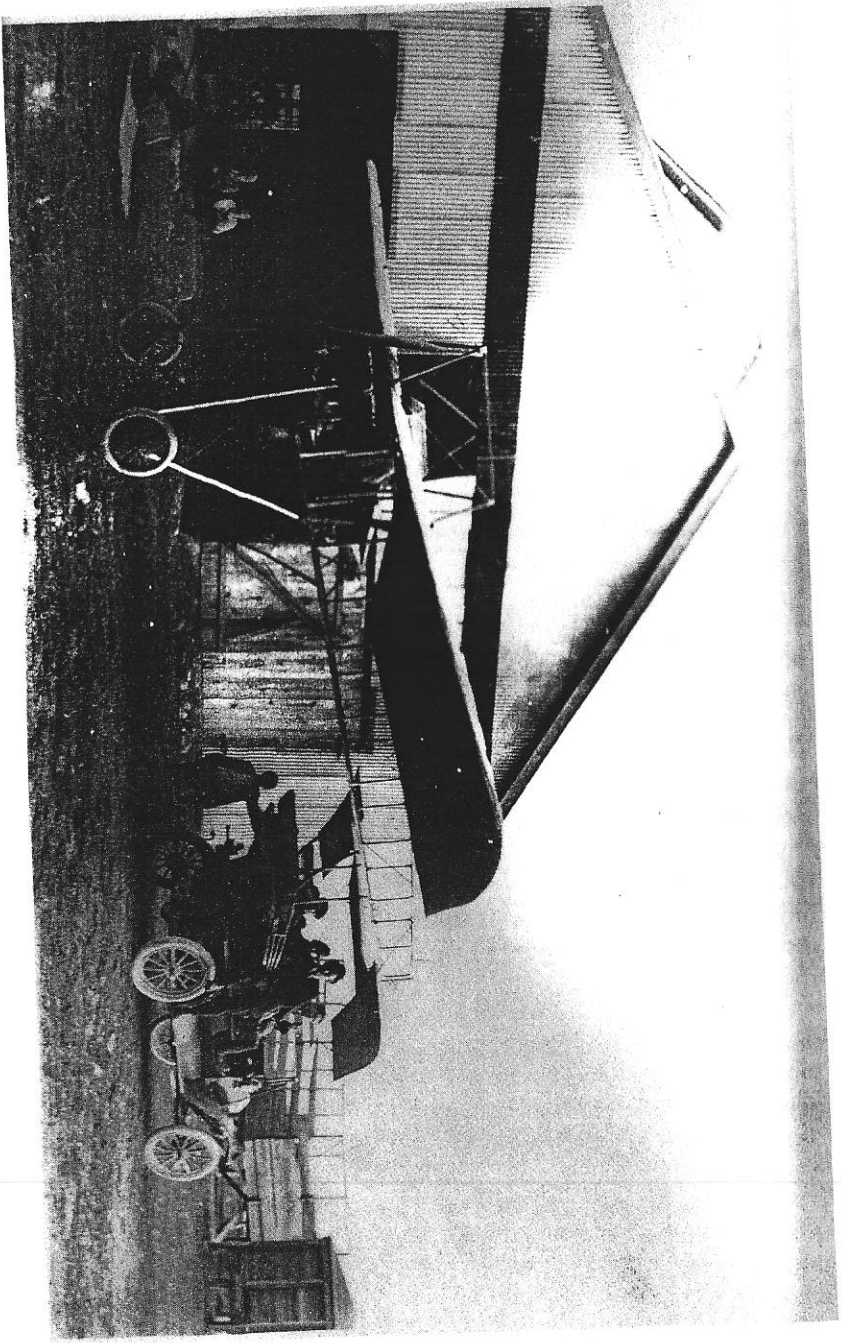


Photo (circa 1910-1911) of the first airplane owned by L. L. Walker, Sr., as it was being towed to the building at Galveston Ironworks which served as the hangar.

18th. I regret that I am unable to describe the first flight or to say how many flights were made that day. I have always been under the impression that at least two flights were made, both within sight of the spectators on the field, but this I cannot say with certainty. Some writers have said that Paulhan declined a request to fly over the city of Houston, claiming such a flight to be unsafe, and declined as well a request that he fly to Galveston, saying it was too far. This sounds like newspaper talk, for flights over cities had become quite common, and Paulhan himself had flown greater distances than from South Houston to Galveston and back. Paulhan was evidently a good businessman who did nothing for which he was not paid. Had there been money in it, he likely would have heeded both requests.

On the field that day were three men who had far more than a casual interest in what they saw: L. F. Smith, Guy Hahn and L. L. Walker. Even then these men were building airplanes of their own, although it seems unlikely that any one of them had ever seen an airplane in flight before. With these men begins the history of Houstonians in aviation.

Mr. L. F. Smith, who was universally called "Greasy," was actually a resident of South Houston. His home still stands, and he might have stood in an upstairs front window and seen the airplane and the crowds watching it. He was to be at various times mayor of South Houston, a city councilman and president of the school board. One of the elementary schools of the Pasadena Independent School District, of which South Houston schools for some years have been a part, is named for him. He was something of a mechanical genius, and was at the time of the first flight or soon after the master mechanic for the fireworks factory. He was the oldest of the three men, having been born in 1878 or 1879.

Guy Hahn was younger than L. F. Smith and, like Smith, a resident of South Houston. His father is said to have been a wealthy landowner, and Guy Hahn seems to have enjoyed the life of a wealthy man's son. In interviews with two South Houston pioneers, when I asked what Guy Hahn did for a living, I got the same answer from each: "Nothing much." In any event, he seems to have been Smith's principal helper and perhaps the financial backer in the construction of a biplane. His interest in aviation was evidently a passing one, for he does not figure in any of the early aviation activities after the first year or so.

The third man was my father, L. L. Walker. He was called by most people "Shorty," for he was only 5'3" tall. He was born on October 2, 1888. After high school he attended Oklahoma A&M College, but, finding that too dull after a year or so, he lied about his age and signed on as an apprentice machinist in the construction of the Panama Canal. He returned to Houston, perhaps in the latter part of 1908, worked as a machinist in several shops and then, despite his young age, was hired as a foreman by a company called Auto and Motorboat Works. This firm occupied a three or four-story building on the northeast corner of Capitol and Milam, and it was on the top floor of this building that he began construction of an airplane, without, so far as I know ever having seen one. His helper was a fourteen or fifteen-year-old boy named

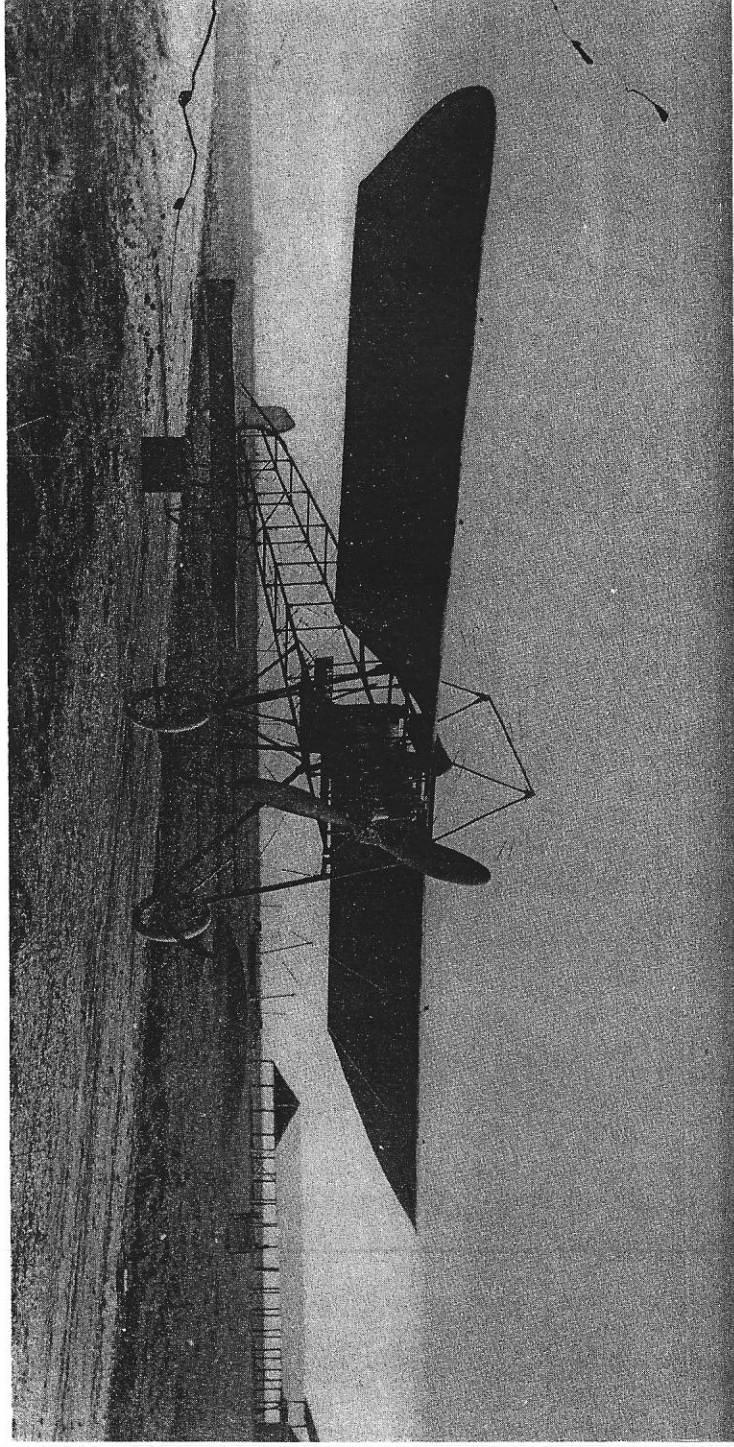


Photo taken at the South Houston airfield (circa 1910-1911) of the first aircraft constructed by L.L. Walker, Sr., which was a variation of the Blériot XI.

M. J. "Mike" Guseman, who would remain an employee and friend until his

death.

The design chosen was the Bleriot Model XI aircraft, being substantially the same as that in which Louis Bleriot flew the English Channel on July 25, 1909. The presage of the Bleriot name notwithstanding, the design made for a tricky and inadequate aircraft; and, by the time my father's aircraft was complete, it was obsolete by comparison with the most advanced designs of the day. Then, too, limited finances forced him to compromise in many ways, including the choice of engine. A French-built engine, the best of the day by far, would have cost too much, so he purchased an American-built engine of more weight and less power. Inherent design flaws, together with the low-powered engine, were factors which would sharply limit the capabilities of the finished product. Perhaps it is just as well that he did not realize this at the time.

Some time in the latter part of 1910—perhaps the late summer or early autumn—construction was complete. The wings were removed and the fuselage was towed on its own wheels from downtown to South Houston, where it was reassembled. There then remained only one slight detail: the owner had yet to learn how to fly. There was no one to teach him, and, even if there had been an instructor, the aircraft had only one seat. Whatever he had to learn, he had to learn alone. Remarkably enough, no records of any kind were kept, and so there is nothing to document what I am about to tell you; but, from many conversations with my father and with Mr. Smith, I have concluded that he would have first made sustained flight in October or November of 1910. This and subsequent flights were made from the same field in South Houston where Paulhan had flown earlier in the year.

L. L. Walker may have been the first Houstonian to fly; I think he was and several writers on the history of Houston have so suggested. I can tell you, however, that I never once heard him make that claim. For him, the accomplishment of building and flying his own aircraft was enough. Although he did not bother to fly for license until 1915, he held Pilot's License No. 759, issued by the Aero Club of America. Walker was a civilian pilot instructor in World War I, and continued to fly until 1948, when severe illness forced him to relinquish his license. Thereafter, he flew with friends until his death in 1960, shortly before his seventy-second birthday. His name appears on the bronze tablet in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington as one of the "Early Birds," the American pioneer aviators.

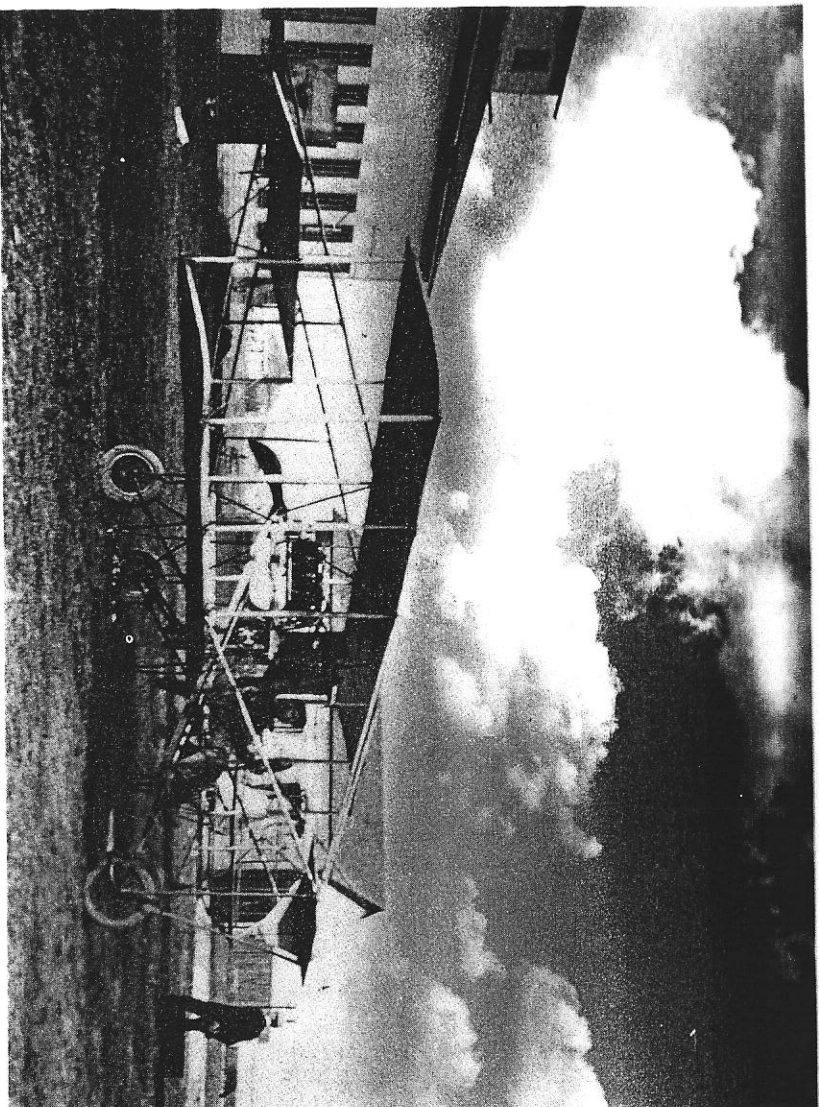
The aviation event in Houston of importance next only to that of the flight of Louis Paulhan was the appearance of Moisant's International Aviators, Inc., a troupe of French and American aviators under the management of John B. Moisant. Moisant was a Chicago promoter who learned to fly only early in 1910, and whose career in aviation was to last less than a year. He was killed in New Orleans on the last day of 1910, only a matter of weeks after the Houston show. This troupe was the first of the true "barnstormers," flying exhibitions wherever and whenever Moisant could find sponsors. The first aircraft flight over Houston was made at this time by one of the Frenchmen



L.L. Walker, Sr., in his Bleriot.



Men hold the tail of the aircraft as L. L. Walker, Sr., readies the Bleriot for flight.



L. L. Walker, Sr., in his Curtiss pusher, purchased from Fred DeKor. The plane later crashed with Walker when a wheel strut broke during take-off.

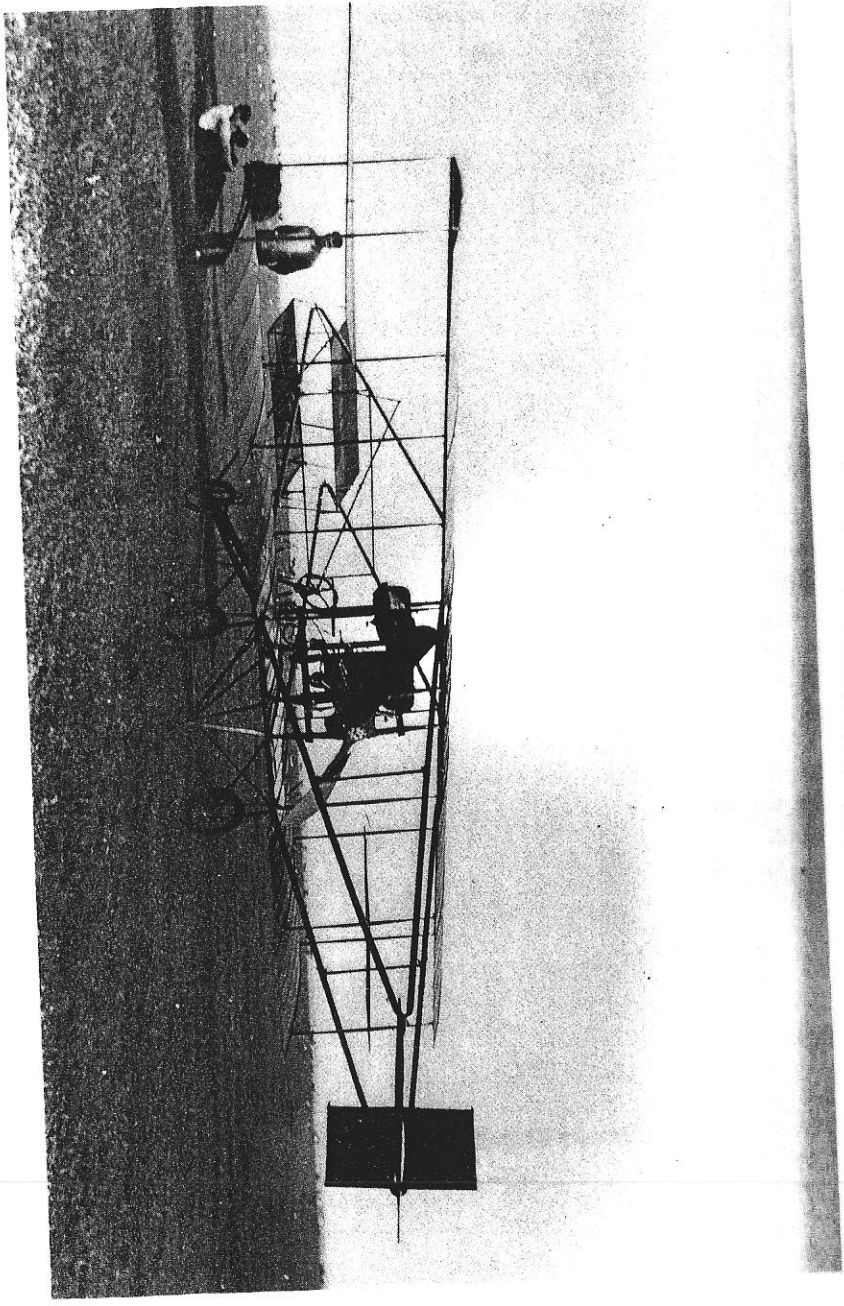
Rene Simon, flying a Blériot. I do not have the date, but this would have been some time late in the year, perhaps November or December.

There is an amusing story about this aviation meet. These touring aviators brought with them a variety of aircraft, most of them of French design, and this would likely have been the first opportunity for the Houston aircraft builders to see and to study these types. Mr. Smith, Mr. Hahn and my father were on hand, of course. Mr. Smith carried a walking stick—but one with a difference. This one was carefully but discreetly marked off like a yardstick, in inches and feet. As he inspected the aircraft, Mr. Smith would gesture and point with his stick in such way as to measure, or at least estimate, the dimensions of various vital parts. Just how much he really learned, I do not know, but I have heard him and my father recall this incident with great glee as having put one over on the sophisticated Frenchmen.

The Smith and Hahn aircraft was flown sometime in 1911. Mr. Smith, I know, never piloted an airplane, and I do not think Mr. Hahn did. Perhaps the aircraft was flown by a professional pilot named Fred Dekor, who came to Houston about that time. Dekor had his own airplane, a Curtiss pusher, which my father would later purchase and fly for several years. Dekor flew exhibitions throughout the southwestern United States, and seems to have made Houston his base of operations for a time.

True to the title of this paper, I have now told you about 1910, the year the air age came to Houston. But I cannot resist the temptation to make one final remark by which to give you some idea of the performance characteristics of some of these old aircraft. In those days, and in most parts of our country, the county fair was the big event of the year. Many fairgrounds featured a half-mile track for horse or harness racing. Because these tracks had grandstands and were surrounded by a high board fence, so that spectators had to pay admission, many exhibition flights were flown from the infield of these tracks. The length of the infield would have been something like 900 feet, and the fence would have been a 100 or so feet beyond that. Thus, the airplane would have had to become airborne and have gained sufficient altitude to clear the fence only a few hundred yards away. Needless to say, they did not always make it. In such cases, if the pilot was not killed or injured—and many were—the machine itself could be put back together again in a remarkably short period of time for another attempt.

Short years ago, there was a delightful movie called *Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines* that conveyed the character of these first aviators. They were young men and they were daring, perhaps to the point of foolhardiness, and too many died too soon. Some flew because it paid well. Others, like my father, flew out of the sheer joy of exploring a whole new dimension of life. What they did then with such great effort made possible what we do today with such great ease.



The L.F. Smith and Guy Hahn airplane, a variation of the Curtiss pusher, at the South Houston airfield.

News and Notes of the

Houston Metropolitan Research Center

Thomas H. Kreneck

We are pleased to announce that Mr. William B. Cassin and the Bellville Historical Society have become Sustaining Members of *The Houston Review*. It is through such support as this that the journal can continue to be published.

The Houston Metropolitan Research Center is cooperating with the Bellville Historical Society to present an exhibition of Alfred C. Finn's architectural work in Bellville. Mr. Finn was born in Bellville and some of his earliest work is in the Bellville-Brenham-Columbus-Sealy area. The exhibition will feature some ten to twelve projects of interest to this area supplemented by a presentation of his total works by the staff of HMRC. The opening of the exhibition is scheduled for November 10, 1984. Bellville is sixty miles west of Houston on Highway 36.

The tape recordings of the sessions of the conference "LULAC in Historical Perspective," held at the Julia Ideson Building on February 11, 1984, are currently being transcribed for publication in monograph form. The publication will include the presentations of three past national presidents of LULAC, John J. Herrera, Frank Pinedo, and Alfred J. Hernandez, as well as six academicians from across the Southwest on the history and nature of the League of United Latin American Citizens over its fifty-five years of development, 1929-1984. Supplementing the transcripts, the publication will include reproductions of several photographs and documents from the display, "LULAC: Over Fifty Years in Houston: An Archival Exhibit," which was featured in conjunction with the conference. These items are from the collection of LULAC materials on deposit at HMRC.

The Junior League of Houston is currently compiling materials to produce an illustrated book on the history of domestic architecture in Houston and Harris County from the nineteenth century through approximately 1914. To accomplish this end, the organization is soliciting copies of materials (paintings, photographs, letters, diaries, maps, etc.) from community people. The program is being housed at HMRC and is another example of cooperation between HMRC and the Junior League, as those materials will ultimately be added to the HMRC archival collections. HMRC staff is contributing its expertise and support in this effort. Co-chairmen Mrs. Thomas W. Houghton and Mrs. Peter T. Scardino envision that the volumes will encompass an overview of community architecture from shot-gun homes to the mansions that once lined Main Street.



Early International Pilot's License of L.L. Walker, Sr.