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The Nisei Birdman

*Henry Ohye of Los Angeles has his career in aviation
despite heavy odds. He now plans a flight to*

Japan, his parents' homeland, in a Piper Comanche

A lone single-engine Piper Comanche will lift off an Oakland airport runway some clear day next April. Its nose will point west. Destination: Tokyo.

The symbolic flight will be the beginning of the end—the happy end—of a story that began many years ago, a chapter of American aviation history that never should have had to be written.

At the controls will be Henry Ohye, prominent Los Angeles, Calif., automobile dealer—whose profession financed his career, a 30-year old career built on the principle that, not only are all men created equal, but they also are equal in the air as well as on the ground. Ohye is AOPA 249412.

"I believe," he said with the serenity of such belief, "that ability is not measured by race, creed and color but on efforts and hard works. I have always had confidence in Nisei pilots and I wanted others to have the same confidence."

For Henry Ohye, now in his fifties, was the first American born of Japanese parents to earn his air transport rating—and the first to learn he would not be allowed to use it.

With his own dream shattered into a nightmare, he set about to build a foundation for others of his race to bring such dreams to reality.

The dream began more than 40 years ago, when a little boy stood at the edge of his father's farm in Watsonville, Calif., and saw a wondrous sight—his first airplane. His heart beat in rhythm to the staccato of a World War I airplane engine as it came in to roost in an empty field.

Someday, the nine-year old promised, I, too, will be a pilot and be as free as the birds.

And the ink was barely dry on his high school diploma when Henry Ohye hitched a ride in a Jenny* to Santa Monica's Clover Field to keep the promise and fulfill the dream.

He toiled on southern California farms for four years in order to earn his ratings, from 1928 until 1932, when he won the commercial rating.

He was 21 when he learned that man could be as free as the birds—if he was Caucasian. But if he was Nisei, his wings were clipped by the invisible but unofficial barrier—even with 300 hard-earned hours in the skies.

In his characteristic understatement, Henry Ohye says of the doors slammed in his face by the airlines:

"The turndowns were cold. No one asked about my experience or training. I could not help but believe it was because of a possible racial handicap."

Particularly, since the temperatures were dropped similarly even by the flying schools and flying circuses.

While a handful of other Nisei pilots had also been thwarted in their desire to fly, Henry Ohye was the first to realize the necessity of organization to combat the emotionalism of prejudice.

There was a grand total of five airmen to organize in California, but organized they were by Ohye in 1932, the pioneer Japanese-American Aeronautic Association.

That year for the first time the Nisei community was suddenly aware of flying. The organization kicked off as a flying circus, holding parachute demonstrations, spot-landing contests, and flying passengers.

In order to finance the activity, Ohye opened the Ohye Flying Service at Mines Field in 1933, shutting the doors a few years later because of the dearth of students. He turned to the nondiscriminatory produce business to raise the funds for the worthy cause.

In 1934, scrimping and saving, he was able to sponsor the first Japanese-American goodwill air tour—spreading the Nisei's wings into northern California.

A grand total of three Waco F-23s participated in the first Henry Ohye derby but the reception along the route

* AZUMA'S
HISSO JN-4



Here, Henry Ohye poses with the trophies awarded in the first postwar Nisei Flyers Air Derby, which he sponsored in 1950. His drive to get recognition for Americans of Japanese descent came to a halt when he was sent to a relocation center during the war with Japan.



The Los Angeles businessman stands on the wing of the Comanche, which he plans to fly to Japan, the homeland of his parents, in April.

A "splashing" good time was had by all when Henry Ohye's Luscombe was christened the "Spirit of Nisei" at the beginning of Henry Ohye Trophy race in 1950. The "Spirit of Nisei" crashed in mountains in Mexico when Ohye got off course.



made up in warmth what the tour lacked in numbers.

Watsonville — San Jose — Fresno — Sacramento. At each stop the Japanese-American community poured out. Nisei Boy Scout bands greeted the three airplanes. Pretty girls in kimonos strewed flowers in their path.

A handful of Caucasians were at least curious enough to watch. The group continued after its triumph—painstakingly, slowly making inroads into the airways. And then:

Pearl Harbor and the loss of more than their freedom to fly for the Americans of Japanese heritage—the United States was at war with Japan. More than 19,000 Niseis including Henry Ohye, were transported to the relocation center at Santa Anita.

Henry Ohye may have been grounded physically—but no one could strip him of his dream, or his goal of promoting aviation among his people.

At Santa Anita, he was asked to supervise the handicraft activities for the children. In as short a time as it had taken him to organize the handful of Nisei pilots into a group, he had more than 2,000 boys organized into model aircraft clubs. He supervised their airplane model building (after somehow wangling kits and materials from what he calls the "outside") and staged miniature air shows with gas model and rubber-powered airplanes.

He continued his campaign after being transferred to Gila, Ariz., and, at the same time, started an intensive—but very futile—personal campaign.

He bombarded Washington with one application after another offering his services as a pilot. Washington, in turn, bombarded him with one turn-down after another. "No" to training, "no" to air transport service. He was even cut short in a brief bid for freedom as a mechanic when the authorities determined he had found employment in an unsafe zone—unsafe, tragically, it was felt, for the nation's security.

As the restrictions eased and the tough, heroic Nisei 442nd Combat Infantry was organized for European fighting, Henry Ohye saw a glimmer of hope to participate. He offered to fly liaison for the rugged fighters, but again was turned down.

But at last the nightmare was brought to a close as the war ended.

Henry Ohye renewed his fight for the recognition of his people, in the face of postwar prejudice that made the earlier years seem good.

Financially successful by 1950, at least successful enough to have \$5,000 free for the first Henry Ohye Trophy Race, the Nisei Flyers of America (a spin-off of the Japanese American Aeronautical Association) was off into the wild blue yonder at last.

The goal—Chicago and the meeting of the distinguished Japanese-American Citizens League.

It was a goal that almost was Henry Ohye's last battle.

Only three aircraft had entered—mostly because of the depleted re-

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Only a few curious Caucasians turned out for the first Nisei goodwill air tour in 1934, but the Japanese American populations flocked to the Fresno, Calif., to see the three-plane beginning of the Nisei Flyers of America.

sources of the Nisei community. Henry and his wife, Sue, intended following the route with the competitors: Los Angeles, Tucson, El Paso, Big Springs, Wichita Falls, Tulsa, Columbus, Peoria and Chicago.

A huge welcome, and the desired publicity, was waiting in Chicago. But Henry Ohye's carefully laid plans went astray when he disappeared from sight.

Exhausted from the preparations, he picked up the wrong heading out of Tucson. For 24 hours he got more of a different kind of publicity than he had bargained for.

Henry Ohye, his wife and their Luscombe disappeared. A nation watched and prayed as rescue air patrols scoured the countryside.

What had happened?

Henry Ohye can chuckle today. The plane crash landed in the mountain wilderness of Chihuahua, Mexico. So

primitive was the terrain, it took eight hours to walk out—with the help of villagers near the accident.

"It was a combination of many things," Henry Ohye explained. "The papers were quite kind and reported weather as the cause. The truth is I should not have been flying. I was totally tired. It was all pilot error."

Others were less kind than the nation's press and sneered "premeditation—publicity stunt."

"No," Henry grins. "It wasn't planned but maybe it would have been if I had known how it would turn out."

He took a resounding ribbing when he and Mrs. Ohye finally arrived in Chicago by airliner.

But he got something else—nation-wide recognition of the Nisei Flyers of America through the near fiasco.

"The beginning of the first postwar air derby wasn't so good," he remem-

During the dark days of internment at a relocations center in Arizona, Henry Ohye went right on preaching flying. He was placed in charge of the activities of 2,000 boys—they were organized into model-airplane clubs and participated in contests staged by the Nisei Birdman.



bered. "But the end—the recognition was marvelous."

Almost better than the first postwar Henry Ohye Trophy Race was the last—in 1954.

The four years in between had seen the first breakthrough:

The U.S. Navy awarded the wings of a naval aviator to the first Nisei in U.S. history—Ensign Harvey N. Kitaoka.

United Air Lines hired for the first time a Nisei copilot.

And the 1954 derby was totally integrated—Niseis and Caucasians flying and competing for the Henry Ohye trophy without regard to race, creed or color—only with regard to the best airman, negotiating the 640-mile course from Fullerton to San Jose. Thirty-two airplanes competed with all pilots equal and all pilots free as the birds.

"I think," says Henry Ohye, "that discrimination now is a thing of the past."

Now Henry Ohye can make at least one of his dreams a reality. He has had many opportunities over the years to visit his ancestral home for the first time by airline or ship.

"I had made up my mind," he explained, "that when I went to Japan I would fly by myself."

And as you have learned, when Henry Ohye makes up his mind, dreams come true. He will be the first Japanese-American to make the sensational journey in a light plane.

Someday, I think," he said, "a lot of people will be flying to Japan in their own private planes."

And he makes no bones about wanting to be the first.

"It's like climbing a mountain."

He is in training for the historic journey with the same discipline.

Last March, he bought a new Piper *Comanche* specifically for the flight and gave himself a year in which to prepare, including mastering the intricacies of instrument flying for which he has just been rated.

Two great Caucasian air pioneers are advising and helping the Lead Nisei Birdman—Max Conrad (AOPA 95611), who crosses oceans with the same ease that most people cross streets; and the legendary Col. Art Gobel, winner of the first trans-Pacific race at the time that Henry Ohye was sprouting his own wings.

Conrad helped select the *Comanche* for the flight to Tokyo. Conrad has flown single-engine planes on long flights himself. He will fly some cross-countries with Henry, helping him to simulate overwater conditions.

Gobel is heading a volunteer committee preparing for the takeoff arrangements at Oakland.

The Japanese government is preparing a reception for Ohye, which includes teaching a young lady to fly so that she can fly out to meet him when he approaches Tokyo.

It is fitting that Henry Ohye get his first glimpse of his parents' native land from the air. Two dreams will be coming true for him. ●

SWAT That Attitude!

by LOREN CARLBERG • AOPA 5835

What is wrong with aviation? Why do young businessmen enthusiastically learn to fly, buy a neat airplane, work like the dickens to get their coveted private license . . . and then vanish into thin air after sacrificing their aircraft investment on the altar of disillusion?

There is nothing wrong with aviation that a change in attitude won't cure. The "so what" attitude of operators, city fathers, mechanics and line boys has added up to create a great big sty in the eye of the men who fly.

Here is a little guy with a shiny new *Sky-Gnat*. He's as proud as pitch and jealous, too, of the shiny new paint job and glistening metal. Well he might be, too, because he has invested the price of a Cadillac convertible in his little four-placer . . . and that's a lot of lettuce for a guy that has just shelled out for enough dual and rented solo to qualify him for a license. He and his little wife . . . perhaps a couple of tiny tots, too, head for the wide open spaces. A wonderful, long time dream has finally come true.

At the first gas stop he finally finds a grimy little gas boy asleep on a broken down sofa in a tumbled down office shack. The lad drags a splintered old step ladder up to the wing, bangs it against the gear and knocks off a chip of paint (maybe even punctures the fabric). He then drags a dirty hose across the leading edge of the bright, new wing, pops his elbow weight against the top of the wing and drips a pint of dyed gasoline while he removes the gas cap.

Often he lets another quart or two of the red dye streak down the wing, staining it from one edge to the other, even letting some of the stain trickle onto the fuselage without so much as a "beg your pardon." Some have even been known to forget to replace the gas cap and even worse, leave the oil stick on the gas pump after adding a quart of oil to the engine. So what? It's just another airplane. It's not a Cadillac, even if it did cost even more. If it were a Cadillac, the station attendant would have placed a blanket over the fender before checking oil; and if he had spilled a drop of gasoline on the precious car he would have almost died of humiliation.

Some mechanics scoff at the owner's feelings—even laugh in his face when he explains that he is proud of his airplane and doesn't want it scratched up. The cowling is tossed to the hangar floor, paint side up or down . . . piece after piece piled on top of another. A quick push with the foot conveniently moves it to a more out-of-the-way place. If a screwdriver slips and takes a few inches of paint with it, so what! Smudgy hands replace the cowling, the cushions; grit-filled shoe soles slide up

and down the struts while the mechanic makes adjustments within the cabin. Disregarding the lift handle on the fuselage, the line boy's fingers pop cracks into the stabilizers as they lift the airplane by pure strength and awkwardness. Chat and gravel is often left where propellers can pick it up to the tune of a few nicks and a few extra bucks for filing out the nicks.

Gasoline prices are completely mad! Oftentimes four cents per gallon differences are found at airports only a few miles apart.

Many states leave their "road tax" on their aviation gas so the fly-boys can help build beautiful highways. Some are kind enough to refund all or a portion of the road tax if you go through enough red tape to use up all the refund in time, trouble and nuisance. Seldom are refunds sought.

Airport coffee shops sometimes have the "so-what" attitude, too . . . with prices that are an insult to their customers' intelligence. And a menu that tempts the appetite to withdraw and wait until it can satisfy itself at an uptown eatery.

But perhaps the most inexcusable "so-what" of them all is the "so-what" of the "city dad" who fails to realize that the airport is usually the first thing a VIP sees when he comes to town. The VIP usually flies, either by airline or in his own company plane.

It is amazing how many times he is greeted by a pall of smoke drifting from the city dump, unbelievably located right on or adjoining the municipal airport. Sometimes it is disguised by the civic name of "land fill", but it still smells like a city dump to the VIP. On the way to town in the mayor's car or in a city cab, he must wend his way through debris strewn lanes that eventually get him to the city . . . even though they may pass a glue factory, a couple of cattle feeder lots, the city's sewage disposal plant and the shantiest part of town. At last they arrive at the plush hotel where an elaborate banquet awaits mister big.

These have been some of the worst examples, true. But they have not been exaggerated. Fortunately many progressive spots have seen the light and treat flyers like they were people.

Loren Carlberg has been flying since 1926. During World War II, he was a civilian flight instructor for military contract schools. He became AOPA 5835 while conducting a radio program on aviation at Wichita, Kan. His career also has included newspaper work, operator of a flying service and power line patrol. He presently resides at Muskogee, Okla. ●