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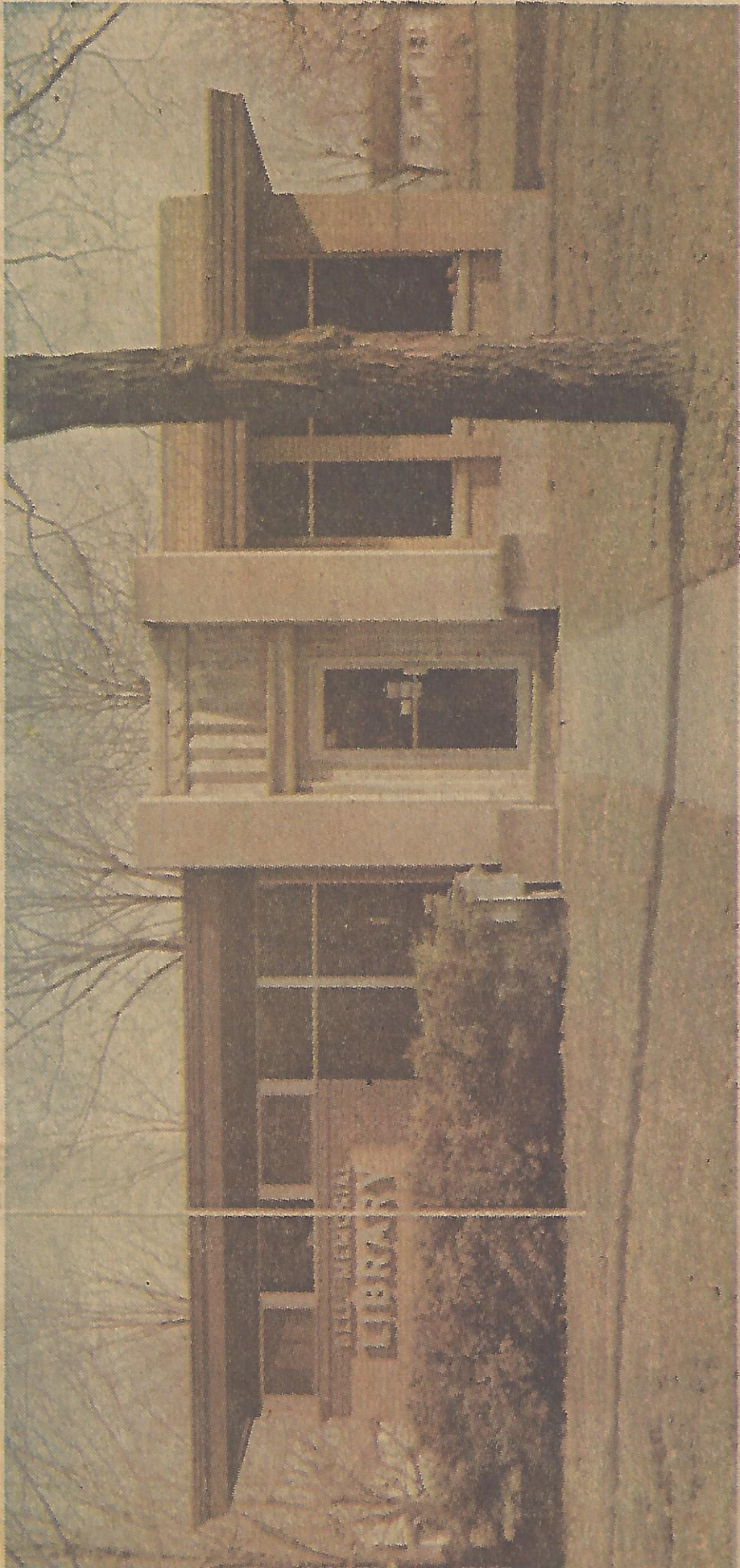
The Sunday Magazine of The South Bend Tribune

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Sunday, Feb. 24, 1974



Ruby Plays
Love Role



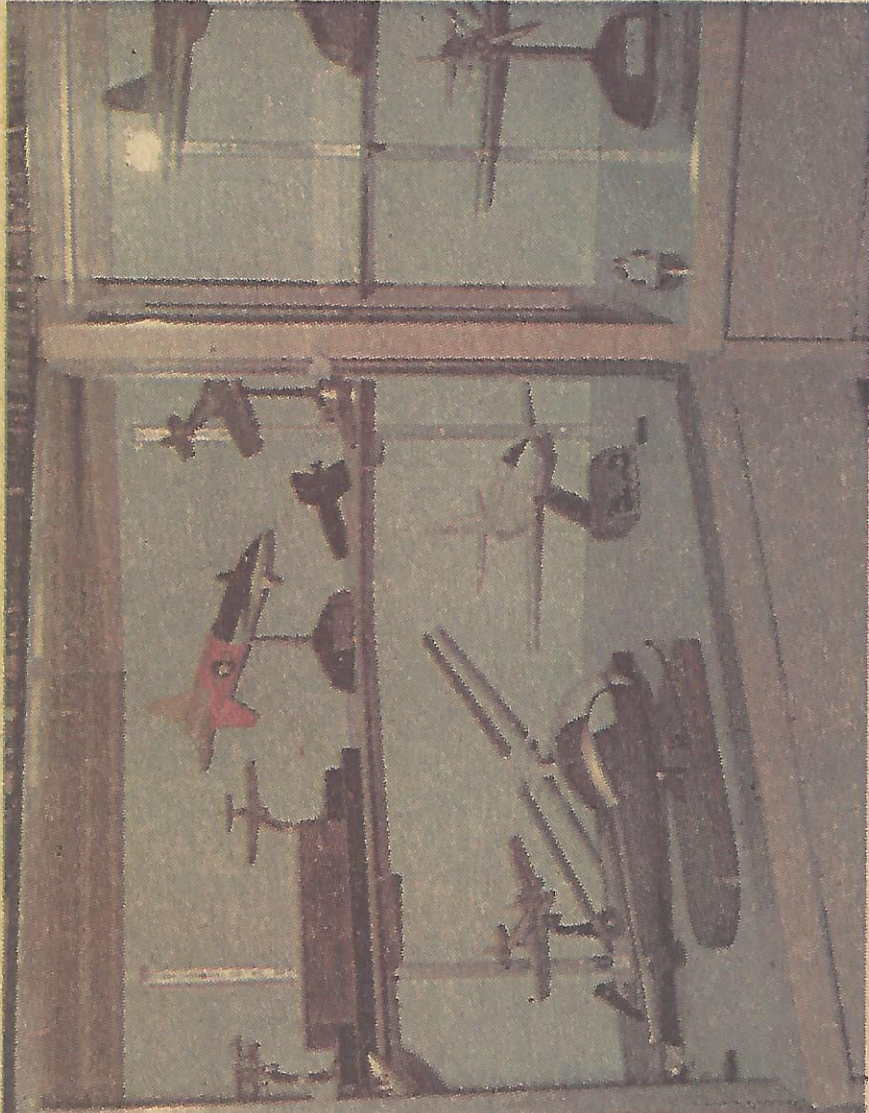
IN THIS MODEST BUILDING in Mentone is housed part of a priceless collection the Smithsonian Institution would like to have.

Collection of Lawrence Bell, Air Pioneer

World's Highest Aviation Awards Rest in Tiny Mentone Museum

By Ann Kindig Sheetz

Photos in Co-operation With Bell Memorial Library



OF LAWRENCE BELL'S collection is on display, but most of it has remained in packing for almost 18 years because of a lack of funds. The interior of the museum also could use some help.

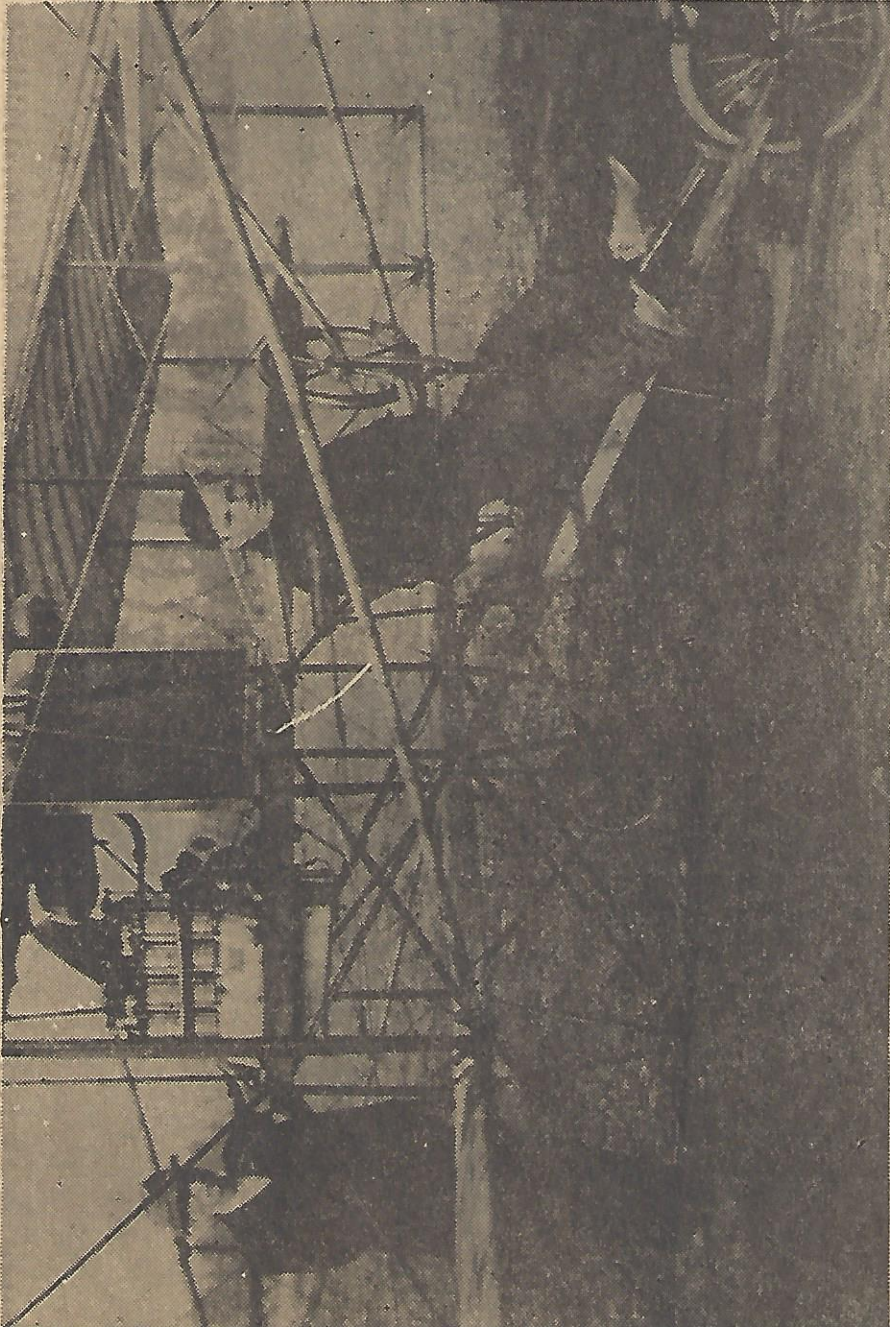
MOST PERSONS VISITING the Bell Memorial Public Library in Mentone, Ind., for the first time are unprepared for the displays that greet them, for few would guess that such a small town could harbor the Collier Trophy, recognized as the nation's topmost civilian aviation award, the Guggenheim Medal, presidential citations, and several models of record-shattering airplanes and helicopters.

The memorabilia are part of a collection willed to the town by Lawrence Bell, a native of Mentone and an aviation pioneer whose work in breaking the sound and heat barriers set the stage for today's space exploration. And even though the collection is unique, it represents a problem even more unique: What happens when a famous native leaves a priceless aviation-space related collection to his home town?

In Mentone's case, the answer is yet to come. The items displayed at the library are only a small portion of the entire gift. For almost 18 years the rural community of less than 1,000 population has wrestled with the question of what to do with the rest of the collection. Reluctant to give it up — the Smithsonian Institution has offered to house it — the town's leaders are met with a mixture of enthusiasm and apathy. Older residents say, "By all means, let's preserve these items and house them in a suitable museum." Younger citizens tend to say, "Bell who?" because the space conquests of recent years have erased memories of early struggles of pioneers like Lawrence Bell.

LAWRENCE DALE BELL, youngest of Isaac and Harriet Sarber Bell's 10 children, was born in Mentone on April 5, 1894, nine years before the Wright brothers flew the first airplane. Part of his boyhood was spent helping his father in an unsuccessful attempt to train a race horse. The airplane was almost unheard of until 1907 when people began to learn of the Wrights' achievements. Few were impressed. The airplane

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BELL, WHOSE AVIATION CAREER began in 1912, sits at the controls of a plane he helped keep airworthy.

Mentone's Unique Collection

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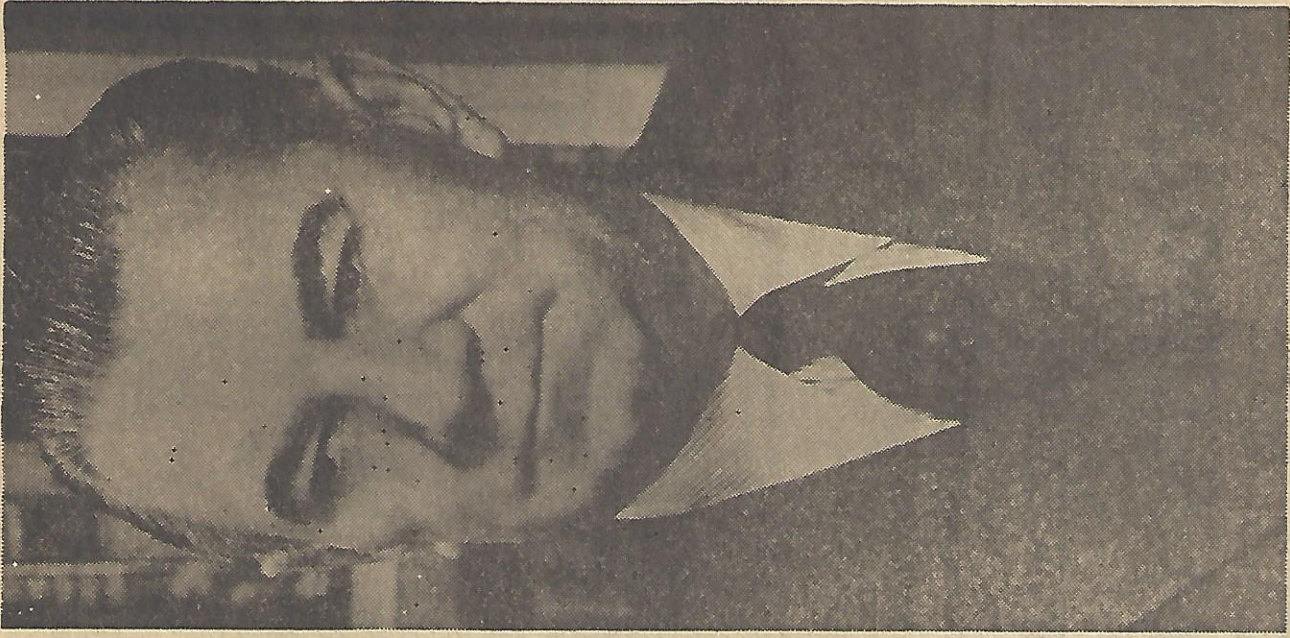
seemed like a passing fancy; there were more important things to do than to give much notice to such an unproven invention.

In 1907, 13-year-old Larry Bell (few called him Lawrence) moved with his family to Santa Monica, Calif., to give his aging parents a warmer climate.

The boy worked Saturdays and vacations in a hardware store where he spent most of his time polishing

daring stunt pilot in the nation. He often attempted feats no one else dared to repeat, such as flying beneath the suspension bridge at Niagara Falls.

LARRY FREQUENTLY VOICED a longing to meet Beachey. Grover, who in the interim had purchased a Martin bi-plane and learned to fly with Beachey, said, "Just wait." Everyone in this business gets to know everyone else." In 1912, as if to prove his point, Grover asked Larry to join him and Beachey as a mechanic.



Lawrence Bell

cows that walked in front of him as he landed after

moves. His spare time, however, was devoted to reading all the material about airplanes he could find. His enthusiasm was shared by his brother Grover, although neither had ever seen a real airplane.

In 1910, Larry and Grover attended a major U.S. air show at Dominguez Field near Los Angeles and for the first time saw airplanes in action. Apparently they liked what they saw.

Returning home, the boys built their own airplane. Although it only was a model, it flew. Larry's career as an airplane builder was launched.

Still a high school student, Larry could only study flying by reading about the men who were making aviation history. By 1911, no airplane pilot was more in the news than Lincoln Beachey, a former dirigible pilot whom Larry had seen in a race at Dominguez Field. Beachey, who delighted in diving a plane with its engine shut off from an altitude of 5,000 feet to a precision landing, was considered to be the most

the overjoyed Larry took and passed examinations that ended his formal education. He then joined Grover and Beachey, tightening nuts and guy-wires and running errands.

Many pilots attempted to copy Beachey's dare-devil flying routines, and were killed. Newspapers began calling the crashes "pulling a Beachey." This caused the sensitive Beachey to quit the stunt pilot field. Larry and Grover decided to continue alone. As Grover's ability improved, he flew in more and more air shows with Larry present to offer advice and encouragement. The brothers were happy with their careers. The future looked promising.

The July 4, 1913, meet at Petaluma, Calif., was a good one. The crowd liked the maneuvers Grover performed and cheered when he successfully imitated the great Beachey. Suddenly, the cheers turned to screams of horror as Grover swerved to miss a herd of

Larry Bell quit aviation. His exciting career had been short, its end bitter.

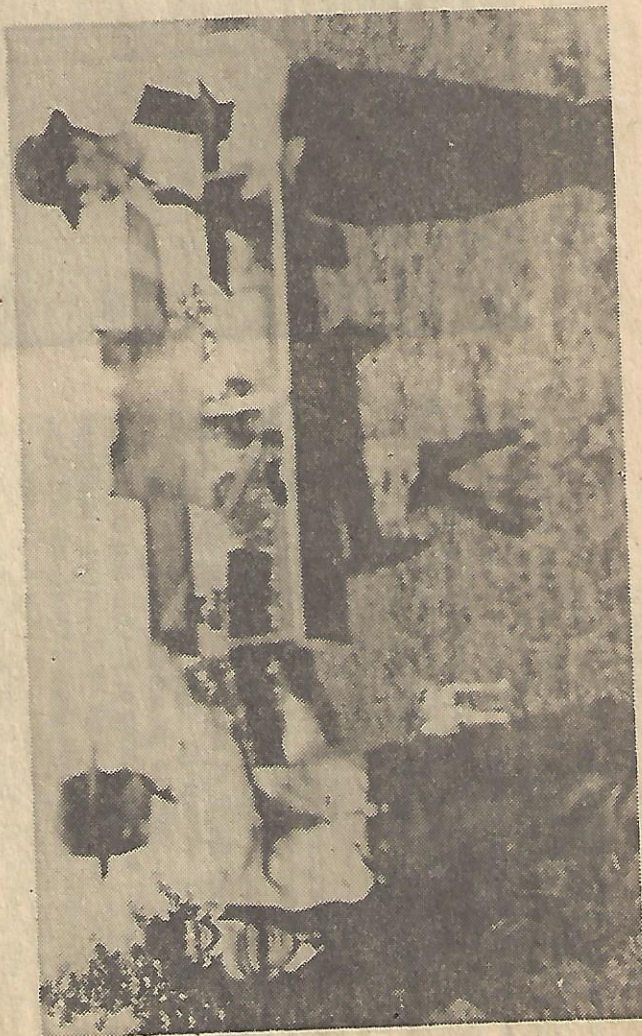
But after a while friends convinced Larry that Grover would not want him to quit. Larry knew that Grover had said men would die and that others would have to carry on if flying was to become safer, so he went to work for Glenn L. Martin, the man who had built Grover's airplane. The Martin factory was housed in an old church. Aviation still was so new the company was listed under "amusements" in the telephone directory.

LARRY SERVED AS a mechanic and all-around helper for Martin. He drew such tasks as detonating black powder charges for a "Battle of the Clouds" routine in which Martin "bombed" a crude wooden fort with oranges. But he became more and more involved in the manufacture of airplanes. By the time he was 20, Larry was shop foreman, and within a few years, vice-president and general manager. Nothing, not even the death of his friend Beachey, who had come out of retirement after learning to do the loop, could slow his determination in his chosen field.

Larry wanted to be able to make decisions and become part-owner of the company, something Martin would not allow, so he left the firm in 1928 to become sales manager for Consolidated Aircraft Corp. in Buffalo, N.Y. Within a year he was vice-president, and the company began developing seaplanes and flying boats. When Consolidated moved to California, Larry Bell decided the time had come to form his own company.

With two associates, Ray Whitman and Robert Woods, he began raising funds to form Bell Aircraft Corp. The company was to be capitalized at \$500,000. Of this, \$150,000 had to be in cash. By scraping together everything they had, the men raised \$90,000. This left \$60,000 to be raised in three months.

It was 1935, a depression year, and few people had money to invest in a company that existed only in the minds of the three men. Undaunted, the three moved



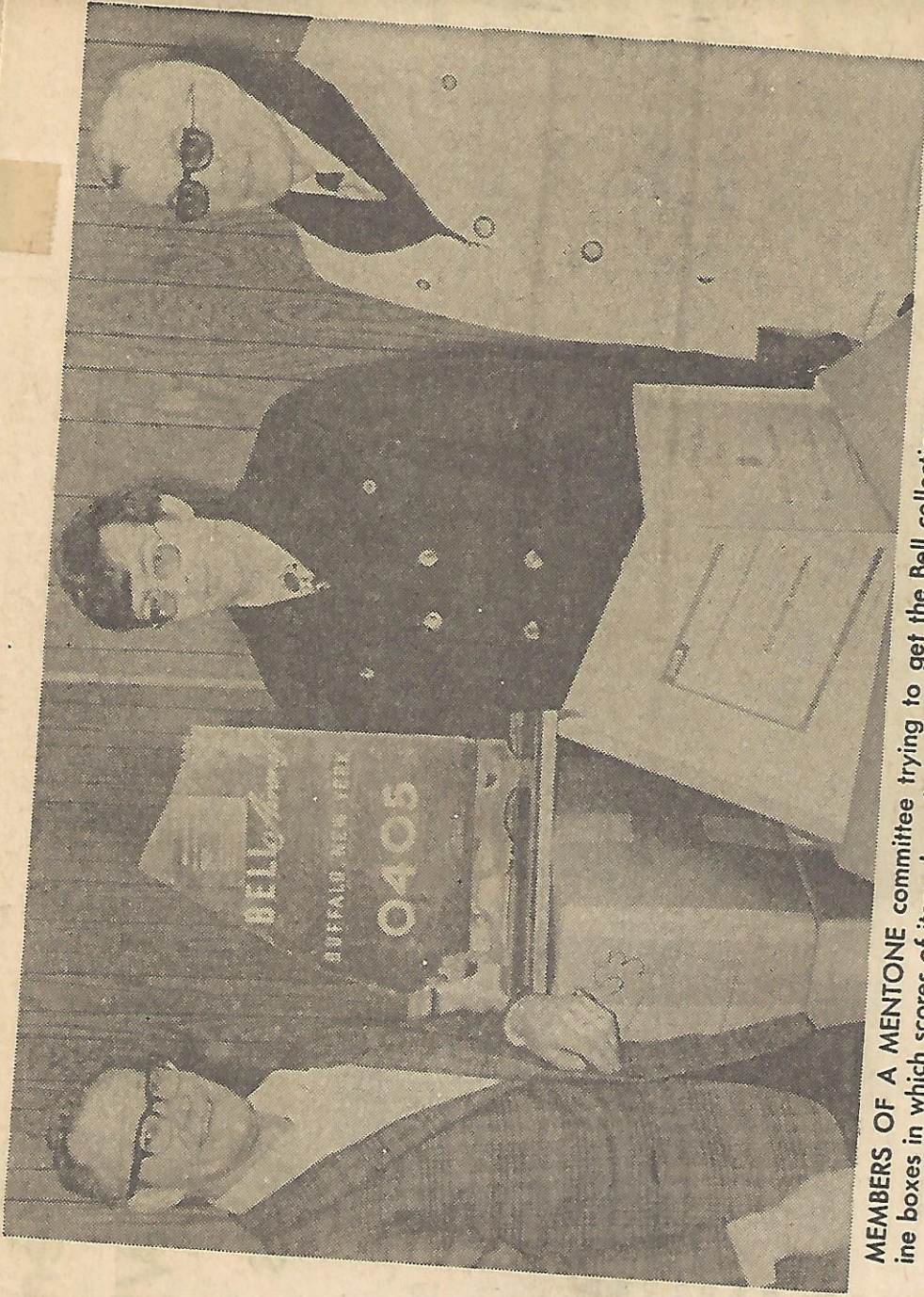
LARRY BELL and his brother, Grover, launch a plane Larry built after attending his first air show. It was the first of thousands he was to build in his lifetime.

into a small office and began work on airplane designs to be submitted for government inspection. Larry asked for subscriptions with the understanding none would be binding unless the entire \$150,000 was raised by Sept. 1. It now was July. With time running out but determined to raise the money, he rang doorbells. Sometimes weeks went by without a cent being subscribed, and he stayed away from the office, afraid to face his colleagues. One businessman asked him to do pushups to determine if he was a healthy risk.

The \$150,000 finally was raised, but only \$35,000 of it could be spent for tools and equipment. Larry bought \$17,000 worth of tools from Consolidated and then offered \$1 for everything the company did not want to move to California. In this deal he obtained a collection of machinery, benches, coat hangers and junk, which he sorted through. He then sold everything he could not use for \$17,000, coming out with his original investment. The same rules of thrift were maintained in furnishing the office — no desk could cost more than \$5 and no chair more than \$2. It was the only way he could get the company started.

THE COMPANY SUBSISTED for a time on subcontracts — and disappointments. Its first plane, the Airacuda with top speed of 300 miles per hour, was faster than any the U.S. Army had, but the Army would not buy it. "Ahead of its time," some said. Other planes proved more successful, and in the first few years, the company grew from 56 employees to more than 4,000. World War II saw the advent of new plants and the "Victory Shift," a part-time crew composed of lawyers, bankers, merchants, doctors and teachers, who, in four hours each day, did their bit to cost production.

Bell Aircraft Corp. soon built the first U.S. jet-propelled airplane. As the company geared itself for speed, it also turned to helicopters, later receiving the first commercial license issued for a helicopter. Oct. 14, 1947 was a crucial day for Bell Aircraft. For to that, no airplane, not even the fastest jets, had entered the sound barrier. At sea level, the speed of sound is 760 miles per hour, but if an airplane flies



MEMBERS OF A MENTONE committee trying to get the Bell collection on permanent display examine boxes in which scores of items have been kept for almost 18 years. From left are Jim Miller, Lloyd Bowerman, and Bill Westerman. Zanna Hammer is the fourth member of the committee.

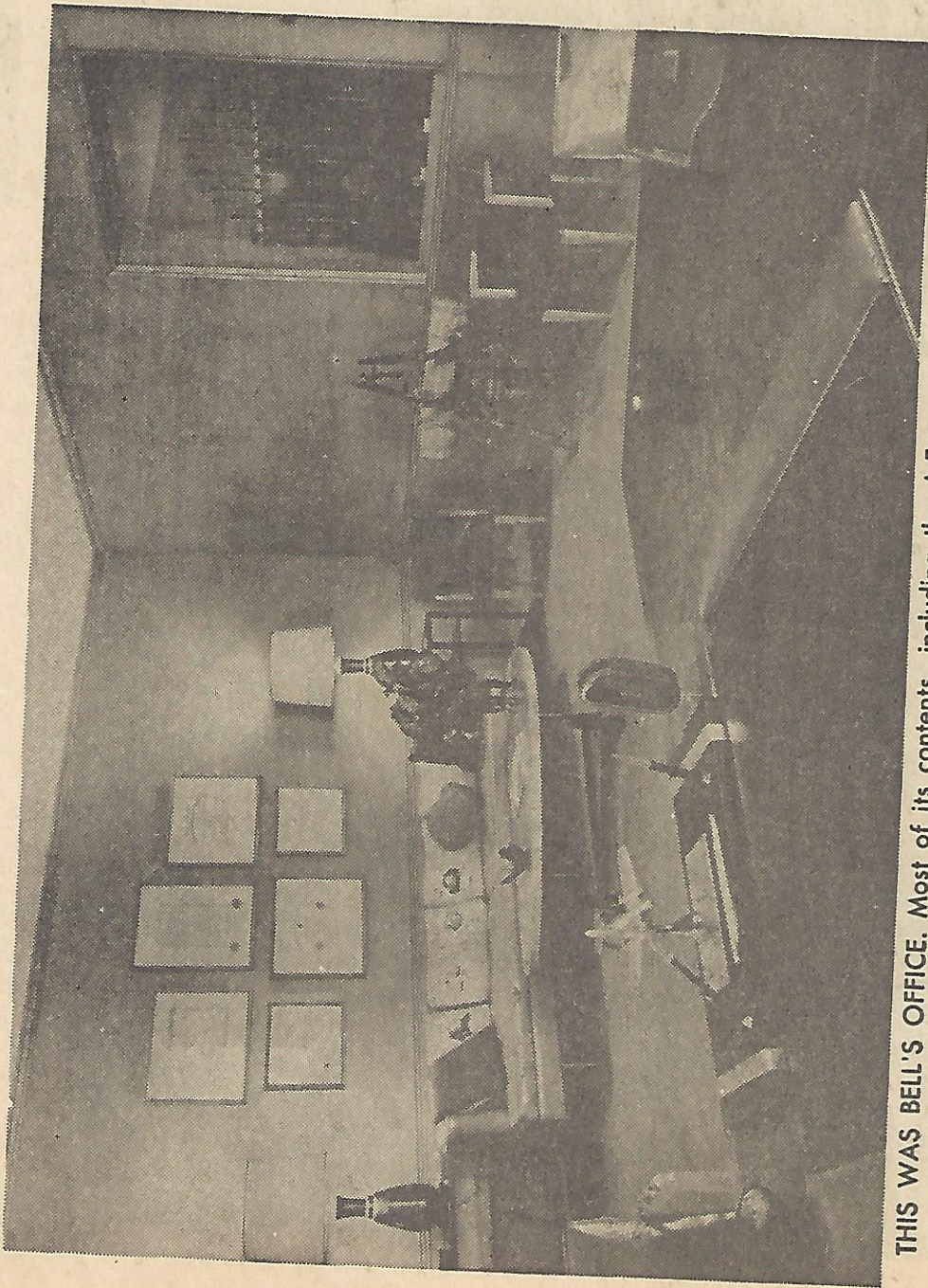
desert. Powered by four rocket motors that could consume their entire fuel supply in two and one-half minutes, the X-1 broke the sound barrier and earned the Collier Trophy for Larry Bell to share with John Stack, a government research scientist, and Capt. Charles Yeager, the X-1 pilot. The accomplishment of breaking the sound barrier

THIS WORK DID NOT GO unrewarded, and the Collier Trophy was joined by the Daniel Guggenheim Medal, the French Legion of Honor, several presidential citations and countless other awards and honorary degrees.

Despite his success, Larry Bell continued to search for new horizons to conquer. Wherever he went, he talked flying.

higher than 35,000 feet, it drops to 650 miles per hour. On that October day, a Bell B-29 bomber carried a small, needle-nosed airplane called the X-1 aloft in its bomb bay and dropped it high above the California

was followed by airplanes that flew more than twice the speed of sound and others that could withstand extremely high temperatures. In all, in its first 20 years existence Bell Aircraft Corp. registered 20 major firsts in aviation.



THIS WAS BELL'S OFFICE. Most of its contents, including the A-Frame, was shipped to Mentone after his death.

elsewhere, when an airplane flies overhead, I'm going to go outside and look at it. I don't think I'll ever get over that," he once said.

And, while he never got over his love of airplanes, he also never got over his love for his home town. When the pressures of establishing new factories, meeting work schedules and other problems became too great, he liked to slip away to spend a few days in Mentone where he could renew friendships.

When Lawrence Bell died on Oct. 20, 1956 at the age of 62 he was the dean of American aviation. As he remembered Mentone throughout his life, so he did in death. His will directed that \$20,000 be given the town to be used as a memorial to his parents. This was used to build the Bell Memorial Public Library, a comparatively small structure. In addition, he directed that his personal collection be given the town. Awards, thousands of pictures, models, even an A-frame he brought home from Korea to observe Bell helicopters in action, were shipped to Mentone. Many of the items were placed in the library; the rest were stored.

Items of the Bell collection, stored in packing boxes for almost 18 years, earlier this month were unpacked and put on display in the Mentone Town Hall where volunteers have been present to explain them. As yet they are uncatalogued. The town hall exhibit is scheduled to close at 6 p.m. today.

Meanwhile, the interior of the museum has deteriorated. The Guggenheim Medal, French Legion of Honor, Chancellor's Award of Buffalo University, and many others rest in disarray in a display case. Shelves, which originally came from the old town library, are falling apart.

Bell money built the library, but the problem has been to find funds to maintain it. Several Mentone organizations are currently conducting a fund-raising campaign.

And thus it is that Mentone is seeking ways to preserve the memory of a native son whose great legacy was helping launch this world's space age.