Noel Wien, Alaska's Aviation Trailblazer
By Jennifer Houdek

Most people might associate the term "barnstormer" with a daredevil personality, one who seeks attention and takes risks. Not so with pioneering pilot Noel Wien, who got his start in flying as a stunt flyer in an aviation circus. Wien was a man of a few words, who didn't demand credit for exemplary acts, but rather earned them. If there was a blizzard outside, Wien would simply comment that the weather was poor. And if he decided it was too poor to fly, he wouldn't fly. Through a long and honorable career, Wien took his place as a history-making pilot who achieved many firsts, among them founding Alaska's first airline.

Wien was born in Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin, in 1899, and eventually made his way to Minnesota. He first learned to fly in 1921 from Ray Miller, however he couldn't solo because flight school required a $2,800 deposit, the price of the plane. Not to be deterred, he took a job as a barnstormer with Federated Fliers Flying Circus. The Federated Fliers was one of the largest stunt circuses of the time. In Jean Potter's book *The Flying North*, Wien recalled that time in his life, "I'd loop with the wing-walkers; people would scream and faint. The only trouble was I had to ride a motorcycle and play auto polo part of the time."

In the fall of 1922, he agreed to take $500 a month to fly as a mercenary in a dispute between two warring factions in Mexico. His job would include dropping homemade dynamite bombs on the opposing force. However, the war ended before he actually had a chance to enter it. Again Wien found himself unemployed with no prospects. Few jobs were available for pilots. So in 1924, Wien jumped at an offer from Alaskan Jimmy Rodebaugh to fly for his company in Fairbanks, Alaska. The pay was $300 a month.

Rodebaugh himself was never a pilot, but a railroad conductor. However, he was the first promoter of the flying business in Alaska. Rodebaugh saw the need and opportunity to make money. In the spring of 1924, Rodebaugh made a trip to the Lower 48 to look for planes and pilots. He found two planes, Standards, and bought them for $5,000. The old World War I planes needed some work to make them useful for Rodebaugh's purposes, and he added extra gas tanks and replaced their small Curtiss OX-5 engines with the much more powerful 150-HP, water-cooled Hispano-Suizas, or "Hissos." As for the pilots, Rodebaugh was pleased to hired two young farm boys who were far from experienced: Noel Wien and Arthur Sampson, both with little more than 500 hours in the air. Although the young men weren't what he was looking for, they knew how to fly and were willing to move to Alaska and work for $300 a month. Hence, the Alaska Aerial Transportation Company was soon up and running. The company was later renamed the Fairbanks Airline Company.

Wien gained a reputation for incredible skill and good luck. However he was better known for his conservative nature. Much to Rodebaugh's chagrin, young Wien would not fly during the winter or even if there was a cloud in the sky. However, that didn't deter him from flying into parts of Alaska that nobody else would. Wien was the first pilot in Alaska to cross the Arctic Circle, landing on the north side to transport two Fairbanks miners to their claim. On his return, his Standard was swept sideways off course and landed on a sandbar. In his journal, Wien reported the incident without fanfare, "Forced down, gas and oil out, walked 40 miles back."

 Soon after Wien came to Alaska, he worked on getting his brothers to join him. Each time he made a trip to the Lower 48, he'd return with a brother. Ralph was the first to come in 1925. The following years, they were joined by Fritz and then Sig Wien.

In Spring 1925, the Fairbanks Airplane Company purchased a Dutch Fokker. When it arrived, other pilots shied away from the large plane, however Noel Wien couldn't wait to get behind the controls. Although he flew the Fokker for only 140 hours before it went into storage, Noel developed a respect for the great plane and its six-cylinder BMW engine. "So heavily built," he said, "no trouble at all." It was in that Fokker that Wien cut

another notch in aviation history. With his brother Ralph as a mechanic, Noel Wien made the first commercial flight between Fairbanks and Nome. He was to transport Norman Stines, an engineer for the United States Smelting Refining & Mining Company of Boston. Stines was going to meet up in Nome with the company's directors, who were to arrive by steamer.

En route to Nome, the weather started to deteriorate. Always cautious, Wien decided to turn back. He knew that he could not make it all the way to Fairbanks without refueling so Wien attempted a landing at Ruby. The options were poor. There was only a short hillside for his makeshift landing strip. With amazing skill, Noel landed the plane safely with only one casualty: the propeller split in two. The Fairbanks Airplane Company sent Noel a wire stating, "Awfully glad no one hurt. Congratulate you on good judgment turning back. Sending propeller first boat, probably Wednesday. Will arrange weather reports Ruby Nome. Best regards to Stine and party. Tell if anything can do." Although grateful for Wien's proven expertise, Stine and party decided to continue on to Nome by boat. When the Fokker's propeller arrived, the Wien brothers beat Stines to Nome.

In 1927, Ralph and Noel bought one of the Standards from Rodebaugh and opened their own airline. In the first two months, the Wien brothers had made $4,000. They used that money along with a bank loan and purchased a second plane, a Stinson Detroiter. Ralph soloed in 1928, however his career was cut short by his untimely death in 1930. The Ralph Wien Memorial Airport at Kotzebue is named for him.

Noel continued to add planes to his company, Wien Air Alaska. By 1929, he had successfully made the first round-trip flight between the United States and Asia. A man of few words, Wien described the trip as uneventful, adding, " . . . .and if we'd run into a storm, we would have turned back awfully fast."

After he completed his flight, Wien received a telegram from William McCracken, Assistant Secretary of Commerce in Washington, D.C.: "Sincere congratulations. This is a most worthy pioneering effort."

Upon completion of his great trip, Wien married Ada Bering Arthurs, daughter of the Nome postmaster, and they honeymooned in the Lower 48. Later that year, Noel sold his company to Alaska Airways. The couple made their home in Fairbanks with their three children, Noel Merrill Wien, known as Merrill after the Anchorage aviation pioneer, daughter Jean, and youngest son, Richard.

Noel Wien died in 1977. He was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame in 1979. The public library in Fairbanks, built on a former airfield known as Weeks Field, was named in his honor. From 1927 until 1985, during which Alaska's first airline had several name changes, Wien Air Alaska folded. After nearly sixty years of serving Alaska passengers and freight clients, the name Wien has become synonymous with commercial aviation in the Far North.

On July 6, 1999, seventy-five years after Noel Wien's first flight between Anchorage and Fairbanks, his sons Merrill and Richard repeated the historic flight, taking off from Anchorage's oldest airstrip, now known as the Park Strip, between 9th and 10th Avenues.

LINKS:

Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum:

http://home.gci.net/~aahm/flightline.html

Wien Air Alaska Commercials, 1980-1981:
http://www.wienairalaska.com/

Wien Air Alaska timetable:
http://www.timetableimages.com/ttimages/wc1.htm

AV Web, **July 14, 2002 interview with N. Merrill Wien, son of Noel Wien.**
http://www.avweb.com/news/profiles/182141-1.html?type=pf

Kent Wien, grandson of Noel Wien:
http://www.kentwien.com/

Anchorage Aviation History and Development:
http://www.muni.org/merrill1/av8history.cfm

Weeks Field, Fairbanks, Alaska:
http://www.airfields-freeman.com/AK/Airfields_AK.htm

Time **article, March 22, 1968, about merger between Wien Alaska and Northern Consolidated Airlines; forming Wien Alaska Airlines.**
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,828530,00.html?promoid=googlep

Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame:

http://www.dot.state.mn.us/aero/aved/museum/halloffame/wien_noel.htm

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about the early days of Alaska's aviation history and Noel Wien in particular. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Acess **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.
2. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **ALASKA AVIATION HISTORY**or **NOEL WIEN**.

MORE READING:

Harkey, Ira. *Noel Wien: Alaska Pioneer Bush Pilot.* Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 1999. Originally published as *Pioneer Bush Pilot: The Story of Noel Wien.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974.

McAllister, Bruce. *Wings above the Arctic: A Photographic History of Arctic Aviation.* Boulder, Colo.: Roundup Press, 2002.

Mondor, Colleen Catherine. *Just One More Dead Pilot: An Exploration of the Causes of Pilot Error Accidents among Alaskan Air Taxi Operators.* Thesis/dissertation, 1999.

Potter, Jean Clark. *The Flying North.* Toronto, London: Bantam, 1983, 1947.

Stevens, Robert W. *Alaskan Aviation History.* Des Moines, Wash.: Polynyas Press, 1990.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Alaska Transportation Museum Photograph Collection, 1905-1970. John W. Klingbeil. Alaska State Library. Collection includes about 725 black-and-white photographs with images of pilots, airplanes, airplane accidents, airports, airlines and railroads. The collection contains an image of Irene Ryan, first woman to solo in Alaska. Approximately 125 images are mounted on museum boards, as they were received, and

are not numbered. Many images are not Alaskan. John W. Klingbeil photographed some of the images.

Sam O. White Photograph Collection, 1922-1960. Alaska State Libraray. Collection includes 95 black-and-white images.Many of the views in this collection were used to illustrate Sam White's story of his work in Alaska, serialized in the ALASKA SPORTSMAN magazine from Dec. 1964 through Nov. 1965. Most depict airplanes and villages in interior Alaska. Other subjects include Alaska Game Commission personnel and offices, airplane crashes, bush planes and bush pilots, the Wien brothers (Merrill, Sig and Noel) and Alaskan localities.

VIDEO:

Wings of Wien, 1924-1999. Dee Hanson. VHS tape (21 min.) Alaska: Takotna Video Production, 1999.

Hit the Road Alaska. David Moore Huntley; David Lyons. VHS tape (ca. 100 min.) New York: A & E Television Networks; Sudbury, MA: Moore Huntley Productions, 2004. Nine segments covering major events in Alaskan history: Vitus Bering Expedition; Henry Tureman Allen's Alaska Exploratory Expedition of 1885, which traversed and mapped a significant portion of the interior of Alaska including the Copper, Tanana, and Koyukuk rivers; the Chilkoot Trail and the Klondike Gold Rush; Nome and the 1925 diphtheria serum dogsled run; the Alaska Highway; the Aleutians Campaign in World War II; Good Friday Alaska earthquake of 1964; Trans-Alaska Pipeline; bush pilots and aviation in Alaska.

AUDIO:

Sounds of Alaska. **Volume 1, 1950s. Narrated by Frank Brink.** Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives. LP recording, 33-1/3 rpm, mono. Anchorage, Alaska: Frank Brink Productions, Ltd.; New York: Capitol Records, Custom Services Department. Includes sound recordings of George Ahgupuk, Eskimo artist; Anchorage; Tex Noey. Fairbanks; gold panning; mining; Cap Lathrop. Nome, gold rush city; sourdoughs; Jules Gunderson; Tony Polet. Dog mushers; world's greatest musher, Leonhard Seppala; "Nome Sweepstakes;" "Serum Run of 1925"; Earl Norris. Alaskan bush pilots; Jack Jefford crash and rescue; Noel Wien: the daring flight; Archie Ferguson: "make smoke." Kotzebue; Eskimo dances; Eskimo Abraham Lincoln; whale fairy tale. Pribilof Islands; seals; fighting bulls; lost pup; Russian Orthodox chants. Lake George breakup; giant ice falls. Anaktuvik Eskimos; animal and bird calls; raven song; children's song. Fort Yukon; Atabascan Indians songs; worship; sourdough Ed Curtiss. Climbing Mt. McKinley; "Operation white tower"; Bradford Washburn; Barbara Washburn. Juneau; Ed Keithahn; Tlingit Indian tom toms, rattles; Ahgupuk: conclusion.