

Surprise visit by plane led to pilot's arrest for murder

It was a police reporter's dream come true during an otherwise humdrum autumn. Out of the sky fell a truly exciting story for a change.

On Saturday morning, Oct. 28, 1939, Bloomington police got a routine report broadcast in the Midwest area to be on the lookout for a stolen two-seated Taylor cub airplane from Brookfield, Mo. The report was duly noted, but the authorities didn't expect the plane to turn up in Monroe County.

When subsequent bulletins indicated that the plane had been spotted over Louisville and Frankfort, Ind., local police began to take more notice. Then the bulletins stopped.

There was a perfectly good reason for that. The pilot had put the plane down on the Meredith Dill-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

man farm a half mile west of Clear Creek. According to the Oct. 30 Bloomington *Evening World*, "The flyer was immediately surrounded by a horde of small boys and men, who had been watching the circling of the plane for several minutes. He was very nervous and told a story of having come from Chicago enroute to Bedford for a steak dinner and that he had decided to land because of darkness."

Why were the police so interested in the pilot? The answer to that

question had its beginning on Thursday, Oct. 26. On that day, Ernest Paul (Larry) Pletch, age 20, was taking a flying lesson with Carl Bivens over Brookfield, Mo. The instructor's body was later found in a pasture some 50 miles away near a town called Cherry Box. He had been shot.

It was the Clear Creek telephone exchange operator, Bertha Maner, who was credited with Pletch's quick arrest. She along with others had noticed the plane circling the area, but did not believe the story that the pilot was a student taking lessons at Bloomington airport.

Maner had been listening to a football game broadcast that was interrupted by a bulletin about the stolen plane. In short order she had called the Dillman home to get the serial number printed on the side of the yellow plane, checked on

Pletch's whereabouts, reported the information to the Bloomington police and warned the proprietor of the Williams and Wampler general store/restaurant that he had a dangerous customer. Maner also called the proprietor and suggested he try to stall Pletch as long as possible.

It worked. Police operator Charles Robinson dispatched Patrolman Carlisle Briscoe to Clear Creek. He was accompanied by State Policemen James Watts and Walter Howard. Related the *Evening World*, Robinson told the officers, "That man is a killer. Be ready to shoot."

As it happened, Pletch didn't resist arrest, although he was carrying a .32 caliber handgun. He had a box of shells and \$14.

The prisoner was moved from the Monroe County jail to the State Po-

lice Headquarters in Indianapolis, where at first he insisted that he had let his instructor off at Springfield, Ill. Since Bivens' body had already been found, Pletch quit stalling and finally confessed.

Maner was the heroine of the dramatic capture. She told a reporter, "I have a vivid imagination and a nose for news. We telephone operators have a code of secrecy in regard to private affairs, but report happenings of public interest in cases where there is public safety involved."

As for Pletch, it was subsequently learned that there was an earlier charge pending against him for stealing another plane at Frankfort the previous summer. Back in Missouri, three counties claimed him on charges of first degree murder, kidnapping and airplane theft.