CROP DUSTING
BY AIRPLANE
POMPANO, FLORIDA 1930-1940
by Leroy Brown as told to Bud Garner

E. L. "Bud" Garner moved to Pompano in 1927, when he was nine months old, and graduated from Pompano High School in 1948. He served in the Navy in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Mediterranean during World War II, farmed, and was employed by the W. R. Grace Company for 30 years. Now retired, he has been the recording secretary of the Pompano Beach Historical Association.

Leroy H. Brown was born in 1921 and came to Pompano as a child. He graduated from Pompano High School in 1942. A retired captain for Pan American and National Airlines, Mr. Brown now resides in Zellwood, Florida. He was interviewed by Mr. Garner around 2000.

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Crop Dusting in Plantation. Photo courtesy of the Plantation Historical Society
Applying insecticides on crops by airplane was first attempted as early as 1921. One of the earliest such experiments was in Mississippi. Although crude equipment was installed in World War I surplus airplanes, the experiments were generally successful. Things began improving with better airplanes, engines, and farm chemicals.

One of the earliest companies was Delta Dusting Company, the forerunner of Delta Airlines. Delta Dusters operated in the Pompano area in the 1930s and used a landing strip located in Hammondsville. It was owned by the Hammond Development Company. Delta operated off the Pompano Navy field immediately following WWII.

The airplanes they used were Huff-Dalands (a product of the 1920s). They were quite successful dusting vegetable crops in the Pompano area. The dust was loaded in a compartment located in front of the pilot. It came out of a chute in the bottom of the airplane in great clouds and was more or less evenly dispersed over the crops as they flew about three feet above the ground dodging trees, poles, birds and anything else that might be sticking up in the air. Dusting was a hazardous job and required very skilled pilots to do this day day-in and day day-out.

These airplanes were soon called “Puffers” for rather obvious reasons. Delta also operated in other areas of Florida as well as other states. Perhaps one of their mainstays was dusting cotton and fighting the boll weevil. The pilots were soon called duster pilots and sometimes various other names.

Perhaps one of the better known “dusting” companies was J.L. Schroeder, Inc. J.L., as we shall call him, was in Pompano as early as 1935 and continued through the 1940s. J.L. was a friend of mine and lived next door to me in Pompano. J.L. Schroeder was from Houston, Texas. He had started in this business in 1924 and was certainly among the first in the duster field. J.L. eventually retired in Delray Beach and lived out his life there.

J.L. operated several airplanes, usually four to seven, and began in the Pompano area with airplanes called “Commandairs.” These planes were built in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Arkansas. They had 185 horsepower Curtiss Challenger engines. The Commandairs were very good dusting airplanes with a normal load of dust weighing 400-900 pounds. J.L. also operated Travelairs, another fine duster powered by a Wright Whirlwind engine - a model J-5 of 220 horsepower - the same type of engine used by Charles Lindbergh on his flight across the Atlantic. These engines were made in 1927. Keeping in mind that at the end of World War I, airplanes were little more than wood and fabric using rotary engines. They were used as a gun and bombing platform and for surveillance. In just nine years, Lindbergh in 1927, had a plane with a metal cowl ing (the rest was fabric), with a radial engine and many features never thought possible at the end of hostilities.

In the fall of 1937, J.L. used a landing strip that had been used by another dusting company earlier. It was the entrance of a defunct harness harness-racing track and was easily identified by two small distinct buildings located on the Old Dixie Highway. It was, and is still called “The Dusting Field” by those who still remember these operations. Today, this is the entrance to John Knox Village and the road is named “Airport Road.” There were sidewalks left over from the “building boom of the 1920s bordering the rock road that served as a landing strip.

One of J.L.’s most popular duster pilots was Bill Longino who, although only 21 years of age, ...
was an excellent pilot and duster and well liked by everyone. It has been said that farmers had their fields dusted just to watch Bill fly.

Bill loved to fish on his time off and usually went with one of Pompano’s finest fishermen, John Whitmer. Longino later left to fly for Braniff Airlines, where he stayed until retirement at age 60. Bill was a good friend of mine, who lived in Texas. We kept in touch on a regular basis. His experiences would have filled many books. Captain Longino, of Carrolton, Texas, died July 8, 2004 at the age of 87. His career at Braniff spanned 1940 – 1976.

The other crop dusting company was Faulkner Air Service, operated by Jack Faulkner. Jack used the previously mentioned entrance to the race track, prior to J. L. Schroeder. He was there in 1936 and the spring of 1937.

Jack operated several airplanes, including a Waco 10, Pitcairn Mailwing, Curtiss Robin, and a Stinson. Even though I was only 14 years old, Jack let me hang around and get in the way, until I began to learn the ropes.

Jack had a pilot named Jim Crawford who hailed from Martin, Georgia. Jack and Jim were also excellent duster pilots. I learned to fly from both of them, but that is another story. Unfortunately, Jack was killed in his automobile, when it rolled off the Old Dixie Highway bridge and into Cypress Creek Canal in the fall of 1937. After Jack’s death, Faulkner Air Service operated on a landing strip parallel to the FEC railroad just east of the harness track entrance. It was operated by Jack’s widow after his death. She and I also keep in touch. She and her daughter, Lenore, went to New Jersey in the summer to dust cranberries, etc. and never returned to Pompano.

J.L. Schroeder’s was the only operation left after Jack Faulkner’s death. Jim Crawford flew for J.L. in 1938. In February, 1939, Jim went to work for Eastern Airlines and flew until the mandatory retirement age of 60. He still lives in the Atlanta area, and we have stayed in touch form more than 60 years.

During World War II, J.L. had many pilots and airplanes. He finally switched to J-3 Piper Cubs, which made for more economical dusters, carrying as much as 500 pounds with only a 65 h.p. Continental engine.

Assistant Jim Crawford (standing) and pilot Jack Faulkner prepare a crop duster for flight in 1936. John Knox Village is located on this site today. Photo courtesy of Bud Garner
The men named here were the pioneers of the crop dusting business. They were preceded by the “barnstormers,” who flew into Pompano landing their “planes” in the weed field where the city nursery is now (located south and north of Northeast 10th St. and east of Northeast 5th Avenue) selling rides for a dollar or two to anyone brave enough to get in their plane.

I worked and flew for J.L. from 1941 through 1950. I also flew for three other companies in the crop dusting business until 1975. Then, like Bill and Jim before me, I went to work for the airlines. I flew for National Airlines and Pan American World Airways for 30 years, still crop dusting on days off.

There were many rumors of so-called “flying rum running” to the Bahama Islands. Most of these stories were probably true. Some of the duster pilots I knew were more than likely involved. I have been told the airplanes could carry 15 or 20 cases more or less of liquor and that a profit of $20 a case or more apparently made it worthwhile. It seems like the Curtiss Robins held the most cases. It took less than 45 minutes to fly each way, so it was pretty good money.

There is another interesting aspect of airplane crop dusting. This is the use of insecticides and fungicides, etc. In the early days, a duster pilot lived in the environment daily without any protection and without any apparent negative health problems. Most duster pilots I have known have lived into their 80s and 90s and enjoyed good health. So much for the environmentalists and their scare tactics about DDT and other chemicals.

I am 78 years “young” and still enjoy good health in spite of all the published articles about the dangers of these insecticides.

Most of the areas in Broward County that were farms are now cities and towns. So much for the era of “Good Pilots, Old Airplanes, Dusting, and Farming” in Pompano. For me, it was a great time to be in Pompano and I am proud to say that I am a real “Beanpicker”!

Notes

1 Huff-Daland Dusters, Inc. was the forerunner of Delta Airlines. Huff-Daland Dusters was based in Monroe, Louisiana. The company was sold in 1928 and the new owner began passenger service between Dallas, Texas and Jackson, Mississippi under the name Delta Air Service. For more on the history of early crop dusters see the web site of the National Agricultural Aviation Association. Photos of early Huff-Daland crop dusters and crop dusting are available at deltamuseum.org (the company’s museum site).

2 The Travel Air Manufacturing Company was established in 1924 in Wichita, Kansas and sold to the Curtiss-Wright Corporation in 1930.