The World’s First Airline: The St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line
by Gay Blair White and Edited by Warren J. Brown

Wayne Bevis

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This book is obviously a labor of love—pictures, maps, tabulations and quotations collected over many years by Mrs. White, and painstakingly edited by Dr. Brown. It deals, in impressive detail, with a local story familiar to many old-timers but almost certainly unknown to thousands of recent arrivals in the Tampa Bay area. The title, *The World's First Airline*, requires a bit of examination. The St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line was indeed the world’s first *scheduled* air transportation company using heavier-than-air equipment. But Anthony Sampson, that omniscient British analyst and author, tells us in his encyclopedic *Empires of the Sky* (1984) that the German DELAG company offered regular lighter-than-air service in 1910. This fine distinction is reminiscent of the airline terms “direct”—meaning without a change of planes—and “non-stop” meaning just that. They are constantly confused.

The modest volume is packed with names known to this reviewer, and to many other long-time aviation buffs. It was my privilege to know Gay Blair White, who for years worked in the public relations department of the City of St. Petersburg; and J. D. Smith, mechanic, pilot, and crash survivor extraordinary. Other familiar names are Lew B. Brown, founder of the *St. Petersburg Independent*; Byrd Latham of the Florida Power Company, aviation hobbyist; and Ted Baker who built National Airlines. All of these have answered their final flight calls. Remarkably enough, the airline’s former “lineboy,” J. Leland Seale, is going strong in his nineties and has attended several recent Tony Jannus banquets in Tampa as an honored guest.

*The World’s First Airline* tantalizes your reviewer with items that call for further investigation. Examples: Were the Railsbacks (O.T. and Tony), mentioned several times in the text, related to the Captain Railsback who flew so long and expertly for Eastern Air Lines, despite the poundage which made us wonder how he passed his annual physicals? If the Percival E. Fansler who was the moving spirit in founding and financing the airline venture had been the Florida representative for a successful Wisconsin Diesel engine manufacturer, why the persistent story that the inventor Rudolph Diesel jumped to his death in the English Channel in 1913, despairing of ever making a success of the Diesel engine? Were the “secret” test flights of the Benoist seaplane off Ballast Point in 1916 the basis of the enduring rumors about Japanese planes flying World War I spy missions?

Enough of speculation. On the record, and very fairly treated in this volume, is the story of the Tony Jannus Award banquets which have taken top rank among the world’s aviation events. As a member of the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce task force since the initial 50th anniversary observance in 1964, it has been the writer’s privilege to meet most of the distinguished award winners, and to work with the dedicated area aviation enthusiasts who make the event successful year after year. Whose is the “soul so dead” that mingling with the great personalities of man’s final conquest of the air would not be thrilled?
It was a pleasure to read this book, and I recommend it to those who would learn more about our area, its pioneers and continuing achievers. After all, where else could you learn the number of the railroad car which brought the Benoist to St. Petersburg from Paducah? Or find out that J. D. Smith stayed at the Hillsboro Hotel on a visit to Tampa in 1918?

Wayne Bevis


“Tracking down (D.P) Davis’s career is a little like trying to nail jello to a tree. . . .” Such descriptive phrases as this about a colorful character in a colorful era of Florida’s history make Nolan’s fresh approach to an old subject most readable, exciting and informative. The author has done monumental research on this state’s background from the days of Andrew Jackson up through the dazzling Florida real estate boom of the 1920s. It was from the latter period that Fifty Feet in Paradise: The Booming of Florida got its charming title. It refers, of course, to owning a little plot in the sun—fifty feet in paradise—as part of the American dream. The grand peninsula of Florida was subdivided into these bits of paradise and auctioned off during the helter-skelter days of the “Roaring Twenties.”

Nolan, a thirty-eight-year-old St. Augustine resident, is making his debut as an up-and-coming historical author with this volume. It is appropriate that his book is the first offering by the