

DONALD H. GORDON - EL CAJON'S EARLY BIRD FLIER
and
THE STORY OF THE D. G. GORDON FAMILY AND RANCH IN EARLY BOSTONIA

(Material compiled by Hazel Sperry) (1969)

The information for this story has been gleaned from both written sources, and personal interviews. The written sources were: Early issues of the El Cajon Valley News; The San Diego Union; and a letter of June 12, 1968 written by the San Diego County Airport Commission to The San Diego County Board of Supervisors which included a marked map of the Gillespie Field area.

Much of the information was gained from personal interviews with family members and friends of the David Gilchrist Gordon family. We are especially indebted to Mrs. R. B. Shanks (Helen Gordon Shanks, daughter of Ralph Gordon) who was very helpful with information and also made available the photos of Donald Gordon's album for copying.

Included in this exhibit are copies of most interesting and informative letters written by Mr. James Gordon during March of this year 1969. Mr. James Gordon is a brother of Donald Gordon and is now residing in Honolulu, Hawaii. We greatly appreciate his sharing of this interesting additional information.

Also our Sperry family count it a privilege to have enjoyed Donald Gordon as a neighbor in those first years of the 1940's when we, the Sperrys, were newcomers to El Cajon. Those were the last years of Don Gordon's long residence in Bostonia - just prior to his move to his Palomar ranch.

- Hazel Sperry -

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From a recent communication with the San Diego County Airport Commission and the San Diego County Planning Commission, it was learned that in the near future when one of the streets in Gillespie Field is extended to the south, it is to be named Donald H. Gordon Drive and it will be the main southern entrance to Gillespie Field.

The existing Drives in Gillespie Field have been named for Aviation "Early Birds" - and this new street is to be named for El Cajon's very own "Early Bird". It is being named for the one who not only made and flew the first powered plane in El Cajon, but it is believed that his was one of the first powered planes flown west of the Mississippi River after the Wright Brothers constructed and flew the famous first powered plane at Kittyhawk, N. C. in 1903.

Don Gordon made and flew several planes in those early days, but the earliest "provable" date for flying his powered plane was June, 1909.

And where did he fly it? Well - he flew it right over a cropped hay-field on land which is now occupied by the Greenfield Junior High School, The Aero Drive-in Theater, and the Bostonia Elementary School ground.

And what kind of a contraption was his first powered plane? Well - it was a bi-plane with a little engine mounted in the rear, and with an out-rigger in front which looked much like that on the Wright Brothers plane. The engine had been taken from his racing cycle "Whistling Rufus". The propeller was homemade. The two wings were made of fabric stretched tightly over a wooden frame and "doped up hard as a board" with Gordon's own wax. The landing gear was three wheeled with a steerable wheel in front. The whole structure was so light that Gordon could lift the whole thing himself.

Little Wilma Drown, young daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Drown, (Mrs. Dorcas Asher Drown) who lived on property overlooking the Gordon Ranch, and who was supposed to be taking her nap in the patio, quickly announced this flight to her mother by shouting, "Mama, there's a man carrying a load of lumber up in the sky".

That first powered flight was a short one. After a run down the field, the plane lifted about four feet off the ground and flew only a few yards; but that flight was followed by longer flights, and it had been preceded by flights in the glider which he had made the year previous.

Altogether Don Gordon built four planes between 1908 and the beginning of World War I. He built a glider, two biplanes, and a monoplane. His first powered plane had the engine in the rear, but when it crashed in 1911, he built his next plane with the engine in front, which he had decided was a much safer location for the engine.

Don's interest in planes was shared by his brothers who were an active ground crew along with school-boy friends from the Old Meridian School.

Don's dreams of flight came to him very early in his life, and seem to have been inspired by the eagles and buzzards that he so eagerly watched as they floated around over El Cajon hills and then would dive down on their prey. "I wished that I could do that", he said. "It seemed so effortless."

The successful flight of the Wright Brothers in 1903 seemed to give the needed impetus - and the succession of Gordon flight experiments followed. The first attempt - an unsuccessful one - was when Don and an older brother built a glider out of bed sheets and bamboo. The older brother jumped off the barn in the contraption. CRASH! - and with that the Gordon plane building ceased for awhile. But the urge remained and so their efforts were resumed - and with success. First, it was a successful glider, and then by 1909, Don flew his first successful powered plane.

Donald H. Gordon was the fourth of five sons born to David Gilchrist Gordon and Helen Hazen Gordon. The five sons were Cris, (who died at age 3 in Connecticut), Ralph, James, Donald, and Grant.

David and Helen Gordon with their four sons came to El Cajon Valley from Connecticut in 1886. At the time of their marriage in Connecticut, David was a young lawyer and Helen was a young school teacher. The family made the trip West by train, but their household furnishings were sent around the Horn.

They purchased a quarter section of land (160 acres) in the Bostonia area in 1886. (That was the same year that Mr. Souther and Mr. Crosby purchased 550 acres and established the Boston Ranch.) The D. G. Gordon property was on the north side of Broadway and on the east side of Second Street. It was irregular in shape, and part of it was on the hill and part on the flat. It took in the area now occupied by Kiernan's Catholic Church, the Greenfield Junior High School, the Aero Drive-in Theater, and the Bostonia Elementary School.

On their ranch they grew citrus, grapes, and some hay. The grapes were of both table and raisin varieties. They marketed the table grapes at Hamilton's Store in San Diego.

Besides farming, Mr. Gordon practiced some law. He was postmaster of the Bostonia Post Office from September 23, 1898 to January 12, 1903. He was also active in forming the Meridian School District and was a member of the first Board of Trustees.

Old records show that meetings were held on July 25, 1887 and October 10, 1887 in connection with forming the Meridian School District. The January 13, 1888 meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Meridian School District was held at the D. G. Gordon residence and it was then that the first school teacher for Meridian School was hired - a Julia A. Kellogg - hired for three or more months of the school year for \$50 per month.

Mr. Gordon was also active in establishing the El Cajon Valley High School which was housed in the upstairs of the Meridian School building from 1893 until 1908 at which time the El Cajon Valley High School building was erected on the southeast corner of Third Street and Broadway. Old photos of the Gordon residence and ranch show this high school building in the near distance.

Mrs. Gordon was very active in community affairs. She was especially helpful in the Valley's two early churches - The El Cajon Presbyterian Church where she played the organ - and the Episcopal Church in Bostonia. She organized the Wednesday Club here in the El Cajon Valley - a club which was active in the area for many years.

Mrs. Gordon (Helen Hazen Gordon) passed away in 1920 and Mr. David Gilchrist Gordon died in 1928.

Through the years, the sons (with the exception of Donald) had married and left the home property. Donald, who had suffered a hearing loss very early in life which ultimately kept him from following an aviation career because it also somewhat impaired his balance, never married. He remained at the ranch except for a short time spent in an aircraft factory.

In 1943, when the last of the Gordon Ranch property in Bostonia was sold, Don Gordon moved to his 160 acre ranch located high on Mt. Palomar. There he spent the remainder of his life - living very close to the hills, trees, grass, flowers, birds, and animals which he so much loved and to which he gave so much in loving attention and care.

He was talented in writing. In his scrapbooks can be found a number of beautifully written articles of his which appeared in San Diego and vicinity papers.

With the death of Donald H. Gordon in June, 1968, only one of his brothers survives - James Gordon, who with his wife, Ruth, is living in Hawaii to be near a daughter who resides there. His brother, Grant, passed away during World War I, and Ralph died in 1959. There are a number of nieces and nephews. One niece, Mrs. R. B. Shanks, (Helen Gordon Shanks, daughter of Ralph Gordon), resides here at 11045 Pueblo Drive, La Mesa, in the Calavo Gardens area.

In his will, Don Gordon expressed the wish that his Palomar Ranch might become a National, State, or County Nature Preserve. Thus the wild-life there would have the continued protection which he so freely gave to it in these past years; and a few more acres of California's virgin land will have been preserved. No decision has yet been reached on this offer.

Yes, Don Gordon is to be remembered for his interest and participation in early aviation activities, but many folks will remember him even more for his great kindness and generosity which he administered in such a quiet manner to both man and beast. His greatest happiness came from bringing happiness and comfort to people in need. Many orphanages all over the world have at one time or another been touched by his genuine interest and generosity.

AN OLD RESIDENT GONE - (Mrs. D. G. Gordon)

(Copied from a clipping which appeared in El Cajon Valley News in an issue during the year 1920.)

The announcement of the death of Mrs. D. G. Gordon at Paradise Valley Sanitarium near National City last Monday was a shock and surprise to the many friends of the family here. Her health had not been good for nearly a year, and for a week or two she had been under the care of Dr. Mathewson. Last week he decided that it would be better for her to be in the care of a trained nurse, and on Friday she was taken to the sanitarium. There was no thought then of a fatal termination and when the end came suddenly Monday, it was a surprise to the physician in charge.

Mrs. Gordon was one of the oldest residents in this valley, having lived here about 34 years. Her maiden name was Helen Rockwell Hazen. She was the daughter of a Congregational minister and was born in Hanover, Connecticut, February 5, 1853. In her younger life she was a teacher in the public schools of Hartford, Connecticut, and was married to D. G. Gordon in that city October 17, 1878. To that union were born five sons, the first-born dying when nearly three years of age. The surviving members of the family are the husband and four sons.

Mr. and Mrs. Gordon came to California and to this valley in 1886 and ever since then have lived upon the citrus ranch east of Bostonia. Mrs. Gordon was a pioneer in all the social and religious affairs in the valley and in her younger days became a prominent leader in all activities. She helped organize and was first president of the Wednesday Club which survived for many years. She was a Congregationalist in her church relations, but allied herself with any religious denomination that was convenient and therefore was at sometime a member of the Presbyterian Church in El Cajon and aided and assisted the Episcopal Church in Bostonia. She was thoroughly democratic in all her associations and ideals and brought with her to the far West the sturdy morality and high Christian standards that are characteristic of the New England stock. Her life and example will remain as an inspiring influence among a large number of old friends who cherish her memory and extend most heartfelt sympathy to the bereaved family.