

THE BOB SMITH STORY

As Told to RALPH S. BARNABY

Among the highlights of the 22nd National Soaring Contest last summer was the closely contested race and photo-finish for first place, between a veteran soarer and a comparative newcomer to the field. While Bob Smith didn't quite make it, he certainly pushed Kemp Trager to the limit in order for the latter to hold the lead in the Championship race, a final lead of only two points in over one thousand! This is the sort of thing which happens quite frequently, not only in soaring but in all competitive sports, and it is interesting to see where these new stars come from and how they got started.

Bob Smith's story is an interesting one. Born in 1926 on a farm at Ulster, Pa., a short Sunday picnic drive from Elmira, into a family interested in aviation, he began attending gliding contests at Harris Hill when he was 10 years old. Not only did the Smiths go to Elmira to see gliding, but gliding also came to Ulster to see the Smiths! Back on July 5th, 1940, Udo Fischer landed his WOLF sailplane on the Smith farm and enjoyed a good dinner as their guest. Later the same day Don Lawrence also "dropped in." Bob reports that the Smith kids, including himself, did more damage to the oats than Don's glider. Don bought \$10.00 worth, and the kids caught h . . . !

From this you might expect that Bob, bitten by the glider bug, had dashed off to Elmira to take a gliding course from the Schweizers, but not so. He went at it the hard way! In July 1944, he started flight training at the Blue Swan Airport, Sayre, Pa., in J-3 Cubs. He'd ride the 25 miles round trip Sundays on his bicycle for an hour's instruction, soloing on September 3, 1944. Bob's father had soloed in August of the same year, and together they purchased a J-4 Cub Coupe, later that fall.

World War II sort of interrupted his aviation activities, but upon his return from overseas in 1946, Bob purchased a 1939 Aeronca "Chief" and started flying again. Attending the 1946 National Soaring Contest

at Elmira and impressed by the sport and the friendliness of the people (a fellow by the name of Bill Coverdale helped him fix his camera one day, when it jammed) Bob joined the SSA and became a reader of SOARING.

His first glider flight came in the fall of 1948, a 10-minute flight in a Schweizer 2-22 with Bernie Carris, at Elmira. Bernie also, had been a glider visitor to Ulster earlier that same year.

In order to be qualified to repair a small hole in the fuselage of the



Bob Smith beaming from the cockpit of his very "clean" flat-top LK which won him second place in the 22nd National Contest at Elmira.

Aeronca "Chief," a \$3.50 job, he enrolled in the Embry Riddle School of Aviation for their A&E Mechanics course, and it was necessary to sell the "Chief" to keep Bob and his wife going and to get them to Florida for the course. Not only did he complete the A & E course, but also a commercial pilots' course, receiving his commercial ticket in August 1949 and his A & E card in March 1950.

While in Miami the Smiths visited the Comptons several times. As Bob puts it "We were getting more and more impressed with the glider people with each new friend we made. They all seemed so friendly." It appears to have been the gliding people which attracted him more than the sport itself!

Finally in November 1950, Bob purchased an L-K from Pat McHenry of Sayre, Pa. He worked off and on, on it for two years before it was

ready to fly. Through Jack Wilkins and C. J. Smith (no relation), whom he met at an EASC meeting in Elmira, Bob obtained a job and started working at the Schweizer Aircraft plant in October 1951.

Bob's first solo glider flight was made in a Schweizer 1-19, belonging to C. J. Smith and Jack Wilkins, from Harris Hill on February 9, 1952. To use his own words, "C. J. Smith put me in their 1-19, told me how to fly it in tow and with a cheery 'you won't have any trouble.' If you get too low, land down at the foot of the hill and we'll bring the glider back on the trailer. Away I went! After release I got below the brow of the hill and was heading for a field at the foot when that fascinating little green pellet began to pop! The ridge-polishing went on for 2½ hours, once as high as 1200 feet, several times below the top of the hill. The wind finally quit while I was below the brow and I landed in a hay field near Route 17 E. This was prob-

ably my greatest flying thrill for in my first solo flight in a glider I had gained my "C" with a 2½ hour flight!

Paul Schweizer pointed out the danger of such overenthusiasm when I took the application in the next day. Now that nearly four years have passed since that day, I view it in the same light! It surely was a foolish stunt, and only my 350 hours of light plane time, and my reading of SOARING till the copies were worn thin, kept me out of trouble!"

Bob got his L-K licensed, and after several local flights in March and April of 1952, he started cross-country from Harris Hill on May 18th. He had picked Scranton as his goal, but when he had made it easily and hit a thermal taking him to 5000 feet over Scranton, he decided to continue on down the river. Five hours

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