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Parrish, Gabriel.

Interview with Gabriel Parrish / interviewed by Helen Dowdeswell and Alphonse Mayernik. - Valley Stream Historical Society, August 8, 1988.

1 cassette.

NOTE: Mr. Parrish spoke about moving to Valley Stream and his work at Columbia Aircraft in the 1940's.

1. Parrish, Gabriel. 2. Columbia Aircraft Corporation.
3. Valley Stream (N.Y.) - History. I. Valley Stream Historical Society. II. Dowdeswell, Helen. III. Mayernik, Alphonse.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:

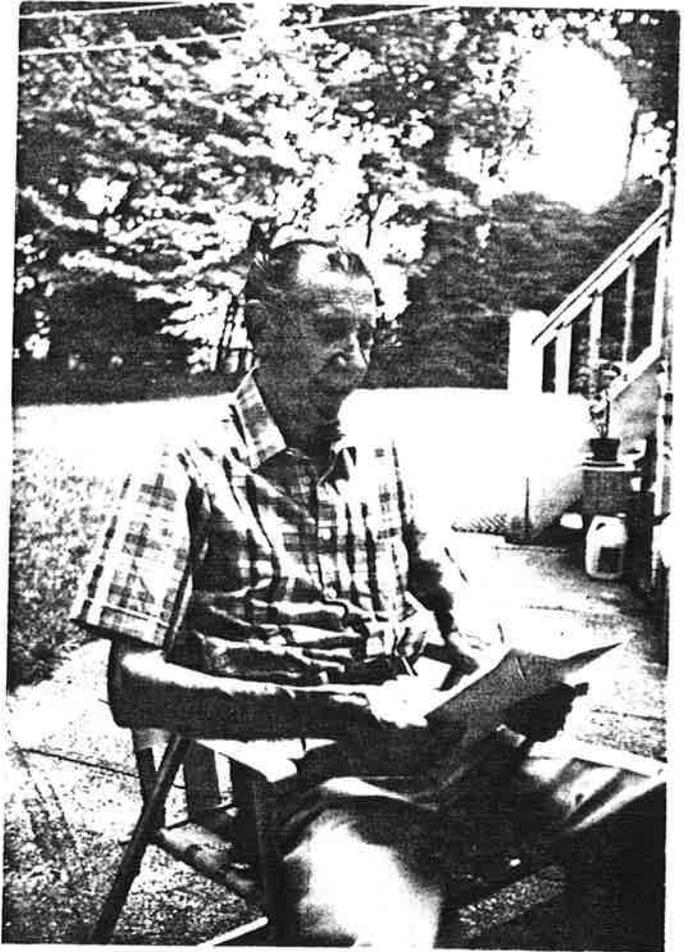
1. Outline of interview - Prepared by Helen Dowdeswell.
2. Photograph of Gabriel Parrish, August 8, 1988. *
3. Recollections of Columbia Aircraft Corporation and aviation in Valley Stream by Gabriel Parrish.

*Original photograph is filed in the Valley Stream Historical Photograph Collection.

VALLEY STREAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY CRAI HISTORY INTERVIEW

GABRIEL PARRISH 8/8/88

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GABRIEL PARRISH

COLUMBIA CONTACT
VALLEY STREAM AND AVIATION

by Gabriel T. Parrish

Columbia Aircraft Corporation before coming to Valley Stream was located in Port Washington. I was employed there in the wing float department. At that time I lived in Bellaire and drove to work in a 1930 Model A Ford Roadster with no side windows and no heater. It was a cold winter in 1942 and I was happy to hear that Columbia would be moving to Valley Stream.

When we moved, I became leadman in Hanger 5 Curtis Field on the wing assembly for the J2F6 Grumman designed amphibean known as the "Duck". This plane, originally built by Grumman, set a new world's speed record for its class, of 191 miles per hour in 1934.

To free Grummans facilities for war production of vitally needed Hellcat fighter planes, Columbia Aircraft was licensed by the Navy to build the "Duck". This plane was so diversified that it was used for personnel transport, scouting, anti-sub patrol, rescue, aerial photography, target towing and any job that arose in the services. The "Duck" was a very rugged plane and could handle heavy seas. It rescued many downed "Corsair" pilots that had been in air battles with the Japanese in the Pacific. The structural strength of this plane was well depicted in the 1974 movie "Murphy's War". The armament it carried during the war consisted of one 30 caliber machine gun, two 100lb. bombs and two 325lb. depth chargers. The crew was the pilot, an observer/gunner and a radio operator.

A J2f5 "Duck" was used as a supply plane for the Bataan garrison following the outbreak of World WarII, On April 8, 1942 this plane escaped from the Philippines with six men aboard, one of whom was Carlos Romulo, an Aide to General McArthur,

On Armistace Day Nov. 11, 1943, Columbia employees paid tribute to veterans who had died in World War I. There were speakers and a moment of silent prayer. My sisters, Columbia employees, and I were invited to the speakers stand. A picture of the event was shown in the "Columbia News", a news publication for and about Columbia Aircraft employees..Herb Boehm was the photographer.

Three Hundred and Thirty planes were produced at Columbia during the war and we were always conscious of our war efforts. On April 1 1944 I completed a training course and I received a Foremans training certificate.

On June 14, 1945 Columbia Aircraft Corporation was awarded the Navy "E" for quality production. The event was an outdoor assembly of all Columbia employees and the award was presented by an admiral.

The Parrish family was well represented at Columbia. My sister Mary Claire, a reporter for the "Columbia News", was secretary for Ted Alexander, the chief Navy inspector. My sister Helen was secretary for Mr. Van Valkenberg who was the Treasurer of Columbia. And my brother Jack was our best riveter on the wing assembly line. After a short stay, he left Columbia to join the armed forces.

At Columbia I met my wife May Schoppe who was secretary for Pat Hickey, Personnel director for Columbia. Sam Schoppe, my father-in-law was a guard in the security department at Columbia.

A word of mention should be made about Columbias' women employees who, with the men, helped bring the Navy "E" to Columbia. Among them were "Rosie the Riveters", who were expert when it came to riveting in the hull of the "Duck".

Recalling some of the happenings, the leader of the engine dept. was injured in the leg by a spinning prop when a switch had been left on. After that injury, all planes were painted with a red warning stripe at the area of prop rotation.

I transferred from wing assembly to final assembly and I remember an accidental shut off of power involving communications between pilot and ground crew. Test pilot Izzy Rabinowitz was in the air on a test flight when the power went out. Somebody had cut off the communication. Needless to say, Izzy had some strong language to express when he landed.

My most vivid recollection is the day I watched test pilot John Miller make, what I thought at the time, a perfect landing on the Columbia runway. Though the plane landed safely, it was not a perfect landing. As the plane gradually came to a stop the wings suddenly tilted and the wing float touched ground. Then the emergency siren rang and I ran to the rescue truck.

I jumped on the truck along with the landing gear leadman, who was very worried, presuming that the landing gear had collapsed or failed to function. On reaching the plane, there was pilot Miller standing in the cockpit, calmly telling us to take it easy and admitting that it was all his fault. He said he simply forgot to wind down the landing gear. It was a great landing without wheels and the sturdy "Duck" had no damage except for the center strip on the bottom of the hull which was sanded off after contact with the runway. We installed a new strip and completed riveting the next day. I'll always remember the honesty and candidness of test pilot John Miller, who could have easily made up an excuse such as a locked gear. Captain Miller was a pilot for Eastern Airlines and an ex marine.

There came a time at Columbia when employees working in the final assembly dept. were permitted to fly in the "Duck" on some test flights. My turn was coming up and I was looking forward to my first flight. But before my turn came the war ended in 1945. At the time, it reminded me of my father, Harry Parrish, who as a 2nd Lieutenant infantry with the A.E.F. in France during World War I, had volunteered after a request from Headquarters for airplane observers. He had gone to Clermont, France, passed the examination and was to join the Air Service, when the war ended in 1918. Looking back and reading about heavy casualties to World War I pilots and observers, the wars end was probably a life saver for my father.

I later took my first flight and instruction in a Piper Cub at Tri State Airport in Montgomery, N.Y. in 1945.

Before World War II ended, Columbia had started construction of a new plane to replace the obsolescent "Duck". This new amphibean monoplane with folding wings and tricycle landing gear was called Columbia XJL. It was much larger than the "Duck", weighing $6\frac{1}{2}$ ton with a 1400 horse power engine and a 50 ft. wingspan. When construction was suspended on V.J. day, one XJL was about $\frac{2}{3}$ complete and the second about $\frac{1}{2}$ complete.

In August 1946 Columbia resumed work on both aircraft. I was involved with set ups for static testing.

The first flight of the Columbia XJL-1 took place from a Valley Stream runway on October 25, 1945 and the test pilot was Izzy Rabinowitz. The second plane flew several weeks later. The test runs were rated good, but I do remember trouble with the nose gear which was electrically powered. At the time it was hoped, with future Navy orders, this plane would continue to provide jobs for Columbia employees. This was not to be. After the two XJL's were flown to the Naval Air Test Center in Maryland, they were later salvaged by the Navy and the engines, propellers and radios were removed. In the Spring of 1949 the Navy auctioned off the two XJL airframes for \$420.00. The eventual story involves the restoration, new engines and a flight to Arizona where one XJL is at Bob's Airpark in Tucson, and the second is at Lakeport, California.

In 1946 Commonwealth Aircraft, Kansas City, Kansas, purchased Columbia Aircraft which then became Aircraft Service Corporation. They (A.S.C.) eventually moved to Florida. Operating in hangars that were once Columbia's, Commonwealth tooled up for production of a land plane and a seaplane. Expecting large orders for personal planes, they began building the "Skyranger" a two place cabin, high winged monoplane and the "Trimmer" an amphibean with twin engines and molded plywood construction.

For a time the future looked very good for Commonwealth and expansion was considered, but lack of sales and the postwar slump finally closed its doors.

Valley Stream resident, Anthony Bauer and I, in the Spring of 1947, crated the last partially completed tubular steel "Skyranger" fuselage and loaded it into a box car at a railroad siding in Rockville Centre for shipment back to Commonwealth's Kansas City, Kansas main plant. That ended aircraft production in Valley Stream.

After Columbia and Commonwealth, I was hired by Sperry in 1948, eventually became a Supervisor and retired from Sperry in 1986.

I became a Valley Stream resident in 1954.

Presently I am a volunteer at the Cradle of Aviation Museum at Mitchel Field, where we restore and build aircraft of past years. We have recently completed an addition to a Ryan NYP, a sister ship of Charles Lindbergh's "Spirit of St. Louis". We duplicated Lindy's instrument panel and periscope which we built and installed. This sister ship of the "Spirit of St. Louis" is one of only three surviving originals.

The museum at Mitchel Field has a replica of Lawrence Sperry's first pilotless plane built in 1918. It was known as the Aerial Torpedo. Also, there, is a familiar plane called the "Skyranger".

Will there come a day when we will see a J2F "Duck" and the "Columbia XJL" among the many planes at the expanding Cradle of Aviation Museum? Time will tell.

Early this year a J2F6 "Duck" in Reno, Nevada, was available but the Museum could not meet the asking price of \$150,000.

In my spare time, I am building a 1/8 scale model of the "Duck" started by Mario DiDiminico.

On August 6, 1988, a reunion of Rosedale residents of past years was held. I attended with my wife, a former Rosedale resident. We met some former Columbia employees and discussed old times. At the reunion we met Rosedale residents that remember the noisy "Duck" that flew over their homes in the forties.

I have a list of over 200 former Columbia employees and only about a dozen addresses.

It may be take-off time for a Columbia reunion. CONTACT!