

The American Aviation Historical Society

The First 50 Years

By Tim Williams
with contributions from William T. Larkins

The American Aviation Historical Society and its *Journal* were born on Sunday, January 29, 1956, at 3038 Bridge Street, Hayward, California, the home of Willis Nye. Three people met and formed the germ of an idea that has led to more than fifty years of continuous cooperative effort to research and preserve the history of American aviation. You are now reading the two-hundredth product of this trio's vision. Those three people were Willis L. Nye, Chalmers A. Johnson and William T. Larkins.

Willis Nye had a connection with aviation that went all the way back to witnessing one of Louis Paulhan's flights at Tanforan Race Track in 1910. He worked for air services, airlines, aircraft manufacturers, authored aviation trade school books and over one hundred magazine articles. At the time of the January 29 meeting he also had seven years experience with one of the two organizations that inspired the idea of an AAHS, the Nautical Research Guild.

Chalmers Johnson was a graduate student in political science at the University of California, Berkley. He started taking and collecting photographs as an air crewman on TBMs in the Naval Reserve at Oakland.

Bill Larkins was an audio-visual specialist working for the University of California, Berkley. His interest in aviation started in 1934 with ten-cent balsa kits and "Dare Devil Aces" and "War Birds" pulps. Like others, his interest in aviation led to an interest in photography. He was an established member of an expanding and active group of photographer/collectors. He had a growing interest in information that would allow the complete and correct identification of the aircraft in the photos he was taking and collecting.

The purpose of the meeting at Willis Nye's home that Sunday was to discuss "the possibility of forming some kind of organization devoted to the serious collector." Nye knew that the Nautical Research Guild had demonstrated success with a similar goal. He persuaded Johnson and Larkins that the three of them could have similar success with an organization focused on aviation. Thus the origin of the AAHS was to support the activities of serious collectors. This included finding and sharing accurate information and making contact with others with similar interests. One of the sources of accurate information used by the three and their colleagues was the British organization, Air-Britain. This was the other organization that helped to inspire the American Aviation Historical Society. Nye, Johnson and Larkins determined they did not wish to be

another Air-Britain, covering information about aviation around the world. No, the focus of the new organization would be the vast field of American aviation. Chalmers Johnson and Bill Larkins agreed to write personal letters to 61 collectors they knew. Asking for \$3 and "a little faith in future developments." Nye, Johnson and Larkins agreed that when twenty people had sent their \$3 the first issue of "The *Journal* of the American Aviation Historical Society would be published. The Society was launched on \$60.

The first twenty members, in order of payment were: William T. Larkins, Charles Mandrake, David W. Lucabaugh, William Steeneck, James J. Sloan, Earl S. Holmquist, Merle Olmsted, Willis L. Nye, Dustin W. Carter, Burton Kemp, Robert G. Hufford, Douglas D. Olson, Boardman C. Reed, Howard Levy, Warren D. Shipp, Truman C. Weaver, Chalmers A. Johnson, Frederick Gardner Freeman Jr., Peter M. Bowers and Joe Goodyear. There were 73 members with the printing of the second *Journal*, 123 with the third and 173 members with the fourth *Journal*.

From the first *Journal* every effort was made to publish accurate, detailed information and photographs that were not available from other sources. The members developed the con-



Recent photo of William T. Larkins (left) with AAHS member Major Tom Elliott, USMC (retired). (Photo from William Larkins collection)

The First 100 AAHS Members

The individuals listed below appear in the order that they joined the AAHS, becoming the founding core of the organization. We owe a debt of gratitude to these individuals as they laid the foundation of an organization that has sustained and grown over the last 50 years. It is the challenge of the current membership to continue this legacy for the next 50 years. Membership number and date of membership was based on the receipt of \$3.00 annual dues.

1.	* William T. Larkins	1-30-56	51.	* Leonard E. Opdycke	3-30-56
2.	Charles Mandrake	2-4-56	52.	John C. Durand	3-31-56
3.	David W. Lucabaugh	2-6-56	53.	Frank Strnad	4-4-56
4.	William Steeneck	2-6-56	54.	* Robert L. Taylor	4-5-56
5.	James J. Sloan	2-8-56	55.	Edward T. Maloney	4-6-56
6.	* Earl S. Holmquist.	2-10-56	56.	D. A. S. McKay	4-6-56
7.	* Merle Olmsted	2-11-56	57.	Robert J. Lemm	4-6-56
8.	Willis L. Nye	2-12-56	58.	Francis J. Caffrey	4-6-56
9.	Dustin W. Carter	2-12-56	59.	Marvin J. Border	4-7-56
10.	Burton Kemp	2-15-56	60.	D. R. Trone	4-10-56
11.	* Robert G. Hufford	2-16-56	61.	Jack Ray	4-10-56
12.	* Boardman C. Reed	2-16-56	62.	Henry W. Arnold	4-16-56
13.	Howard Levy	2-16-56	63.	William A. Riley Jr.	4-17-56
14.	Warren D. Shipp	2-16-56	64.	Peter M. Grosz	4-20-56
15.	Truman C. Weaver	2-17-56	65.	P.W. Wilson	4-25-56
16.	Chalmers A. Johnson	2-17-56	66.	William J. Balogh	4-25-56
17.	Frederick G. Freeman Jr.	2-18-56	67.	Robert P. Straub	4-26-56
18.	Peter M. Bowers	2-19-56	68.	Prank Gudaitis	4-27-56
19.	* Douglas D. Olson	2-19-56	69.	Alexander J. McRae Jr.	4-28-56
20.	Joe Goodyear	2-19-56	70.	Leonel S. Stollar	4-30-56
21.	Alexander E. Ferko	2-23-56	71.	Edgar Deigan	5-2-56
22.	Merle D. Larson	2-25-56	72.	Frank C. Bennett Jr.	5-2-56
23.	E. C. Haney	2-25-56	73.	Brian Baker	5-7-56
24.	* Leo J. Kohn	2-25-56	74.	James C. Mathiesen	5-7-56
25.	Harry Gann	2-25-56	75.	Joseph Nieto	5-7-56
26.	Robert R. Longo	2-26-56	76.	Gene Sommerich	5-10-56
27.	David Oster	2-26-56	77.	Ebert C. Smith	5-10-56
28.	Mitch Mayborn	2-27-56	78.	John C. Mitchell	5-11-56
29.	Ralph I. Brown	2-28-56	79.	* Marion H. Havelaar	5-13-56
30.	* Harold Andrews	2-29-56	80.	* David W. Menard	5-18-56
31.	Sam Haley	3-2-56	81.	Lee Enich	5-19-56
32.	Jack Canary	3-4-56	82.	Emil Strasser	5-19-56
33.	Lawrence S. Smalley	3-7-56	83.	Gordon S. Williams	5-21-56
34.	Stephen J. Hudek	3-10-56	84.	Harold E. Ahrens	5-22-56
35.	Ronald M. Gerdes	3-16-56	85.	Ernest M. Freeman	5-22-56
36.	Brewster C. Reynolds	3-16-56	86.	Richard M. Bueschel	5-25-56
37.	Thomas H. Larkins	3-18-56	87.	* Frank L. Greene	5-26-56
38.	John Underwood	3-18-56	88.	John Caler	5-29-56
39.	Deward B. Gresham	3-18-56	89.	John R. Sharp	5-29-56
40.	* Albert Zimmerly Jr.	3-18-56	90.	Jesse Davidson	5-29-56
41.	William R. Feist Jr.	3-20-56	91.	Howard McLeod	5-30-56
42.	* J. M. G. Gradidge	3-21-56	92.	A. L. Bachmann	5-31-56
43.	James C. Fahey	3-21-56	93.	Roger A. Freeman	5-31-56
44.	Joseph H. Barry	3-21-56	94.	Aaron L. King Jr.	6-1-56
45.	Gregory C. Kohn	3-23-56	95.	Byron B. Calomiris	6-4-56
46.	George Hardie Jr.	3-26-56	96.	Alexis Dawydoff	6-4-56
47.	David A. Rankin	3-26-56	97.	Harry M. Lounsbury	6-4-56
48.	Erwin J. Bulban	3-26-56	98.	Clifford G.B. Stuart	6-15-56
49.	Robert L. Stuckey	3-26-56	99.	Alberto Salvati	6-15-56
50.	Keith D. Boyer	3-27-56	100.	Clinton J. Toms	6-16-56

* denotes members still active as of DEC/2005



Early AAHS Directors meet in Oakland. L to R: E. T. Smallwood, James Sloan, Harry Gann, Bill Riley, Rolly Bliss. (Photo by William Larkins)

tent. The commitment to good quality photo reproduction was evident from the first issue. The early *Journals* were printed by mimeograph. The budget to publish the first four issues was \$498.65 (for the whole year!). Of this total \$209.51 was spent on the photo-offset photo pages bound into each *Journal*. There was no newsletter published in the early years of the Society. Each issue of the *Journal* contained detailed introductions to new members, changes of address for existing members and a wants and disposals listing. These features supported member-to-member contact. The publishing of the introduction of new members, with their addresses, was unheard of at the time. Many collectors jealously guarded information regarding the identity of their trading partners.

There were no elected officers in the first year of the American Aviation Historical Society. Bill Larkins served as Secretary in 1956. He edited the *Journal*. Editing the *Journal* also involved typing the mimeograph stencils. Remember typing when you had to redo the entire page if you made a mistake? Harry Gann has told stories about several members spending part of the weekend walking around Bill and Tillie Larkins' dining room table collating the latest issue of the *Journal*. To help relieve some of the burden on Bill Larkins' shoulders, Douglas Olson began serving as membership chairman. (This was a role he had already been serving for Air-Britain in the United States.) The Society did not have a president in its first year.

During the third quarter of 1956 an eleven person temporary Board of Directors was formed to determine policies and working toward incorporation as a non-profit. The members of this first Board were: Pete Bowers, Dusty Carter, John C. Durand, Chalmers Johnson, Gregory C. Kohn, Charles G. Mandrake, Willis Nye, Merle Olmsted, Warren D. Shipp, James J. Sloan and Frank Strnad.

In the second year, 1957, the temporary board disbanded after electing officers and a new board consisting of: Warren D. Shipp, President; Peter M. Bowers, Vice President; James J. Sloan, Secretary/Treasurer; William T. Larkins, Editor of the

Journal; Willis L. Nye, Director; Chalmers A. Johnson, Director.

By the end of the third year American Aviation Historical Society membership had grown to 485. At the end of 1958, Bill Larkins stepped aside as *Journal* Editor. Dr. Gerald E. Wheeler of San Jose State College and an editorial staff took up the *Journal* editorial duties for the beginning of 1959. It should be noted that while there were a number of enthusiastic volunteers, the burden for production of the *Journal* for the first three years fell squarely on Bill Larkins' broad shoulders. It was time for others to build on the strong foundation he had assured.

This new editorial team and 1959 brought a new look to the Volume Four *Journals*. Gardner Freeman's evocative pen and ink masthead remained. The table of contents, which had graced the cover of each of the first twelve *Journals*, had been moved to the inside of the front cover. And the cover of the *Journal* now sported a large, dramatic black and white photo. The inside back cover presented a fine three-view drawing. The inside of the front cover also had an editorial, a complete list of officers and staff. AAHS now had a Los Angeles address.

Volume 10 and 1965 brought another upgrade in *Journal* design. With Ken Rust as editor and Matt Jefferies as technical editor, the *Journal* took on a minimalist, sixties style. A monochrome color (blue in 1965 and 1966) featured on the coated stock front and rear covers. Gone was Freeman's masthead, replaced by a small four-bladed prop logo and simple typeface. Artwork was added to the back cover. At the end of 1966 membership had reached 3,350.

In the first quarter of 1967, the American Aviation Historical Society launched a new publication. *AAHS Newsletter* number one was published in March 1967. This had the effect of freeing space in the *Journal* for more historical information. The matters of AAHS business, introduction of new members, some correspondence and items of timely interest were moved to the newsletter. The appearance of the *AAHS Newsletter* allowed more exposure to these matters.

The Bicentennial in 1976 brought with it some enduring changes in the *Journal*. Thanks to some corporate assistance the front and back covers were printed in full color. The page count went up to 80 pages. These became standards for future *Journals*. A new red, white and blue, stars and stripes masthead incorporated the now familiar eagle circular logo. Martin Cole was the editor.

In 1977 Robert E. Williams became *Journal* editor. Bob was a formally trained graphic artist working in aerospace publications. He was also a keen historian, photographer and archivist. One year later Al Hansen joined the editorial team and over twenty years of steady improvement of *Journal* quality had begun. Al Hansen is a historian of vast experience and prodigious recall. He is also a keen photographer and archivist. The team of Bob and Al continued to impress members every quarter with ever more outstanding *Journals*.

Throughout the seventies and eighties the *Journal* had been printed by an arrangement with McDonnell-Douglas Corporation. This provided our Society with a much-needed inexpensive cost for printing. This did not come without some significant downsides. Since ours was an external job for the



AAHS Directors at SFO Helicopter Hovercraft. L to R top: James Sloan, LeRoy Weber, Walt Jefferies, Rolly Bliss, Harry Gann, Willis Nye, Warren Oberhaus. Bottom: Two pilots, Bill Riley, E.T. Smallwood. (Photo by William Larkins)

corporate printers and not a money producer we were always at the end of the queue. This meant we were not able to control the timing of *Journal* availability. We were infamous for never knowing when members would receive their *Journals* and *Newsletters*. Another occasional problem with our printing arrangement was quality control. While the printers were capable of excellent work, when there were problems we did not have the option of reprints to fix problems. There is one issue with a neon paint scheme on a very dark Boeing P-12 gracing the cover that still causes nightmares on the editorial team, today. Then a bad thing happened that turned out very well for the Society and the *Journal*. Our benefactor informed us they would no longer be able to do our printing.

Because of our erratic printing, and *Journal* delivery schedule, we were losing members at an alarming rate. The schedule or lack of one, and some severe front office problems had caused our membership to dip well below 2,000. We were able to address the front office problems in a relatively short time. But a number of members had already written the Society off as incompetent and frustrating.

We had to find a new source for printing. We determined we would take advantage of the situation to gain control of our ability to deliver high quality *Journals* to members on a schedule they could count on. We demonstrated our ability to meet that commitment. Within a year our membership was up to over 3,000. The word got out and members returned, bringing new members with them.

About this same time Bob Williams was asked by the Board to investigate the possible advantages of composing the *Journal* electronically. A task force was set up and determined such a conversion could produce cost and quality control

advantages for the Society. Great! The only thing was that the Board could do was authorize funding the equipment and software, but the conversion was up to Bob. It required Bob to learn a whole new set of skills. What a trooper! He persevered and was relentless in mastering the process. Thanks to his efforts and the templates he developed, the Society saved and continues to save a great deal on printing costs. His work had another effect that contributed to the continuity of the *Journal* and the Society. When Bob was suddenly no longer able to prepare the *Journal*, the work he had done made it much easier for others to step in and carry on.

In 2000, the Society entered the electronic age with the introduction of the AAHS Web site (www.aahs-online.org). The Web site has been continuously enhanced since its introduction, offering members discussion boards for Wants and Disposals as well as general information

exchange. Book reviews, a complete Table of Contents for all *Journal* issues, and extensive Web resource links can be found on the site.

The Society continues to evolve. It does, however, support the same values and purposes from 1956 and faces similar problems. As we look forward with the possibility of unlimited color, video and well over 80 pages of space in an electronic format *Journal*, we are still working to move more of the membership to action. Put fingers to keys and get that article you have been going to do on a disk and into the editorial team. At the end of 1956, Bill Larkins made exactly the same request of those 173 members, pointing out that you are not a subscriber, you are a member.



AAHS 1967 group tour of NAS San Diego. L to R: Bill Larkins, Henry Arnold, James Dunavent, Larry Smalley, Dusty Carter, Willis Nye, Clay Jansson, Bude Donato, Bill Swisher. (Photo from William Larkins)