

BOOK REVIEW

REMINISCENCES AND BYGONE PREDICTIONS

by VICTOR M. SAUDEK

Tom Swift and His Sky Train, by Victor Appleton; Grossett & Dunlap, N.Y., 1931; 35 cents second-hand in 1960.

My son was reading "Tom Swift, Jr., and His Ultra Sonic Cycloplane." It was too advanced for me. I retreated to a second-hand book store to find something I could understand.

This is the book I found.

It is an authentic bit of Americana, even to the scuff marks and indications of young, unwashed hands. The warmth of the summer sun of those days reached me again as I saw the exciting pictures on the front cover. A "box kite" airplane, and electric automobile, a motor boat (dashing through Lake Carlopa which, every boy knew, lay adjacent to Shopton, Tom's home town). At top center is the portrait of a high-collared, stripe-suited young man; Tom himself, most assuredly. He was contemporary with Tom Edison, Billy Mitchell and Charles A. Lindbergh; as good a crowd as any.

Just as most of today's television shows reveal scientific innocence so did Victor Appleton (actually the "author" was a small committee) miss authenticity of and in his subject. But, just as kids watch TV so did we enjoy Tom Swift.

As one who saw many ideas within this book evolve into reality, then dissolve into the mists again, there is something awesome about this minor saga.

You must realize that, during the 1930's and 1940's, there was a considerable need, which was sensed by many others beside Tom Swift, to try to create something practical and useful out of gliders. There was, in fact, about 1934, a "Lustig Sky Train," a tug airplane and three Franklin gliders hooked up nose to tail (!) as Tom's were. They took off from Miami, Fla., and landed in the plaza at Havana Cuba—once.

Tom Swift: "... I'll give the word and let Nerthrop (Nokin) in the tail glider cut loose and go down. After that, I'll pick him up again."

When this was written, the first U.S. National Soaring Contest had just become history. No one knew if there would be another one or not. In those days most launchings were by shock-cord (a kind of sling shot) or by auto tow. Aero tows were known but novel. No one would try to pick up gliders for ten years; but more about that later.

Tom Swift: "I don't say that I am going to pick up gliders in mid-flight yet, but that will come in time."

It took something like five years.

Richard duPont, a founder of the SSA, once was flying an open-cockpit Franklin when he saw that he could catch the towline trailing behind a towplane! He grasped it in his bare hand—losing considerable skin in the process—and made the only mid-air pickup I know of.

Ned Newton (Tom Swift's business Manager): "... I think these gliders will never be anything but a plaything." So true. Through much of this era, the bizarre was superseded by reality, except that peaceful use of gliders was never achieved for significant transport purposes—though many feasible ideas were developed. This is due perhaps to the invention of helicopters and to improved highways in the U.S. and Canada. The case for economic glider cargo transport is not very hopeful now in any county as STOL and VTOL aircraft have been developed and will become more practical.

Tom Swift had innocence to match his young reader's, and his enthusiasm to plunge into adventurous invention was child-like and financially irresponsible. It took the desperation-packed war years with money-no-object to develop the snatch pickup of gliders by an airplane in flight as a practical and, for war purposes, an economic technique. This too was due to the skill and foresight of Richard C. duPont who founded All American Engineering (still located at duPont Airport, Wilmington, Del.). He had created in 1937 an airmail in-flight

pickup and delivery service based on initial patents by a Dr. Adams. About 1941 Richard used this equipment, somewhat modified, to pick up "Art Schultz' Midwest glider with Lew Barringer as pilot. Art was then hired as Chief Engineer of the company (known then as All American Aviation, Inc.). Many soaring pilots were employed by AAA, Inc. and a number of them are still there. This company developed, in two years, glider pickup systems for the C-47 and CG-4A team, i.e., DC-3 pick-up of the 15-passenger, 8000-pound gross weight gliders which were most commonly used in the war. There were others, up to the B-17F and CG-13A team: Flying Fortress pickup of 32-passenger, 16,000-pound gross weight gliders. The success of this activity is attested by over 100,000 allied air pick-ups through the war in all theaters and under all kinds of conditions with only one fatality. The use of gliders by the military ended in the 1950's.

Meanwhile, back at Shopton, life for Tom and his friends followed a relentless, predictable pattern of striving to overtake his rival, a wild chase, tragedy, financial problems, personnel difficulties and heroic victory followed by reconciliation. This is quite in tune with real life through those decades.

I hope that Tom Swift, Jr.'s, generation gets as much enjoyment from this world.



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