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## Flint Hills and Aviation

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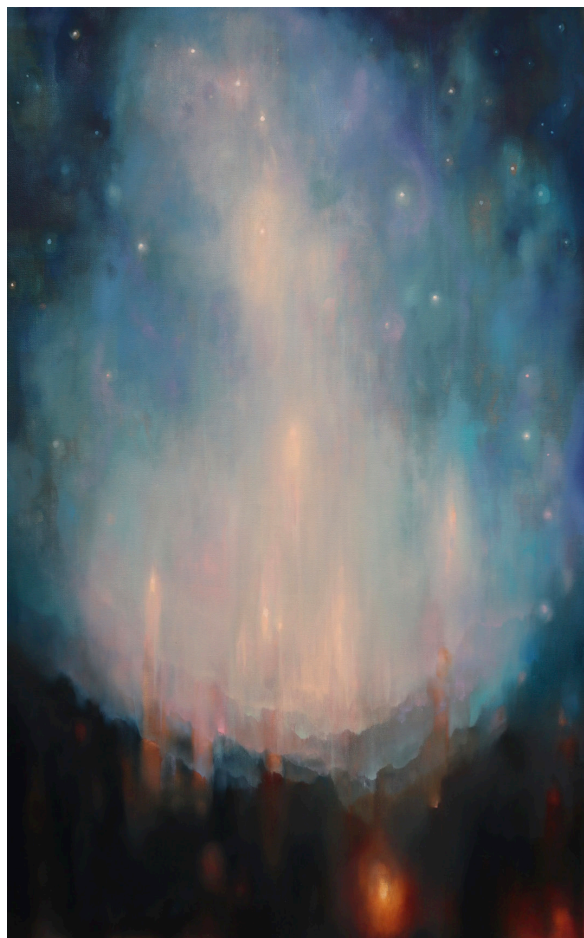
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**Ember**  
Clare Doveton

## FLINT HILLS AND AVIATION

### A COMPLEMENT TO AN EVOLUTION

December 2023 will mark the 120th anniversary of the Wright brothers' historic flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and the launch of aviation in all forms.

The microcosm of the Flint Hills has played a substantial role in aviation's evolution from those early days to today.

One of the first direct impacts the aviation industry had on the United States economy was the implementation of the U.S. Air Mail Service in 1918. Instead of several days if not weeks to deliver mail to remote locations or coast to coast, air mail reduced delivery to just a few days. Of the several routes covered by these aircraft and pilots, one notable route crossed the Flint Hills, connecting Kansas City and Dallas.

Back then, the radio ground-based navigation systems that support aviation today did not exist. Instead, a series of light-beacon towers, positioned on or near large concrete or metal arrows, were constructed along the various routes, including five beacons located within the Flint Hills. Today, most of the beacons are gone, and just a few of the arrows exist.

One of the beacons was Cassoday Airway Beacon No. 41 near the town of Cassoday. It had a 2-million-candlepower, 24-inch rotating beacon. The site also included Cassoday Intermediate Field, which consisted of two 2,600-foot grass runways in an "L" formation. Intermediate airfields served as rest stops where pilots could land if needed.

The site operated from 1925 to 1928. It was upgraded to a Flight Service Station in 1931 and included a weather teletype. Traces of the airfield are no longer visible.

\* \* \*

The development of Wichita as the “Air Capital of the World” began in the 1920s and 1930s. While Wichita is outside the Flint Hills, the numerous aviation companies that formed in the city impacted some Flint Hills communities.

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### **THE ENOLA GAY, THE B-29 THAT DROPPED THE ATOMIC BOMB ON HIROSHIMA TO END WORLD WAR II, WAS PROCESSED AT THE HERINGTON ARMY AIRFIELD.**

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The Herington Army Airfield (now Herington Regional Airport) served as the aircraft and crew processing site for Boeing’s B-17, B-24 and B-29 bombers manufactured in Wichita prior to their departure for overseas assignments. The Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima to end World War II, was processed at the Herington Army Airfield.

Support for aircraft manufacturing continues today with the LMI Aerospace operation located in Cottonwood Falls. LMI produces sub-assemblies for Boeing

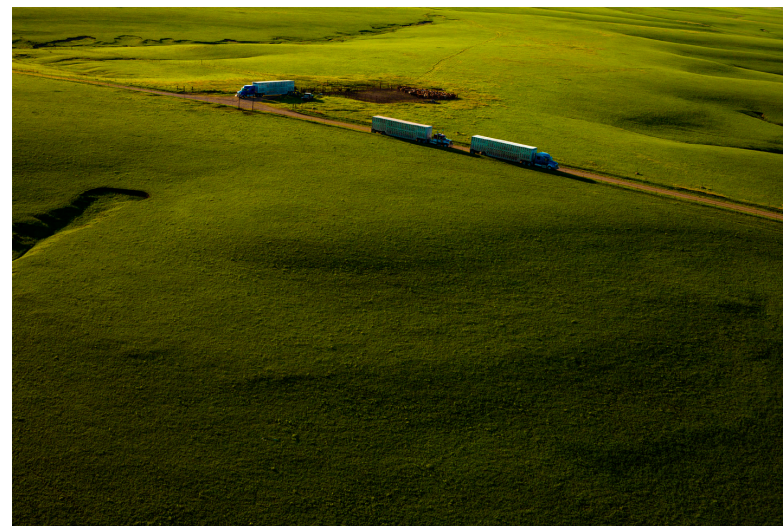
that Spirit AeroSystems assembles in Wichita.

\* \* \*

The growing popularity of aviation and the accessibility of aircraft, coupled with the wide-open spaces of the Flint Hills, were a natural combination leading to the establishment of many municipal and private airports. These airports offer a variety of services to their local communities, including private and commercial air transportation, aerial spraying services for local farming and ranching operations, aviation-centric services of fuel, flight instruction and mechanic services, and a place for local pilots to “poke holes in the sky.”

The growth of Kansas State University and the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility in Manhattan and the Army’s 1st Infantry Division (the “Big Red One”) in Junction City have provided the necessary passengers for one major air carrier, American Airlines, to establish regular service between Manhattan Regional Airport and the Chicago O’Hare and Dallas Fort Worth airports.

The Captain Jack Thomas Memorial Airport in El Dorado, with its proximity to Wichita, local oil refineries and other businesses, serves as a transportation hub for private and charter flights. It also offers aircraft rental and pilot instruction.



**Blanketed Landscape VI**  
Mark Feiden

The Lt. William M. Milliken Airport in Eureka, Marion Municipal Airport and Herington Regional Airport are bases for aerial spraying operations for farming pest and pasture noxious weed control.

Some of the many small municipal airports created in the Flint Hills have gone by the wayside, but a few still exist with a combination of asphalt or grass runways. They are the Cottonwood Falls, Council Grove and Hillsboro airports, as well as the Marion airport mentioned earlier. These primarily serve the needs of

private pilots who enjoy the freedom of flight and the opportunity to take in the scenic beauty of the Flint Hills tallgrass from the eagle’s view. One of the most picturesque views is the lush green of the new bluestem grass about two months after pasture burning in early spring; thoughts of Ireland come to mind.

These pilots are always looking for a reason to fly, with pancake breakfast fly-ins being at the top of the list. One such fly-in is hosted by Chapter 1535 of the Experimental Aircraft Association



**Clements Bridge II**  
Mark Feiden

at the Cottonwood Falls Airport on the Saturday of the Flint Hills Rodeo in nearby Strong City.

Marked on aviation sectional maps are several private airports within the Flint Hills, the majority located within Chase County. In addition, there are some that are not marked, known only to the landowners who use them. These serve as the base for the landowner's own personal transportation, whether it be for business or personal travel. One such landowner shared memories of

using his private airport and airplane to commute from the Toledo area to visit relatives in Bazaar, while another uses his to commute between the several quarry operations his business owns.

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Aviation history also includes an unfortunate side: airplane crashes. A few happened in the Flint Hills.

Most notable was the accident on March 31, 1931, near Bazaar that took the life of Knute Rockne, famed Notre

Dame football coach, and seven other people. A granite obelisk marks the site in a private pasture west of Kansas Highway 177.

Relatives of one of the authors witnessed two of the following crashes.

In 1944, a B-29 from the previously mentioned Herington Army Airfield crashed into the Glanville farm east of Cottonwood Falls and destroyed the farmstead's house, outbuildings and some of the livestock. The author's great-grandmother, who was in the house, suffered a back injury, bruises and severe shock but managed to crawl free from the debris and fire. She survived.

Later, a small reconnaissance plane from the Herington airfield flew to the bomber crash scene. When it attempted to take off, it crashed and burned after its wheels struck a stone wall. The Army officers on board escaped without injuries.

In 1966, an Air Force F-105 supersonic fighter-bomber crashed into a field

between Strong City and Saffordville. The author's great-grandfather, who was cultivating the field, heard the jet coming in low and close behind him. "As I turned around on the tractor I saw the crash and felt the heat," he said in a news report of the crash. "It felt like my back was burning. The flames came about 50 feet from me."

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Through a combination of location, geography and timing of world events, the Flint Hills and its communities have had a remarkable impact on the first 120 years of aviation's evolution. Today, the Flint Hills continues to have a presence in the aviation industry and also relies on technologies and businesses that evolved from aviation to sustain its communities and ecosystem. It is unknown what impact each will have on the other over the next 120 years. If history is an indicator, the partnership can only soar to greater heights.

Mark L. Brown, a former resident of Cottonwood Falls who now resides in Arizona, obtained his private pilot certificate in Arizona. He has flown his own aircraft back to airports in the Flint Hills on several occasions, including Cottonwood Falls Airport, where his inspiration to take flight started.

Lee Glanville is a commercial pilot in Chase County. He operates an aerial survey business from his family's farm in Chase County, which includes a private airport. He obtained his pilot's license in Manhattan, Kansas, while attending university and has pursued a career in aviation while also being the sixth generation to work on the family farm.