

MATTHEW SELLERS: KENTUCKY'S ANSWER TO THE WRIGHT BROTHERS

By Edward Peck

Few Kentuckians realize that some of the world's earliest airplane flights were made right here in our Commonwealth. The site of those pioneering experiments was about two miles south of the village of Grahn in Carter County. The man who made these flights in a flying machine of his own design and construction was Matthew Bacon Sellers (1869-1932). Although he experimented with kites and gliders during the later 1800s, his first powered flight was made there on December 28, 1908 -- just five years after the Wright brothers first flew at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

Sellers was born in Baltimore, Maryland, but both of his parents were native Kentuckians. His father was a pioneer of another kind who grew up on the western frontier in what is now Livingston County. As a young man, the father established a very prosperous plantation in Louisiana and there accumulated the family fortune. After the Civil War they moved to Baltimore and lived in an imposing mansion on LaFayette Square.

Being a member of this wealthy family, the younger Sellers' early education was under tutors and at private schools. While a teenager he also attended schools in Gottingen, Germany and Evereux, France. Then in 1892, he earned a law degree at Harvard. Sellers next undertook some technical studies at Lawrence Scientific School and at Drexel Institute, but from 1895 onward he devoted his life to those pursuits which most interested him -- mineral prospecting and aeronautics.

His father and a brother having died some years before, Sellers, his mother, and a sister and second brother lived several months of each year in Carter County where they built a three-story frame house on a secluded hilltop. It was there and on property in adjoining Elliot County that he

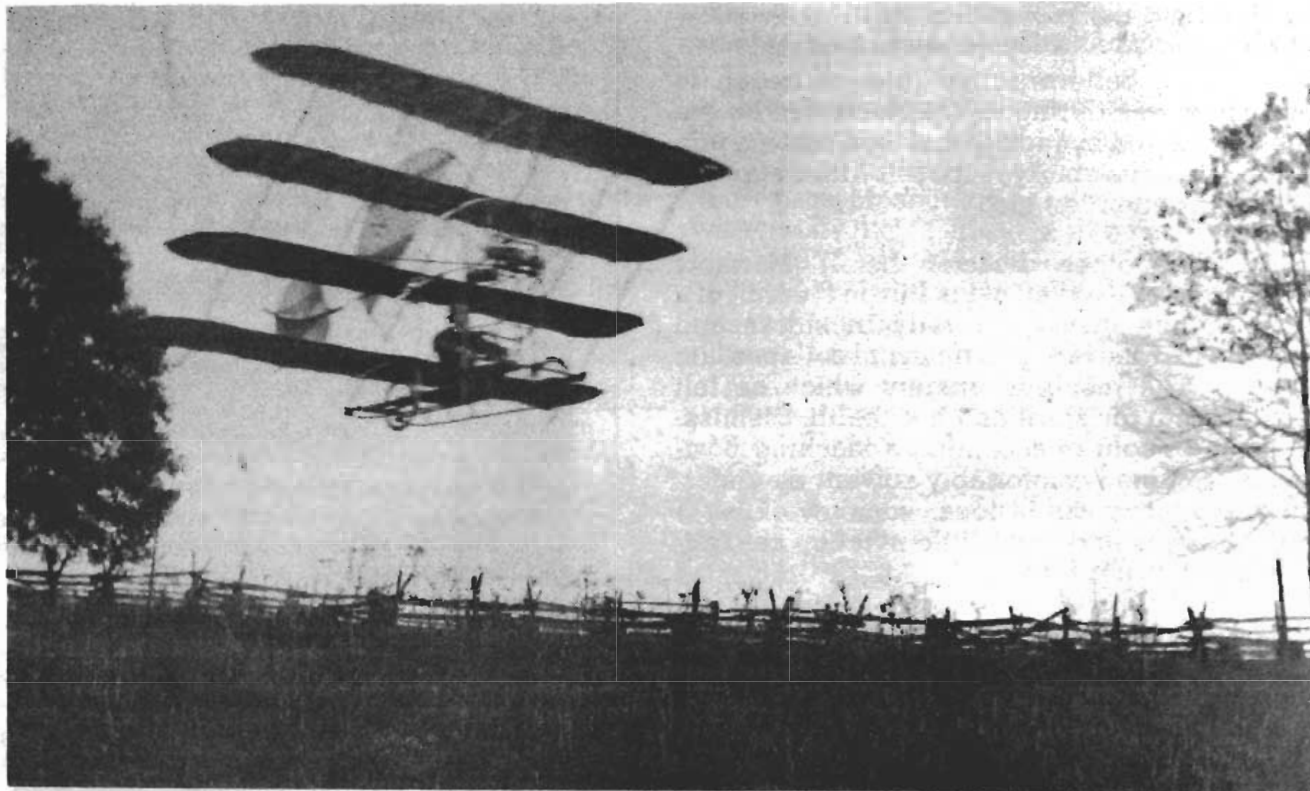
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Matthew Sellers (1869-1932) was Kentucky's first noted aviator. His early experiments were made just after those of the Wright Brothers. Much of his work was done on his farm in Carter County. (Photos from author's collection.)

expended much effort prospecting for precious metals and diamonds. Sellers hoped that he would find deposits associated with the legendary John Swift Silver Mine, and unusual formations in Elliott County suggested the presence there of diamonds. However, it is believed that all he ever found were less valuable garnets.

Aeronautics had interested Sellers since childhood, but in the summer of 1903 he turned his full attention to experiments in flying. In his Carter County laboratory building he constructed a twenty-foot wind tunnel of thirty-inch diameter. Inside he would place model wings to accurately measure their lifting force in air moved through the device by a suction fan at one end. This was driven by an electric motor with power supplied from his steam engine generator -- the first use of electricity in that part of Kentucky.



In this rare 1910 photo we see Sellers in mid-air in his famous quadruplane. This flight took place near his home in Carter County. This plane was the world's first to use retracting wheels. It weighed only 110 pounds and was powered by a gasoline engine of only seven horsepower -- less than most riding mowers today!

After his first real flight with a gasoline motor in 1908, Sellers continued development of the quadruplane (four wings) and began to fly farther and higher. One of its innovative features was retracting wheels, acknowledged to be the very first use of such in aviation history. Sellers did not simply haul himself into the air by brute force, because the two-cylinder engine which he then used was rated at only seven horsepower. At the same time these flight tests were underway, he further pursued his theoretical studies and experiments in efficient wing and propeller design. Most of this research took place in Carter County, but he also owned land in Warren County, Georgia, where some of these trials took place.

On October 24, 1911 disaster struck. A local assistant named Lincoln Binion was killed instantly when the airplane's propeller gave him a crushing blow on the head. Sellers was deeply grieved by the tragedy and departed within a week to resume his work in Georgia and elsewhere. He returned to Carter County only once again in his life, although the property there remains in his family to this day.

Having by this time achieved some prominence in his field, Sellers was appointed by President Taft to the Aerodynamic Laboratory Commission in 1912. This resulted in the founding of an agency which is known today as NASA -- the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. In 1915 he was named to the Naval Consulting Board as an expert on aviation. This body was headed by Thomas Edison and included many leading scientists of that day.

In 1918, at the age of 49, Sellers married Ethel Clark, a young lady many years his junior. They built a home at Ardsley-on-Hudson, New York, and there he resumed his private aeronautical work -- both as a consultant and an experimenter. Some years earlier, in 1914, Matthew Sellers had suffered a serious accident while flying his quadruplane on Staten Island. This nearly resulted in the loss of an arm, if not his life. Probably in deference to his wife and two small boys, he did not again fly an airplane himself but engaged another pilot to test his machines. The last of these was constructed in 1926, but the following year it burned on the ground at Curtiss Field, New York, when a backfire ignited some

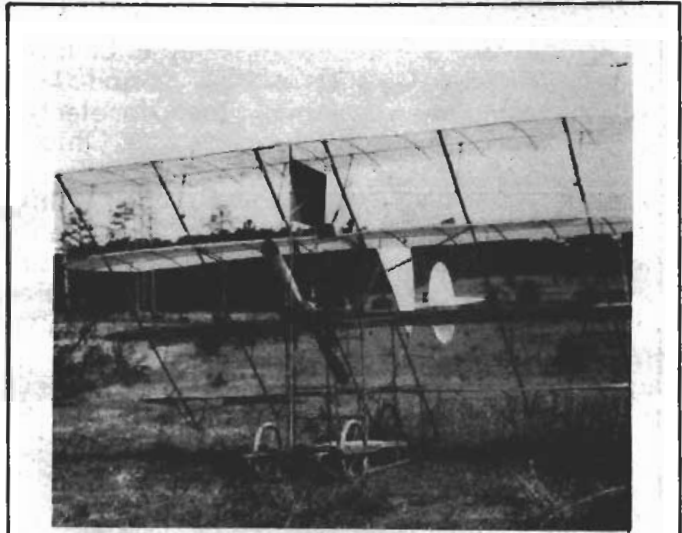
gasoline which had leaked into the fuselage.

By this time the pioneering spirit of aviation was giving way to its development as a major industry. Thus, Sellers' active interest began to diminish. It was during this period that he became fascinated by radio -- just then coming into practical use. His family responsibilities claimed much of his attention also.

In 1929 another disaster befell Matthew Sellers. Having lived all of his life on the fruit of a family fortune invested mostly in stocks and bonds, he lost heavily in the financial collapse late that year. The resulting anxiety which he felt devastated both his spirit and his health. Dismissing some thought of accepting a teaching position, he remained comfortably solvent by undertaking writing commissions, some work as a patent attorney and what little aviation consulting work he could find.

While visiting friends in Larchmont, New York, early in 1932, Sellers was chilled by a raw wind blowing in off of Long Island Sound. Soon confined to bed with pneumonia, he apparently had nearly recovered when, on April 5th, he died suddenly of a pulmonary embolism. His remains were cremated and the ashes buried beneath a favorite cherry tree.

And what remains today to remind us of Matthew Seller's pioneering achievements in aeronautics? His Carter County home burned to the ground in 1974 -- just a month after its listing in the National Register of Historic Places. That same year the Olive Hill Airport was renamed Sellers Field as a memorial to this far-sighted local resident. His laboratory building survived the fire, but in 1976 this was dismantled and taken to the New England Air Museum in Connecticut where it awaits restoration. Only a derelict windmill now stands to mark the site



Taken in Georgia in 1909, this view shows the Sellers quadruplane with a square vane between the two top wings. This was supposed to be an automatic control which, when deflected by side gusts, would impart a correcting movement of the wings for balance.

where Kentucky's first airplane flights took place in 1908. However, there is a Kentucky Historical Marker beside U.S. Highway 60 near the east interchange with I-64 at Olive Hill.

Perhaps surprisingly, numerous artifacts of Seller's aviation research have survived and are now in the collections of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Also, many of his diaries, letters, and photographs are now preserved there for study by future historians. Even in Eastern Kentucky, old propellers are said to be hung over fireplaces by those who somehow took them into "protective custody" from the vacant Sellers property. As a 1976 Bicentennial project, the Carter County Vocational School constructed an accurate full-size replica of the 1908 quadruplane. This can now be seen in Louisville's Museum of History and Science. And then there are some fifty techni-

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cal articles which Sellers wrote, still to be found in the aviation literature of that period. Most recently, his name has been proposed for election to the Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio.

A good tale often improves with each telling, and a common belief in Carter County today is that Matthew Sellers flew even before the Wright brothers. A large body of indisputable evidence, including Sellers' own words, proves this notion to be false. Still, local pride, unrestrained imagination and deeply-held tradition are difficult to change. Even if a claim of Sellers being first

cannot be supported, he achieved more than enough to secure for him an honored place among the true pioneers of flight.

This writer recently took a 1909 airplane control bar of Sellers' to the Smithsonian Institution to be added to their collections at the National Air and Space Museum. Flying in a commercial jet with this relic in his lap, a bemusing thought occurred: Little did Matthew Sellers realize in 1909, while fashioning this control, that 77 years later it would be whistling along at thirty thousand feet and nearly 600 miles an hour!



Built around 1895 on a Carter County hilltop, this view shows Sellers' Kentucky house as it appeared in 1951. At left is his laboratory and shop building, now awaiting restoration at the New England Air Museum in Connecticut. The house burned in 1974, only one month after its listing in the National Register of Historic Places. (Photo from the author's collection.)