

# ON THE WATER- IN THE AIR- YACKEY WAS FOUND EVERYWHERE

*Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits*

Wilfred Anthony Yackey, Jr., professionally known as W. A. Yackey, was very familiar in this area in the 1920s when, if you looked up over Canadarago Lake during the summer season, you might have seen him flying by as he introduced the mysteries of the aeroplane, specifically the hydroplane, to those who were daring or perhaps just fascinated with the latest in adventures.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1890, auto racing intrigued him as a youth. With the outbreak of World War I, Yackey traveled to Italy to join, in 1914, the Italian Air Force where he served as a combat pilot. When the United States entered the war in 1917, he transferred to the United States Army and continued to fly missions until he was injured near the end of the war. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government for his heroic efforts. He convalesced from his injuries at Cooperstown.

Following the war, he settled outside of Chicago. He teamed up with Hans Hoyle to do exhibitions of trick flying and offering rides to those brave enough to try. Fred Fox, owner of Canadarago Park, was always looking for what would be a new type of entertainment for the many summer visitors and beginning about 1920, made arrangements for these

exhibitions on Saturday and Sunday afternoons during July and August. The takeoff would be from the hill back of the park and the airmen would fly over the lake so that everyone could see them. It was advertised that there wasn't a "stunt" that couldn't be successfully performed by them. Passengers could 'just ride' or be taken through some of the aerial performances - whichever they chose. Some of the locals such as Harry Tuller and A. Kurkowski wanted to go the limit and were turned upside down and inside out with a variety of stunts during their rides. There was even a special service to and from Canadarago Park by the trolley line to accommodate those interested in attending.

A ride with 'Tony' in his flying boat was also a popular diversion. He carried from fifteen to forty passengers daily and everyone seemed to enjoy the water and air ride with first-timers surprised and pleased at the feeling of perfect security they had as soon as Yackey started his machine across the water. Before they realized it, passengers were admiring the beauty of the hills and valleys surrounding Richfield springs as seen from the air.

Between March 1921 and October 1922, Yackey was hired as a pilot for the growing U.S. Mail Service. He made regular

mail trips into Washington, DC. In an examination and trial for appointment, he stood fifth on a list of one hundred and fifty. He wrote to Fred Fox that he would be able to secure a leave of absence to permit his being at Canadarago Park during the summer months. During his service as a mail carrier, he became friends with Charles Lindberg.

After leaving the U. S. Mail Service, he remained in the Chicago area and began to focus more on building airplanes of his own design, including in 1925, the Yackey Sport. In 1918 the Checkerboard Aviation Field near Chicago was established by retailers Decker & Cohn for transport of their Society Brand clothing line to other nearby cities. The planes were decorated with the company name and notable checkerboard logo. Yackey became associated with the field during his final months as a mail pilot and then started a flying school there which was advertised as one of the oldest flying schools in the United States at the time. The field was sold to Yackey in 1924 and he rented out the grass air fields to local festivals, fairs and other events to bring in revenue.

With a large investment from his wife, Olive, he started the Yackey Aircraft Company, first modifying surplus World War I



*Wilfred Anthony Yackey, Jr.*

military fighter and bomber aircraft into civilian passenger and cargo transport planes of his own design.

His career was cut short when Yackey was testing a plane before it was transferred to its new owner. He was a noted advocate for airline safety and insisted on personally testing every plane he built before its

final sale. On October 4, 1927, he was performing such a test flight when a brace on the right wing failed causing the wing to buckle during a steep turn. Control of the plane was lost and he plunged five hundred feet to the ground where the plane exploded. 'Tony' was thirty-seven.