

The Contact Man

A South Carolina Aviation Pioneer

The early 20th century was far more astonishing than most African Americans realize and appreciate. In the 1920's, Blacks involvement in aviation was virtually non-existent. Laws coupled with traditions relegated most Blacks in the south to a life of sharecropping and lower paying, service oriented jobs. Limited access to education also contributed to the socio-economic disparity among several groups of people. Consequently, day-to-day survival and the welfare of immediate family became the main concern for many people. This may account for the tragic loss of vital historical information that is usually made available for future generations as noted in other cultures.

A great example of lost history is the story of Mr. Willie Patterson and his contribution to early aviation. The role that Black pioneers played in the evolution of the airplane is much more diverse than previously acknowledged. Therefore, it is a pleasure to present this untold story - one of many historically significant events that never received wide spread recognition.

This story is dedicated to the family of Mr. Willie Patterson.



I met with Mrs. Elizabeth (Libby) Patterson White at the October 2007 George Fish School Committee meeting. She gave me newspaper articles dating back to 1971 and showed me old photos of her father, Mr. Willie Patterson. "This is my dad," she said, with great pride and excitement. She told me several short stories of her dad's adventures in life. She also showed me several 50-year-

old photographs of people from The Paradise community. As I listened, and began to review the information, I realized this story is relatively unknown and is quite unique. It depicts a 36-year bond between two men and their families. As you will note, a story about Mr. Willie



Patterson's life would be incomplete without recognizing his unique relationship with the American hero and WWI Fighter Ace, Col. Elliott White Springs.

Elliott Springs assumed control of the family business in 1931 and was the impetus that created the foundation for what is now a giant in the World's textile industry. The Springs family has a long, rich history that can be tracked back to the 18th century. This story, however, centers on life at the White Homestead, in Fort Mill, SC. As an employee of the Springs family, Mr. Patterson lived here during a large portion of his adult life.

The White Homestead was built in 1832 by William Elliott White. The home is the site of the last Confederate Cabinet meeting which was held on the morning of April 27, 1865. At that time, Samuel Elliott White who later was a founder of Springs Industries was living in the home. In 1921 his grandson Elliott White Springs modernized the home and lived in it until his death. It is now owned by his eight (Close) grandchildren and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

It was a cool and sunny autumn morning. I had just arrived at the White Homestead, 19th century mansion with my wife, Maxie. The brilliant, natural scenery reminded me of the movie, *Gone with the Wind*. Mrs. Anne Springs Close, our tour guide, is both daughter of Elliott Springs, and mother of current CO-Chair of Springs Global, Crandall (Close) Bowles. Springs Global is the world's largest manufacturer and supplier of home finishing products.

The legendary Springs family, and all their grandiose, are the at the epicenter of our local history. Naturally, it follows that a story about Mr. Willie Patterson's life begins at the White Homestead. During our interview, Mrs. Close (82) spoke of fond memories of her childhood



playmates Mary Lee and Irene. Mr. Patterson and his family lived on the White Homestead property from the 1920s through the mid 50s. "Mary Lee and IB (Irene) were the only friends I had at the time," said Mrs. Close. She indicated the location at which the Patterson's first house on the property stood. "Everyone loved Willie," she added. She went on to tell us that Mr. Patterson and Col. Elliott Springs were great hunting partners. They used an old surplus WW II ambulance as their

hunting vehicle that doubled as a carryall for all the Colonel's other hunting buddies. "Mr. Patterson knew where all the Quail were and how to hunt them," she said.

Mr. Willie Patterson was born on March 25, 1897, in Lancaster County, SC. Col. Leroy Springs employed him for several years. Shortly after WWI, he became the personal aid and chauffeur for Leroy's son Elliott Springs. Mr. Patterson married Irene in 1921 and together they raised six children. He was quite active in the church and believed very strongly in community. He recognized and understood the value of education. In their travels with Col. Elliott and Mrs. Springs, Mr. Patterson and his wife Irene developed a well-rounded view of



world affairs surrounding Black America. Therefore, he insisted on seeing his children through college.

"There were six of us, but now there are only 4 of us left," Mrs. Elizabeth

Patterson noted. She continued, "My brother John Edward (Buddy) Patterson passed away in July, 2001. He worked for Capitol Housing, District of Columbia (Washington, DC). Buddy spent about 13-14 years in the US Air force. His Capital Housing job came after the armed forces. He was in charge of the Credit Union for Capital Housing for 20-25 years. My sister, Irene (IB) Patterson Russell passed away May 2004 in Philadelphia, PA. She was a nurse & worked in a Penn State Hospital for more than 30 years. Mary Lee Patterson Zachary (84) lives in Carson, CA. She is a retired Food Service Director, Los Angeles Harbor College (25 yr.) Lena Patterson Davis is a retired teacher, Philadelphia, PA (32 yr.) Ruth Patterson Bell Meachum was a secretary for her husband's heavy equipment business for 30 years. I am a retired teacher from the state of North Carolina (20 years) & retired Administrator from state of New Jersey (12 years). We understood from an early age that we would attend college. When one finished college they would get a job and help the next one in line with paying school bills." Mrs. Elizabeth Patterson White noted.

Eventually, the Patterson family would relocate to a second and more secluded spot on the White Homestead. There, Mr. Patterson and his family lived in a farm like atmosphere where he raised a calf each year. He also maintained the hunting dogs that he and the Col. used on their hunting trips.

Mr. Patterson was an agent for Col. Springs in the sale of property in what is now the Paradise Community. In the 1950's he purchased property of his own. The second home that he and his family lived in, located on the White Homestead, was moved to 102 Smith Street in Fort Mill, SC.

Mr. Patterson obtained only a 3rd or 4th grade education; however, he continued to learn new things and developed new skills, which included bee keeping. Nevertheless, one interest quickly became his passion - aviation. Perhaps working so intimately with the

Springs family facilitated this new interest. After all, every member of the Colonel's immediate family were certified pilots. But Mr. Patterson understood, all too well, the harsh realities of Jim Crow.

In the early 1920s' pilot training was limited to "Whites Only" here in the US. Blacks, on the other hand, were forced to get their certificates in other countries such as France and Italy. Even with license in hand, Blacks were denied services at airports across America. There were a few Black aviators that sought out other means in obtaining skills and knowledge of aerodynamics. Mr. Patterson was one of them.

In addition to learning the science of aerodynamics, while working with Col. Springs, he also received hands on experience in airframe and engine maintenance. Col. Springs



facilitated the manifestation of a passion for Aviation in Mr. Patterson. Col. Springs also encouraged him, on many occasions, to pursue a license. In fact, the Colonel offered his own instructional services. "Mr. Patterson could have become one of America's First Black Certified Pilots if he had wanted to," said Bob Bryant.

An unknown author wrote an article about Bob Bryant and Mr. Patterson thirty-six years ago.

In the article, Bob Bryant, a fellow understudy of Col. Elliot Springs and South Carolina Aviation Hall of Fame member reminisced of old times with Mr. Patterson.

This is a reprint of portions of the Bob Bryant's article that appeared in The Fort Mill Times, Thursday, August 26, 1971:



For many years Willie Patterson was a loyal employee and personal aide to Col. Elliott White Springs of Fort Mill. In the accompanying photograph, made by Rock Hill aviator and photographer Bob Bryant, Willie may be seen running

around the wing of the ancient bi-plane.

The head protruding from the open cockpit is that of Col. Springs, textile industrialist who was also a World War I ace. For years Willie served as the Colonel's contact man. That is, when the Colonel would yell "contact," Willie would spin the propeller to start the plane's engine.

This picture was made in 1921 - 50 years ago - the year Mr. and Mrs. Patterson were married. The plane, although it looks like, and actually is, an antique by today's standards, was the very latest half a century ago. It was a BACO bi-plane and was made in Texas. One of only two ever made of this exact model, it had a 10-cylinder Anzani motor. It had a four-place open cockpit with dual controls in the back seat. It was in this plane in 1921 that Col. Springs taught Bob Bryant, also an aviation pioneer, to fly.

Although Mr. Patterson knew much about flying and even more about planes, he never became a certified pilot. However, Mr. Patterson was given command of the aircraft on at least one occasion.

Col. Springs and Mr. Patterson were together almost constantly during his once-a-week visits to each of his Cotton Mills in Fort Mill, Lancaster, and Kershaw. Mr. Patterson was the Colonel's personal aid and chauffeur and on many occasions, his co-pilot. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several newspaper articles featured Mr. Patterson's aviation contributions.

An article titled **Willie Patterson Was State Aviation Pioneer**, appeared in the Fort Mill Times (Date unknown). This article makes reference to a previous story printed in The State Newspaper.

The following is a reprint of an excerpt from that Fort Mill Times article:

Regarded as one of South Carolina's aviation pioneers, Patterson has been the subject of several newspaper stories.

One of the most interesting of these appeared in an issue of The State in 1967 that was devoted to the history and progress of aviation in South Carolina.

Pat Robertson, a journalist for The State newspaper, wrote a lengthy article about Mr. Willie Patterson.

The following are excerpts from Pat Robertson's 1967 article:

Willie Patterson piloted an airplane just once in all his 70 years, but he was as much a part of aviation history in South Carolina as if he had been a pioneer pilot.

Patterson holds a place in the state's aviation history because he was chauffeur, co-pilot, bodyguard and all-around handyman for Col. Elliott White Springs.

Springs - World War I Ace - returned from the war to his home in Fort Mill and concentrated on his number one hobby - flying. In 1920 or so, he began using his father's butler - Willie - to help him with his airplanes.

Willie Patterson worked for Col. Springs for 36 years. During that time he learned a lot about airplanes. The colonel spent a lot time teaching him.

Once he piloted the colonel's airplane on an extended flight. "We went down to Lancaster one Sunday morning in one of the Colonel's planes and we got ready to come back in another plane." "Colonel Springs pulled the plane just off the ground. Then he said, "Willie, you take this plane and go to Fort Mill!"

Willie remembered the flight as a smooth one. "We took off from the cotton mill in Lancaster and I followed a wire line into Fort Mill." As Willie brought the plane over the Colonel's house in Fort Mill he turned to Springs and said, "Colonel Springs, I believe I'd rather you take it down."

Willie remembered that Springs executed a turn just as he had thought about doing and... "brought the plane down just as I had in mind doing it, but I felt safer letting him do it,"

Willie Patterson thought a lot of his employer. "Colonel Springs was better to me than a father," he said.

Col. Springs passed away on October 15, 1959 at the age of 63. In his biography *War Bird, The Life and Times of Elliott White Springs*, the author, Burke Davis wrote:

The body was cremated, and the ashes were returned to Fort Mill for memorial service. A throng of people, most of them Springs employees, lined the streets of the small town, three or four ranks deep, as the hearse rolled toward the Presbyterian cemetery, where Elliott's ashes were buried in the White family plot, near the graves of his grandparents, his mother, and Sonny (his son)."

Mr. Patterson retired in 1965 at the age of 68. In 1971, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. "It was a grand event," as one newspaper article stated. "...the reception took place at the Leroy Springs Club house and it was perhaps the high point of the social season as hundreds of friends, black and white, came to pay their respects and express their best wishes. Both Irene and Willie were supremely happy." Mr. Willie Patterson passed away in November 1973 shortly after the passing of his wife, Irene.

There are many similar stories about friendships and exploits that present huge challenges for old tradition. Most of these stories are untold, perhaps, because they remain taboo. Although Mr. Patterson and the Col. were visionaries, they may have never imagined their unparalleled friendship and common passions would still reside as fond memories and would continue to inspire so many people, of all ethnicities.

In the 1920s aviation was still in its infancy and many people considered it a mere novelty. However, future developments of this critical science would demand the most confident, brave, and most daring of men and women, from all walks of life, to put their lives on the line. By today's standards, aviators are all flying positions; Pilots, Navigators, Weapon Systems Officers, Flight Engineers etc. In that respect, Mr. Patterson was truly a pioneer of early aviation. He clearly had the "right stuff."

Notes and References

1 (The White Homestead) Note Card

2 "Willie Patterson Was State Aviation Pioneer" Fort Mill Times, 26 August 1971: 1 +.

3 Robertson, Pat. The State, (Columbia, SC), 1967.

4 Davis, Burke. War Bird: The Life and Times of Elliott

5 Fort Mill Times 1973