

SAGA OF THE GEHRLEIN WINCH

by LARRY GEHRLEIN, SR.

The year 1962 will bear witness to our break-through to offering a Winch Kit to the soaring world. This winch will be one any club or individual will be proud and able to afford.

I like to think of the winch in relation to soaring as the ski lift was to skiing. In past years skiing was for kids and a few hardy souls who didn't mind the exercise climbing back up the hill. With the advent of the ski lift, an inexpensive method was furnished to enjoy the sport of skiing. Result: today ski lodges and ski hills are big business. This can very well happen with soaring with the development of a safe, dependable winch.

As most of the soaring fraternity knows we operate the Thermal G Ranch Gliderport near Erie, Pa. The last five soaring seasons have been serviced by winch tows alone. Last year (1961) we made 3053 winch tows. I would like to mention here that our five years of operation have been accident free. Due to the urging of our contemporaries we tried aero tow with the results that both students and solo pilots voted to keep winch tow and to forget aero towing.

The main factor in favor of the winch is the cost of operation. As a commercial operator we can attest to the savings. The people who have flown with us know because our rates are about half those of other commercial operators. Pilots speak of more satisfaction in flights made from winch tow, it gives one a greater feeling of accomplishment. Talking to pilots who have checked out on our winch, we find they have an added confidence in their own flying ability that before they didn't possess.

We make no claims to inventing the winch. But we do take pride in the part we played in developing a winch that will perform safely, has a low operating cost and is of a good rugged construction, with all the built-in features of safety that are necessary to a good, safe operation.

In 1950 we started building and testing winches. For the last eleven years we have had a steady program of improving winch construction, until today we feel we have come up

with one of the finest. The fact that we use winch exclusively in our operation keeps us trying continually for improvements.

Our winch program started by first making an extensive study of all the winches then in operation and the old antiques of the past. We talked to all the old timers, operators and engineers. My friends Gus Scheurer, the father of the first winch in America, Otto Zauner of New Jersey and Ray Jackson of Detroit were very accommodating with information and advice.

Fortified with this information our first winch was born. It was designed as a test bed to experiment with different ideas of drums, level winds, engines, transmissions and guillotines. During this early experimenting we developed a near perfect level wind. At last a level wind that never broke down, and the heart of its construction was available at Sears & Roebuck and Montgomery Ward.

Our elation with this level wind was short lived though. Fate willed that by redesigning the winch drum and properly locating the guide rollers, we no longer needed a level wind. Another step forward, less working parts and lower manufacturing costs, something we're all looking for.

Other experiments during this period included different size engines, belt drives, stick shift transmissions,

automatic transmissions, industrial fluid drives, etc.

In December, 1954, we started to design a winch with the express thought of putting it on the market (see *Soaring* May-June, 1955, pages 4 & 5). At that time we planned to build it as a complete unit and in kit form. One of the features of this winch was by leaving the fenders and axles off it would then fit in a pick up truck.

At this time we started building and operating the Thermal G Ranch Gliderport. So it was decided to give up trying to market the winch.

It was in 1957 that Schweizer Aircraft Corp. received the Air Force Academy order for sailplanes and one winch. Paul Schweizer, knowing of our efforts with winch design and construction, gave us a chance to bid on this order.

Major Fuchs, a soaring pilot in his own right, represented the Academy and promoted the soaring club there. He also was instrumental in setting up the contract for the sailplanes and winch with Schweizer Aircraft.

One evening Paul Schweizer sent Major Fuchs to the Thermal G to talk winch with us. After an all-night session we came up with a set of specifications for a winch the way we thought it should be built. Eighty days after the order was placed we had the winch designed, built and in operation.

Major Fuchs made a trip to the Thermal G and spent a day operating the winch. He then accepted it for the Air Force, starting us on our way to being a manufacturer of sailplane winches.

After delivering this winch to Schweizer Aircraft we built one for

Larry Gehrlein, Sr., at the controls of the winch now in use at the Thermal-G-Gliderport.

Photo by Walter Rudolph

