

DEAN & MARSHA FELDPAUSCH

Wayne: This is May 3rd, 2024. I'm Wayne Summers, and today I'm interviewing Dean and Marsha Feldpausch. Dean, why don't you start out by telling how you became interested in Clem Sohn?

Dean: My father-in-law passed away about five years ago, and kind of being somewhat technically adept, the family wanted to put together a video presentation of pictures for his visitations. So my wife and I and some other family went to my mother-in-law's house and we were going through pictures that I could possibly put in this little display. I remember going through a scrapbook. It was of black and white pictures, and a lot of the pictures were missing, and I said to my mother-in-law, Alice Pline, "Why are these pictures missing?" You could see they were kind of ripped out. She said, "Oh, I would loan my book to somebody, and they would take pictures of the Batman." I'm thinking, "Batman? Oh, you know what? I know there was Batman that came from Fowler. I really don't know anything about him." How are you related to him? She said, "Well, I'm his first cousin."

It was like, "Whoa!" I didn't realize how close I was related through marriage to this famous Batman from Fowler and that kind of started me on my path. Then I found family writings that talked about Clem's life. There was one particular part that kind of amazed me. There was a ballerina that performed during Clem's lifetime, Margot Fonteyn, and she was a premier ballerina known throughout the world. She actually had an over 50-year career, might have been the greatest ballerina ever. In the family writings, it talked about how Clem had sent her bouquet of flowers in a note at one of her performances. I thought, "Wow, that's kind of interesting." Later on, when I started doing some research on Clem, I actually bought Margot Fonteyn's autobiography, and I was reading that to find out about her. She mentions it in her autobiography that she received a note and some flowers from Clem Sohn.

I was so intrigued by this, I thought, "I've gotta find out everything I can about this relationship," which was pretty much nothing. After going through and learning so much about Clem and so much about Margot, I ended up deciding that I wanted to write a book that featured those two, and actually placed them in a relationship that I wished it could be. I'm not sure whether it really happened or not. I actually wrote a book, *The Batman and the Ballerina*. It's a historical fiction, but it's all the background about Clem and about Margot. That's all thoroughly researched and true. It's just their relationship that I sort of had to take some leniency to, but the book was very well received. I sold over 400 copies and I considered it a success. That's what got me started on the whole thing was a scrapbook and family writings.

Wayne: How did Clem's family come to this area?

Dean: The Sohn name originated in Switzerland, but many of them moved to Germany. Clem's dad, Gottlieb, came over with his father, Peter, and their family from Allendorf, Germany, to the Americas, and ended up coming to Fowler and settling. The mid-Michigan area had Fowler and Westphalia, which were German settlements. When those people came from Germany, they sought friends, relatives, people that they could converse with and so they ended up here. Gottlieb ended up becoming friends with and marrying Rosalia Cramer from Fowler, who was my mother-in-law's aunt. That's how this connection came about.

Wayne: Where was their home? Where was their farm?

Dean: Their farm was actually out on Hinman Road, north of M-21. There's nothing there anymore from that farm, at least on that location. The house was actually bought and moved. That currently sits off the

corner of Grange and Kinley Road. That's currently owned by a Frechen, but if you go and look for the farm, there's a few little concrete foundations that may have been a part of it that are kind of in the trees and the weeds. Otherwise, there's nothing else there.

Wayne: Tell me a little bit about his family that he grew up in, brothers, sisters.

Dean: He was born December 10th, 1910, and he was the second son of Rosalia, who I mentioned earlier was a Cramer, and Gottlieb Sohn. He had an older brother, Francis, and Francis was 15 months older than him. The family was living near the corner of Walker and Hinman. When Clem was eight years old, his mother, Rosalia, died of a respiratory disease. That disease that she had was complicated by a faulty heart valve. When she passed away, Gottlieb, I'm told, didn't really like farming and wasn't that good at it, did not want to take care of Francis and Clem on the farm. So he gave responsibility for taking care of Francis, the older brother, to Rosalia's sister, Christine, and John Motz. They had a farm north and east of Fowler out on Walker Road. He gave responsibility for taking care of Clem to Rosalia's sister, Margaret, and Bill Kissane, who had a home northwest of St. Johns on Dewitt Road. So Clem and Francis actually ended up living about four and a half miles apart. Then Gottlieb, his dad, sold the farm, and he moved to Lansing to take a job as a Lansing city police officer.

Wayne: Are there stories about him, as a child, maybe being a bit of a daredevil?

Dean: He was a bit of a daredevil. He also loved aviation from an early age. Family writings say that he had airplanes attached to the ceiling in his bedroom on strings. So every night, when he slept, he got to look at airplanes. Now, I'm told that Clem and Francis were very obedient and very respectful young boys, but they didn't have really parents. They were kind of guests at other peoples' homes, so they probably had more leeway to do things they were interested in than other kids, who were living with their parents.

Wayne: What schools did they attend?

Dean: Clem and Francis attended Fowler until they got shipped out. Then they actually attended St. Johns schools. Much later on, his dad, Gottlieb, remarried a woman named, Louise Tritts. They lived in a house that's about 10 blocks south of the capitol in Lansing on Linval Street. That house is there. It's a two-story house. I went and looked at it. At that time, Clem then enrolled in Lansing Eastern, and he was a member of the aviation club. It was through that membership that his aviation career began.

Wayne: Did he learn to pilot airplanes at an early age?

Dean: Yes, he did, probably earlier than they would ever let kids do it nowadays. He developed a friendship with a gentleman named Art Davis, who owned a WACO airplane dealership, and he owned Davis Airport. That's on Chandler Road in East Lansing. The airport's not there anymore. It's now a big condominium complex. After Clem graduated, he went to Art to see if he could land a job. This was around the depression. There wasn't a lot going on and Art just could not take him on, but he did find him a job at a friend's airport up in the upper peninsula. It was Luce County Airport near Newberry. He spent the first summer after school working at that airport. There were so few airplanes at that time, and of course, so few landing in the upper peninsula, that Clem actually spent most of his time working in the potatoes that this airport owner owned.

The following year, Clem made his way back to Lansing, and Art was able to hire him at that time as a mechanic and a grounds keeper. Through that, Clem learned how to fly. He would end up fixing planes and then he would take them out and fly them to test what he had done, whether it was working on the

body or working on the engine or whatever. He eventually bought his own WACO Taperwing, single engine airplane, and he souped it all up. I'm told he would often fly to Fowler to join his friends, Ed and Larry Motz, and take them out flying.

Wayne: Where in Fowler would he land at? Was there a landing strip here at that time?

Dean: No, at that time they just landed in farm fields. There would be a smooth farm field and they would land there.

Wayne: You hope it was smooth anyway.

Dean: Well, those planes could take a lot. Yeah, he was an accomplished pilot. I'm told that, about 20 years old, he was an accomplished pilot.

Wayne: How did he go on to start jumping out of airplanes?

Dean: Art Davis would get involved in air shows, and what he started out doing was racing airplanes. At that time, you gotta remember planes were fairly new. Art, who had done some work on the earliest of airplanes in the military, when he got out and he started working with his own airplanes, he began souping them up and putting bigger engines in them. He did a lot of airplane racing. If you do some internet searches, you'll find that he was pretty good. He would often get in the top three in the races that he was a part of.

In the mid-1930s barnstorming became popular. Barnstorming consisted of pilots and airplanes who would get together and they would perform flying stunts to the enjoyment of a crowd. Of course, the people, because planes were relatively new, they were enamored by this, and they would come to these barnstorming events. They were called barnstorming because they required a lot of land. They didn't want to tie up airports to do this, so they would have them on farms. There would be barns and stuff around. They just ended up calling them barnstorming events. Clem started performing as a pilot at these barnstorming events and was quite successful.

Eventually, they started parachuting, and Clem wanted to do that. When they first started parachuting, it was static line jumping. This is, on the inside of the plane, there's a cable that runs across the ceiling in the plane and the rip cord was attached to that. As soon as they would jump out of the plane, it would pull the ripcord. The weight of the parachutist would pull the ripcord, and the parachute would deploy, and then they would come down to the earth. Parachuting like this was amazing. People, they just loved it.

There happened to be one show that Clem was at, and there was a parachutist named Spud Webb. He took parachuting a step further. He would jump outta the plane with his rip cord unattached to the static line. He would fall some length of time, and then he would pull his rip cord. According to family writings, the first time Clem saw this, and he saw how excited the crowd was, he decided right away he wanted to do that. One time, when Spud landed, he went up to Spud and he asked him, "How do you do this? I wanna do this." Spud would not help him. It was Spud's unique act and he didn't want anyone replicating it. So Clem had to pretty much learn how to--free fall parachuting, as it was called—to do that on his own. He became quite proficient at it. He once held the record for the highest altitude jump at 18,500 feet.

Wayne: That's a long ways up.

Dean: Yeah. He jumped higher one time long after this. When he was interviewed after that, he believed he was unconscious on and off during that jump. The air was so thin when he jumped out that again, he thought he was unconscious a time or two. He ended up coming down successfully, obviously, but that was way, way-- I mean, that's almost four miles up.

Wayne: Yes, wouldn't be a lot of oxygen up there.

Dean: Then the parachutists, took it another step further. Once there were more and more free fall parachutists, they started playing chicken. This was something that the crowds were excited to see but obviously, it was very, very dangerous. There is one time when Clem-- He had a good friend named Jerry Westling. They were very proficient free fall parachutists. They were good friends and they played chicken at a performance. I'm not really sure where they were at, but they jumped out the plane at the same time. They would jump out, and then they would come together, as they were coming down, so the crowd could see they were at the same altitude. Then they would split apart and start coming down. In this one particular event, Clem got probably between one and 2,000 feet above the ground, and he pulled his rip cord, losing to Jerry. However, Jerry waited too long and he pulled his rip cord too late, and he was killed. So Jerry, the winner, paid the ultimate price for winning that event. Clem was very distraught. He went to the hospital where they took Jerry. Jerry didn't really have a chance, but Clem went there and spent time there. He was very distraught, but he was the ultimate performer, and he performed the very next day. Didn't stop him.

Wayne: Did he ever do any wing walking?

Dean: I'm not really sure about that. I've been asked that before. I have not found evidence that he was a wing walker. There were a lot of people who did that. There was a woman who used to be a wing walker, very, very famous woman. I don't remember her name, so that was another big thing that thrilled audiences.

Wayne: How did he come up with the idea for his bat wings?

Dean: In 1934--this was about three years before he perished--he was actually at the Ionia Free fair in Ionia, Michigan, and he was with his friends, Ed and Larry Motz. In between performances, he was sitting with Ed and Larry, and he drew up a picture of what he perceived would be wings that would enable him to glide in the air. At this time, nobody was doing anything like that but Clem was an amazing performer and he wanted to take this to the next step. He wanted to give the audiences something they had not seen before. So he drew this amazing picture. I thought for the longest time, "Wouldn't it be fantastic to see what that paper looked like?" Recently we had a memorial dedication for a Clem Sohn monument in Fowler and a gentleman came up to me and he had that piece of paper. He showed me Clem's drawing, and I was just utterly amazed. His mother was a Sohn, and she had inherited a blue metal trunk that belonged to Clem, and it had a bunch of Clem's belongings in it and that piece of paper was part of it.

Wayne: Who actually made the first bat wings?

Dean: With his idea, Clem went back to his boss, Art Davis, and they put together a metal framework for his wings. It did not end up looking like the picture that Clem had drawn, but it was definitely a wing type outfit. After they made the framework, Clem went to his home in Lansing and took zephyr cloth, which was sometimes used as sailboat material at that time, and he used his stepmother's sewing machine to actually sew the zephyr cloth and place it on the wings. Then he tried different times to jump with it. He ended up making some changes. He changed his outfit that he wore. He put cloth in

between his legs that he could widen his legs, spread his legs apart, and it would kind of act like a tail on a bird and that gave him stability in the sky. He ended up, with the help of Art Davis, making those wings.

Wayne: Did he keep changing this over time or make additional ones?

Dean: Yeah, he did. Clem found that he couldn't just jump out of a plane and open his wings. If he did that, he would go into a spiral. He would just start spinning. Other people, who tried to emulate Clem, actually did this, went into the spin and ended up dying. They lost consciousness and dying. But Clem found that, if he jumped out of the plane, spread his legs, then opened one wing till he was stable, he could open the other wing, and then he could perform the way he wanted. He could kind of glide horizontally up to a mile away from the launch point and back. He could perform loops in the air.

The original wings, which are currently at the Michigan Historical Museum, were sort of heavy. I made a replica of those wings there. The replica that I made, it's very close. It looks very close to what is in the Michigan Historical Museum. They weigh between 15 and 20 pounds. Clem was looking to increase the amount of wing he was using and decrease the weight. He had several versions of the wings. The wings that he actually was wearing, when he passed away in Vincennes, did not look much like his original wings. They did not have the heavy metal and all that. They actually look much closer to what people use nowadays, and they kind of call 'em squirrel suits. That's where you kind of know that Clem was really the grandfather of this kind of flying. It's a whole sport now, but Clem was the one that initiated all that.

Wayne: I assume they were steel frames?

Dean: Yes, and I've got my replica here. I'll show that to you before you leave. Yeah, it was a steel frame and it fit on his shoulders and rib cage. Then they had long handles that fit from his armpits to his hands, and he could lift them up, and that would be like his wings.

Wayne: Where was the rip cord?

Dean: The rip cord, of course, was not on the wings. He would still wear a primary and secondary parachute when he wore his wings. That brings me to an interesting thought. A year before Clem passed away, he almost passed away performing in London, England. He jumped out of a plane, and for some reason, when he pulled his primary parachute, his wings got caught in his parachute. It came out, of course, but it didn't fully open, and he was falling too fast. When he got close to the ground, he did pull his secondary chute, but it didn't have much of an impact on his speed. What saved him was that he fell on an automobile in the parking lot. I'm sure he mangled it good, but he only broke his arm and dislocated his shoulder. It saved his life. I'm sure, if he would've landed on the ground, he either would've passed away or he would've debilitated himself so much that he would not have been able to continue that.

Wayne: Break a back or--,

Dean: Fate was definitely on his side.

Wayne: Did he have any other accidents?

Dean: Not that I'm aware of. Of course, he had the ultimate accident in the Vincennes, France, but I'm not aware of any other accidents. I know that, when he first started, like I mentioned, he had a lot of

trials that didn't go well, but they didn't result in an accident. They resulted in him deciding to make some changes to his outfit or his wings that would allow him to do his bat wing flying in a more proficient manner.

Wayne: Were all of these events that he did part of the Davis Air Show?

Dean: They were. He did get invited to other events that he went to by himself. The last event that he attended in Vincennes, France, was not part of the Davis Air Show. Art didn't even go, but his wife, Rhoda, went with Clem, acting as kind of his manager.

He would get invited to separate events because his act was so unique. Even though his act was unique, people weren't seeking to necessarily replicate that like they replicated parachuting, because it was so much more dangerous. People who tried it maybe jumped out of a plane a time or two with the wings and said, "We can't do this anymore."

Wayne: "I wanna live a little longer." How much did he get paid?

Dean: It's interesting. The great depression was in 1929. October of '29 was when the stock market crashed and this is 1937 so it's only eight years removed. The economy in America and Europe was still needing to rebound. It did not come back. The employment did not come back, but Clem could make a couple thousand dollars at one of these performances. So many people would come--and he would get a percentage of the gate--that he could make a couple of thousand dollars. He was actually a fairly wealthy man. I'm told that in his car he had a pistol that he kept on top of the visor in his windshield because he always feared that someone would try to rob him and take away some of his goodies.

Wayne: Where was he living during this time?

Dean: He lived with his mom and dad in Lansing on Linval Street. Once he moved there, he stayed there.

Wayne: So, even though he had thousands of dollars, he didn't get a house of his own?

Dean: Correct. He didn't have a steady girlfriend. He did go to dances and things, and he did dance with gals. I was just told at the memorial dedication-- A woman came up to me and said her mom danced with Clem Sohn the night before he went to take off for Vincennes, France. So he did, apparently, enjoy being with women, but he did not have a steady girlfriend.

Wayne: Where all did he perform at? You said London and France. I assume, throughout the United States?

Dean: Oh Yeah. He performed from California to Florida; Michigan; the upper plains states. He was in North Dakota; Iowa. He performed all over. One of the things I tried to do was kind of find newspaper articles about where he had been. I probably found 10 or 15 of different places where he was at. The story would be about how he thrilled audiences with his wings. He told people in Vincennes, France, when he was interviewed, that he had jumped over 200 times. There was nowhere near that many that I found, but I know he was all over the United States.

Wayne: The 200 events, it wouldn't be practice jumps or other things?

Dean: They weren't practice jumps, but you make a good point. At a barnstorming event, there may be one or two days where they'd have the event and he might jump two or three times each day. He might jump six times at an event. I'm sure that's in the count, so every time he jumps wasn't 200 events, but something less than that.

Wayne: His entire jumping career was about how many years?

Dean: Sometime in 1935 to April of 1937.

Wayne: Only about two years. That's still a lot of jumps for--

Dean: --a year and a half to two years. When it was winter up here, he would jump in Florida and southern states and things like that, so he was jumping year-round, but never really had an off season that I'm aware of.

Wayne: Why don't you tell us about what led up to his final jump?

Dean: While he was recuperating from his near fatal jump in London, he got invited to Vincennes, France, to the Hippodrome, the Vincennes Airport, and he accepted that invitation. On April 4th, 1937, he boarded the Queen Mary cruise ship in New York with Art Davis's wife, Rhoda. They made a trip across the Atlantic Ocean towards Southampton, England. That's where it first docked. During that trip, it rained; it was damp; the ship was not on schedule. It was a very, very long trip so they came to Southampton England, late. Then they went from Southampton, England, to Cherbourg, France, which is in the north part of France. That was a big naval port. It's interesting to do some history on that port because Nazi Germany actually overtook that port and used that for a long time during the war.

Anyway, once they got there, they took train transportation down to Vincennes, which is south and east of Paris. Because they were late and because of the weather and everything, Clem had little free time to take care of details related to his performance. There's a newspaper article that interviewed Rhoda Davis, and she talked about what she believed caused the accident. She said that she was not aware that he repacked his parachute when he got to France. As she saw it, the silk stuck together. His parachute did come out, but it didn't open.

He left from the plane at 10,000 feet and he began his first descent, and everything went well. At about 1,000 feet, he pulled his primary rip cord and his chute came out, but it didn't open. He was pulling at the ropes to try to get it to open. It didn't open. He pulled a secondary chute, but it was just really too late. He ended up landing on the ground at 200 miles an hour. The story is that he left a one-foot depression in the ground. No doubt, he died instantly. No doubt, he broke every bone in his body.

There was a newspaper article that Rhoda talked about. One thing she mentioned about this repacking things. The explained that in France, parachutists were required to repack their chutes at least 10 days before they used them. But in America, the requirement was 60 days. So Clem may not have packed his chute for quite a long time. He left on April 4th; he died on April 25th, so that's a month right there in damp weather. So most certainly, that's what caused his accident.

Something that I found that made me kind of sad was-- Clem had a friend, the Lansing police Chief John Early. Clem's dad Gottlieb, when he was in Lansing, he got a job as a Lansing City police officer, and he worked for John Early. John Early mentioned that Clem told him that, after his France performance, he was gonna hang up his wings for good. He was going to be done doing aerial gliding. He just thought it was too dangerous. He thought he had gone far too long without an accident, and he was ready to just

hang it up. Early was interviewed after Clem died, and they asked him what Clem's dad, Gottlieb, said when he was told that Clem passed away. Gottlieb simply said, "I expected it," which is really kind of sad.

Clem's body was returned to U.S. soil by ship, and he's buried in the Fowler Cemetery.

At the site where Clem landed in Vincennes, France, the French airport built a memorial. Around the actual place in the ground where he landed, they had a short, wrought iron fence, and there was a flagpole in the center of it. They flew an American flag from that flagpole. In that they placed a brass plant stem, and it had an engraved plate attached to it. In French it said, "Vieilles tiges à leur camarade," and translated this means, "Old stems to their comrade." So the French Air Force was telling Clem, "These are stems for you, our comrade." When I found out about this, I thought, "Wow, it'd be great to go to France sometime and try to find this spot," but I have since learned that, during World War II, that airport was bombed heavily by Germany. That site was destroyed in World War II by bombing. The brass stem sculpture is here in Michigan, and that's at the Michigan Historical Museum with his first set of wings. I have seen these brass stems. It's very, very neat what French Air Force did.

Wayne: Did I hear somewhere that they're going to be putting it on display soon?

Dean: After Clem passed away, Art Davis hired another batwing flyer, and his name was Charlie Zmuda. I am told that Charlie Zmuda's wings are going to be on display in the Michigan Historical Museum, starting May 11th, and I think through the end of the month. I'm planning to get there if I can. I wanna see his wings, how they display them in the Michigan Historical Museum.

Wayne: Not gonna be Clem's?

Dean: I don't know if Clem's is also gonna be on display, but the Zmuda's family was told that Charles Zmuda's wings were gonna be on display. They were in the R. E. Olds Museum. It's interesting because, when I was doing my research, I didn't even know that there was a set of Clem's wings remaining. Somebody told me, "Hey, Clem's wings are in the R. E. Olds Museum in Lansing." So I went there to see those wings, and it ended up being Charlie's Zmuda's wings. They weren't Clem's wings, but I did find out that Clem's first wings were in the Michigan Historical Museum. I went there to see them. They weren't on display, but they gave me a private showing. So I got to see his wings, his outfit, his goggles, and of course, the brass stems, got to see a number of things that the Michigan Historical Museum had. I took careful measurements of the wings. I took a whole bunch of pictures, and that's how I made my replica of his wings.

Wayne: I believe you had mentioned at the memorial service that there was also, at least at one time, a plaque at Eastern High School.

Dean: Yes. That was another thing I found was there was a brass plaque that they put on the wall of Eastern High School after 1937, after Clem passed away, to honor Clem and some other Lansing Eastern graduates. That plaque had his picture and his name, and it had a quote from Walter Sam Foss. That quote* is on his memorial that's in Fowler.

Marsha: Wasn't there kind of a thought too that Clem was a daredevil because of his mom passing away so young? He just did not have that mother guidance that may have discouraged--

Wayne: Mom wasn't telling him, "Don't do this. Don't do that."

Dean: She would've likely forbidden him from doing some things that he actually did.

Yeah, but as I was telling you, Wayne, when he first started jumping, he would attach a bag of flour to his leg, and before he jumped out of the plane, he would take a stick and poke the bag, and then he would jump out. Flour would stream out, and that's how the crowd could picture him up in the sky and see his trail. Later on, he began using smoke bombs. He would attach those to his leg, and then he would just pull a key or a pin or something and smoke would come out, but initially he used flour.

This guy that's with him--remember I talked about Jerry Wessling who died playing chicken with? That's Jerry Wessling and this is a Ford airplane, the old tri-motor. That's Clem. (Video playing in background.)

Dean: He said, "Jerry and I are taking off from the Floyd Bennett airport and this Ford--

Marsha: There was a conspiracy type thing about his death. Right?

Dean: There's multiple conspiracy things about his death. I guess we don't know for sure. I wrote a screenplay based on my book and based on the Margot-Clem connection, and I show possible reasons that aren't the inability to pack his parachute, but I didn't wanna write about those theories in the book. If I could have chased down one of the theories and it would've been much more interesting, but I would've ended up defaming someone so I didn't wanna do that. Yeah, there was thoughts that maybe it was a jealousy thing; maybe it was a military thing. There's multiple possible conspiracies for this, but because of the newspaper article, where Rhoda says that she's pretty sure it's because he didn't pack his parachute, and the fact that, as she saw him coming down, she thought the silk stuck together. It made me think that those other possibilities aren't as real as just simply not repacking his parachute.

Wayne: Usually, the simplest explanation is the correct one.

Dean: Clem's dad, Gottlieb, is a historical person in his own right. In 1943, about six years after Clem passed away, Gottlieb became the second Lansing city police officer to die in the line of duty. He had subdued a drunken individual in downtown Lansing, and he was walking him to the precinct jail, They had an altercation on the way, and Gottlieb suffered a heart attack and died. Every year the Lansing City Police department has a memorial service--they just had it a couple of days ago--where they honor all the police officers who have died in the line of duty and Gottlieb is always number two to be mentioned.

It's at that ceremony where I first met Jim and Joe Sohn. Jim and Joe Sohn are sons of Joe Sr. Sohn. Joe, his wife, Elia, named Otilia "Tilly," and him started Sohn Linen Service in Lansing. So that would be Gottlieb's first cousin, Joseph Sohn, Sr., who did Sohn Linen Service. Otilia "Tilly" [Feldpausch], she lived to be 101, and she worked at Sohn Linen Service all the way up until she was 90 years old. She was very dedicated to the business. Her brother, Roman, is from Fowler, and he lived to be 103. So there's pretty good genes in that family .

Wayne: I assume it was a large funeral service when he got back to Fowler, when the body got back to Fowler?

Dean: Yes, I have a picture of his funeral service. It looks to me like there was probably in the neighborhood of 300 people there. At that service, pilots who knew Clem, they flew over the cemetery. They threw down roses to the crowd. There was a sky writer, I guess you'd call it, who wrote the name, Sohn, up in the sky. It was a calm day above the cemetery. It was pretty neat.

Fifty years after April 25th, the day he passed away, they had another memorial ceremony in the Fowler Cemetery. At that time parachutists came down, parachuted in the cemetery, and airplanes flew over

and threw little wreaths out to the people at that time. They replaced Clem's headstone, and I guess it was quite a neat ceremony.

There is a controversy concerning his headstone and it's one of the reasons why, if you go to the Clem's monument in Fowler, you don't see a middle initial on his name. I did that purposely. In the Fowler Cemetery, his stone says, Clement J. Sohn. It says that because that's what the original headstone said, and they just simply replaced it with the same information. "J." was not Clem's middle initial. Clem signed his name, sometimes Clem Joseph Sohn and sometimes Clem Augustine Sohn. His birth certificate, which is written in Latin, says his middle name was Augustine. Gottlieb's brother, Clem's dad's brother's name was August. So Clem's middle name actually came from his uncle, and they used the long version of it, Augustine.

Wayne: If it was in Latin, I assume those would be church records?

Dean: Yes. When they wondered about that, they did ask the priest in Fowler at that time. Art Bossy(?) was his name, and he knew Latin. He read the birth certificate, and he confirmed that it was Augustine. In the family writings, where it talks about the genealogy of the Cramers, which I have, it does say that Clem's middle name was Augustine, so the headstone that's in Fowler is incorrect. I find that interesting.

Wayne: Wouldn't be the only one that's incorrect.

Dean: I'm sure of that.

Wayne: What motivated you to work to put a memorial next to the depot in Fowler?

Dean: Through this whole experience, doing all the research I did and then writing the book, and it took me nearly two years of research to write the book. Then I went on book signings. I went all over the place. My farthest I went away was Dallas, Texas, but I went to book signings all over. I was amazed, especially that when I was in local areas, like St. Johns, Fowler, Portland, Ionia, how few people knew who Clem was. Clem Sohn, at the height of his career, was known all across North America and known all across Europe. He was such a famous person. It grieved me, literally, that people didn't know him anymore. Especially since I found out my close relationship--my mother-in-law was first cousin. That makes my wife, Marsha, a second cousin. I'm a second cousin by marriage to one of the most famous people that ever came out of Fowler, if not the most famous, and nobody remembers him anymore. That was the reason I wrote the book. I didn't write the book to make money, and I didn't make money on it.

The memorial, I just decided I wanted to do that. It's by the bike trail in Fowler, Michigan, by the train depot. Anybody who goes by the train depot now, they can't miss the memorial. Clem will not be forgotten anymore. People will remember who he was and where he came from, and that's my whole reason for doing this.

Wayne: Was there any difficulty getting permission to put it there?

Dean: Not a whole lot of difficulty, but it took time. I worked with the Fowler Village, the group to work with on this, to get a place to put the monument. I had to go through that layer of government. The monument is by the bike trail. The bike trail is the old railroad track, so the Village of Fowler doesn't actually own that land. The State of Michigan does. The Village of Fowler had to get permitting to get the State of Michigan to give the okay for that piece of ground. It just took a long time. It took well over a year, from inception to placement, to get that monument there. Of course, some of that was

negotiating with monument places to try to get the best deal on a monument, which I ended up getting in Chesaning. They helped me tremendously. It just took a long time.

I was a project manager. I'm retired now, but in my work day, I was a project manager so I just know that, when you're working a project, you list what you need to do. You start checking off the boxes when you finish things and you stick with it. Had I not been a project manager, who knows? I might've given up part way through this, but I knew I could complete it if I just kept working the steps. Finally, that came to fruition April 25th, 2024. That's when the monument was dedicated for Clem Sohn.

Wayne: So do you have any final words you'd like to say?

Dean: Just if you want to learn about a really, neat guy, there's a lot of information out there on the internet about Clem. I encourage you to go look it up. I've got tons of research that I've done, but I still find things occasionally. I still talk to people occasionally, like the guy who had the drawing that Clem drew. I find out new things about Clem. Those things are all gonna be going away. With each day that ticks by, more information about Clem is gonna be lost. If you're interested at all, go out and do some research and have some fun with it.

Wayne: Thank you.

*There are some pioneer souls who blaze their paths where highways never ran.

BAT-WING SOHN DIVES TO DEATH

Tangled 'Chute Rope Blamed For Tragedy That Killed World-Famed Flyer

Clements A. (Clem) Sohn, former Clinton county farm boy, who at 26 had become the most celebrated parachute jumper in the history of aviation, fell 1,000 feet to his death at Vincennes, France, Sunday, while thrilling a great crowd with one of his famous "bat-wing" dives. Tangled parachute ropes are blamed for the tragedy. His appearance at Vincennes was one of several booked for a French tour during his second trip abroad. Last summer he jumped in England and while there crashed through the top of an automobile, breaking an arm and dislocating his shoulder when his 'chute rope fouled and he was forced to land with a small, emergency parachute.

He again wore two 'chutes, and while he succeeded in freeing one so that it snapped out above him, it failed to open and he plunged on downward to the earth. He had jumped from his plane at 6,000 feet and swooped through space on his man-made wings until he reached the 1,000-foot level where he strove to release his parachutes, but in vain.

Born near Fowler Dec. 7, 1911, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Gottlieb Sohn, he attended district school as a young boy. Later he spent some time with Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Kissane, and while there was a pupil at the Greenwood school. He received his high school training at Eastern and Central schools in Lansing, and as a student served an aviation apprenticeship under Art Davis, noted Lansing flyer. He became a licensed pilot, and then took up parachute jumping.

Sohn made his first jump in Florida four years ago. He gradually increased the time of his "delayed" jumps and then conceived the idea of fastening webbing to his arms and between his legs so that he might swoop and dive while descending in his jumps. This idea was original with Clem, and after much hard and dangerous practice, he perfected a wing-like harness. Almost immediately he was dubbed "Bat-Wing" Sohn and drew thousands wherever he appeared about the country in his celebrated feat. Many Clinton county people witnessed his performances in Lansing and at the Ionia County Fair. In the back of his mind was the thought that out of his "wings" would develop some invention to make airplane flying more safe and practical.

While his mother had faith that her son would survive his hazardous calling, the father feared for the boy's safety, and upon learning of his tragic death, sadly remarked, "I expected it." The elder Sohn is a Lansing traffic officer. Surviving, with the parents, is a brother, Francis Sohn, proprietor of the Band Box Cleaners at St. Johns; also a niece, Janet Christine Sohn, other relatives and a host of friends and admirers among the flying brotherhood. Sohn's body will be put on shipboard in France Friday and will reach his former home May 6 or 7, following which funeral rites will be held.

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