

NOEL WIEN: Bush Pilot

① p1 NW:
A #51

And he said, "Well, you never can tell, you might become a great pilot someday."

① p3
A#463

I'd been running around this racetrack out here almost every night, because I knew sometime I was going down somewhere. I wanted to stay in shape, because I knew I'd die if I didn't. So, I thought I was in perfect shape. I could run from now on.

N: It wasn't long before Noel Wien got a chance to put this training to the test. In 1925 he became the first Alaskan to land an airplane north of the Arctic Circle. But on his return flight he was blown off course and forced down on the Toklat River. For a while he was more famous for his walk out to Nenana, than for his flight to Wiseman:

② p4
A#472

NW: Well, the first hour, I managed to struggle for an hour, and finally I played out so badly that I couldn't have wiggled if a bear had been coming around, could hardly have turned around. I played

③ p4 A#483

out so completely, you can't imagine, and I'll never forget it. Well, the next two days weren't quite so bad, but almost as bad. I had no food,

④ p5 A#506

and I was hungry.

N: It was the worst possible time of the year for walking. The rivers had just broken up and were running full. Soft, we snow was still on the ground:

⑤ p3
A#451

NW: Another thing that was so tough was these burnt spruces. They seemed to be cross-wise on my path everywhere, so I was having to step on them, break them down, and go around some of them. It was zig-zag just like this all the way.

N: To cross one stream, Wien cut down a big spruce for a bridge:

- ⑥ p6 NW: I had a little axe that long, one of these little
A#544 Boy Scout axes. And I chopped a tree--the butt of
it was that big--it took me two hours. I didn't
want to get wet all over because I would have
gotten chilled, and I might not have made it then.
Well, I made it across there without getting wet
all over.

N: At the next stream, he built a raft:

- ⑨ p7 NW: Then the next time was about thirty miles farther
A#567 on. Well, there was a gas case, an old gas case,
there and I had this little axe, and it had a place
to pull nails. And I took the nails out and the
pieces of box and some, just happened to be some
four-foot pieces of wood. And I nailed these
pieces together. Well, that wasn't bad. That was
pretty good.

N: In a straight line it was 40 miles to Nenana. Wien covered
the distance in 3 days:

- ⑩ p3 NW: But I think I made close to 80 miles because of
A#435 going around all these swamps full of water, oh,
deep water. I didn't want to get wet too far up,
but I was wet above the knees all the time, in the
snow.

N: The experience didn't hold Noel Wien down. A month later he
made the first commercial flight between Fairbanks and Nome.
His passenger was a mining engineer named Stines. It was
Stines' reports which resulted in construction of the huge
gold-dredges around Fairbanks and Nome. But on the way west,
they hit bad weather and Wien had to land on a hilltop at

Ruby.

(11) p9
B#007
NW: Well, I landed just as short as I could there, on the upgrade, see, front here, because I knew it was downhill on the other side and I had no brakes. Well, I didn't need brakes. So, we went over on our back on that soft spot right in the center. I had these four people in the back cabin, Norman C. Steines, the big engineer. Well, anyway we got them out and they didn't like that. He says, "Well, we're not going to do that anymore." And they hired a boat.

(12) p10
B#025
N: Wein completed the flight to Nome, but first there were a few repairs. In order to turn the plane over, the wings had to be taken off. Fortunately the whole town of Ruby came up the hill every day to help:

(13) p12
B#36
NW: We had to take the bolts out of the wing. Here it was upside down and the wing was lying on the ground ^{of course}. So we unbolted it then we had a number of men lift the engine part, the fuselage up and then others pulled the wing, dragged it straight out sideways to get it out from under. Then we were able to roll the fuselage over on its wheels. And then, a little later, all could get under the wing, walked over the tail and walked it up lifting a nine hundred pound wing. Right up in place again.

N: In 1927 Noel Wien and his brother Ralph bought their own airplane and started an airline based in Nome:

(14) p25
D#456
NW: I had to borrow my \$300 to put my share into this \$750 to buy the Hiss Standard. A sourdough, Phillips was his name--he run the Horseshoe Cigar Store in Fairbanks, loaned me the money. Without a note or anything, just gave me the money, and he said, "Pay me when you can." So I paid him quite soon after that, the first thing I wanted to do.

N: It wasn't hard to pay the money back. In the first two months operating their airline the Wiens made \$4,000. Pretty soon there were two more Wien brothers in Alaska:

(16) p1
A#56
NW: Sig and Fritz. Fritz learned to fly, but somehow he didn't have the drive to keep it up, so he was a good mechanic and stayed with the mechanical end. But Sig was a bachelor, and he still is; he went right at it. He put more hours in the arctic from Nome, Kotzebue, to Barrow, and east of Barrow, than any other person. So he practically lived in his airplane and he was always out at some base or some roadhouse somewhere, ready to fly when the weather cleared.

N: But it was Ralph Wien who gave Noel his earliest encouragement and support. When they were still teenagers on the farm in Minnesota, Ralph said something which Noel never forgot:

(17) p1
A#51
NW: He was sixteen months older than I was, and he said, "Well, you never can tell, you might become a great pilot someday."