



BY SPARKY BARNES SARGENT

*Relegated to the back of a large hangar full of old airplane parts in Georgia, N3277G's once-brilliant red paint was nearly camouflaged by a mottled coating of opaque dust. Nevertheless, it was the first Curtiss Robin that David Mars had ever seen outside museum walls, and it won his heart instantaneously. That was fortuitous, for the Robin had been destined for static display in the foyer of the Merrill Lynch office building in New York. Mars had no inkling of it then, but his deep affinity for the old Curtiss monoplane would lead him to fulfill a significant role in sharing the inspiring story of Pearl Carter Scott, a Chickasaw girl who learned to fly in a Robin and became the country's youngest certificated pilot.*

**D**avid Mars discovered the 1929 Curtiss Robin (serial number 237) during an estate sale a couple of years ago. He says, "It was about as near to a 'barn find' as any airplane I think I'll ever find. I purchased the plane, took the plugs out, cleaned it up pretty good, and changed the oil. Then I flew it out of there."

In his genteel, southern bass voice, David explains, "I've always been enamored with the Curtiss Robin, because I grew up within 30 miles of where the Key brothers set their endurance record in a Robin, and I actually knew one of the brothers. I really fell in love with it; it's not very much of a performer and doesn't fly very responsively, but I kind of like the Art Deco looks of it, and this is the era of aviation that I'm most interested

in. This originally had an OX-5, then it had a Challenger engine installed, and then this 220-hp Continental R-670 was installed. It was registered in Mexico, and I can only imagine what exotic thing it was used for down there!"

The Robin was designed and built by Curtiss Aeroplane & Motor Company of Garden City, New York, and manufactured at Curtiss-Robertson Airplane Manufacturing Company in Anglum, St. Louis County, Missouri. In 1929, Curtiss Aeroplane and Wright Aeronautical merged and became the Curtiss-Wright Corporation. All told, more than 750 Robins were manufactured before production ended in 1930, and today there are 51 Robins listed on the FAA Registry. The Robin was touted for its durable construction, along with its in-flight stability and ease of han-



dling. Ground operations were facilitated by a steerable tailskid.

### **Aviation Heritage**

David is proud of his familial aviation heritage, which is a bit unique in several respects. Elaborating on it, he shares, “My dad was a bombardier on a B-17 in World War II, and then he bought a J-3 Cub when he got out of the service, so I grew up in the 1950s flying off a grass strip in Mississippi. And one of the reasons I’ve always been a fan of Curtiss is because I have an ancestor, named J.C. ‘Bud’ Mars, who was an exhibition pilot for Curtiss.” Indeed, J.C. “Bud” Mars was taught to fly by Glenn Curtiss, and he made numerous first-time flights in a wide variety of locations during 1910, including Curtiss biplane flights in Fort Smith, Arkansas, in May; Sioux City, Iowa, in June; and Hawaii in December.

One of David’s outstanding childhood memories is his first time at the controls of a Cub—without proper supervision. “Now this is a true story,” declares David, explaining, “in 1953 my dad was going to take my sister and I flying in this Cub. I tell people that I have the world’s record for being the youngest person to ever fly a plane. I know they think there was an older person in the plane when it took off, and I was just manipulating the controls—so then I tell them that the older person was my 5-year-old sister. My dad propped off the Cub, and I was standing in the front seat. The stick was secured in the aft position with the seat belt, and he reached his hand in the window and idled the throttle up, before he went back to untie the tail. Apparently the minute he got the tail untied, I gave it the power, and they

say the Cub went about 20 feet and jumped off the ground. One wing dropped, and it cartwheeled a couple of times and ended up in a pile of wreckage maybe a 100 yards from where my dad was. When he got to the wreckage, my sister said, ‘Well, Dad, I thought you were going with us!’”

Since that time, David has continued to have many adventures in aviation. He has owned a Cessna 180 for 35 years and has flown it frequently in his business ventures—but if you ask him what his profession is, he’ll simply state that he is a barnstormer. “I’m in my fifth decade selling rides in biplanes—ranging from a Stearman in the late 1970s and 1980s, and in a Travel Air in the 1990s and this decade. I’ve been flying with the American Barnstormers Tour for a few summers now.”



David Mars with his Robin, which was the “leading aircraft” in *Pearl*.



to fly the grand old Robin to their own wedding reception. The second event was its role as lead airplane in the movie *Pearl*, which was independently produced by the Chickasaw Nation and Media 13.

It all started during 2008, when the Chickasaw Nation decided to produce its first feature film—a movie about Pearl Carter Scott’s early flying career. Pearl was born in 1915 and learned to fly a Curtiss Robin in the late 1920s, in Marlow, Oklahoma. She had her very first flight with Wiley Post when she was 12, and he sensed that this passionate and inquisitive young girl was a natural-born flier. After hearing Wiley’s observations, along with repeated insistent pleas from his daughter, George Carter, a successful blind businessman who dearly loved Pearl, declared that if Wiley would find an airplane and hire a good teacher for her, he’d build a landing strip and a hangar on his property. It wasn’t long until Wiley found an OX-5-powered Curtiss Robin (which Carter purchased) and a teacher for Pearl. After learning to fly, she earned her way as a barnstormer and stunt pilot at local air shows. (In 1995, she was inducted in the Chickasaw Nation Hall of Fame and the Oklahoma Aviation and Space Hall of Fame.)

Hence, Donna Carlton, head screenwriter for *Pearl*, started a modern-day quest for a Robin that could be flown for the movie. Donna and her husband conducted some online searches, and then she contacted the American Barnstorm-



The Robin’s tail is rather angular.



SPARKY BARNES SARGENT PHOTOS

A glance at the Robin’s front seat and panel.

## Making—and Revitalizing—History

As David mentioned, brothers Al and Fred Key set an endurance record over Meridian, Mississippi, in 1935. They flew *Ole Miss*, a highly modified Robin, and stayed aloft for 653 hours and 34 minutes. Their record far surpassed Dale Jackson and Forrest O’Brine’s 1929 record of 17.5 days aloft in the *St. Louis Robin*. Additionally, Douglas

“Wrong Way” Corrigan made history while flying a Robin in July 1938, when he flew from New York across the Atlantic to Ireland.

N3277G has made its own mark in more recent history—at least twice. The first occasion was about 17 years ago, just after Glenn Cruz had completed a partial restoration of the monoplane at Gillespie Field in San Diego. He and his bride just couldn’t resist the opportunity



Ted Davis takes actress Angela Gair and head writer Donna Carlton up for a ride over Blakesburg, Iowa, in his New Standard.

ing Tour about shooting some footage of their airplanes, with the pilots and bystanders dressed in period clothing. “We contacted Clay Adams,” recounts Donna, in her soft, gentle tone, “and he indicated that another movie was supposed to be shooting their barnstorming tour that summer. So I checked back with them a few weeks later, when I was sure that we had the green light for the project. Clay said they hadn’t heard from the other movie company and invited us to come on up. And still at that point, we weren’t sure if we were going to be able to pull it off—but as soon as [our production people] went up there and saw all the planes, they knew this was a done deal!”

David recalls that the producers met the American Barnstorming Tour in Great Bend, Kansas. “They asked if we had a Curtiss Robin in our midst, and it was known that I had the only Robin in our group—I don’t barnstorm in it, but I did have it, so it worked out fine,” he says. “And that fall, we went to El Reno, Oklahoma. Ted Davis and Chris Price brought their New Standard, and Clay Adams brought his 1929 Travel Air 4000, and I took my Robin there, where we filmed the

scenes that required flying.”

Ted Davis explains that the New Standard’s role in *Pearl* was that of portraying Wiley Post’s airplane. “I took the actress up in it, with a cameraman in the front, and since the New Standard holds four people in the front cockpit, it was great. The cameraman could shoot back and get some footage of the actress riding in it, and the pilot as well, so I think that worked out real well for them in that respect. Chris Price did a little flying in the Robin, with a wig on to look like Pearl, and he flew in the Standard a little bit. I did most of the New Standard flying, and Dave did quite a bit of the Robin flying. It was neat, it really was. It’s a neat movie, and it’s a neat story.”

Perhaps only the discerning antique airplane buffs will detect a misstatement in the movie, when an actor gestures to the Robin’s 220-hp Continental engine and refers to it as an “old reliable OX-5.” Donna shares that even though she and the director, King Hollis, knew that David’s Robin didn’t have the OX-5, “He wanted to use the line as written because it accurately described the plane that Pearl flew.”

Donna talked with literally



SPARKY BARNES SARGENT PHOTOS

Ted Davis flew his New Standard biplane for the movie.

hundreds of aviation enthusiasts at the *Pearl* booth during AirVenture this past summer, gleaning insight from them about the movie and the nature of aviation itself. “Some of the people that came to our booth at Oshkosh have said that aviation people are very passionate about flying—but you can only go so far with a bunch of planes in the air; you have to have a story, and there’s a real story here that is touching people,” shares Donna. “Those who have seen *Pearl* tell us the final scene

of the whole movie is their favorite; it's very touching. We worked on that scene the longest—that's how important it was to get the final scene right."

## Bringing the Story to Life

The experience of flying his Curtiss Robin for the movie and helping to bring Pearl's story to thousands of individuals has been extremely rewarding for David. "The thing I've enjoyed the most," he shares, "is bringing Pearl's story to life. All of us in the movie are really passionate about this era of aviation, and we want to keep aviation history alive—whether it's about the airplanes or the pilots. I consider myself somewhat of an aviation historian, and I'd never heard of Pearl's story. And when I heard that a Curtiss Robin was involved, that was great! So I enjoy helping keep history alive by bringing this story to life, and of course, I enjoy the camaraderie of being there and flying with my friends in the movie. That was a lot of fun; I enjoyed it so much."

As an interesting side note, when the movie premiered on May 4, 2010, at the historic Warren Theatre in Moore, Oklahoma, David flew his Robin to Moore, and the airplane was showcased in the theatre's parking lot. "They found a 750-foot patch of grass close to the cinema that they thought I could land in, so I went up and looked at it, but it was just too unsafe. We found a field 3 miles south of there, where I could land and then taxi on the highway with a police escort to the cinema parking lot. As preparation for the landing, Chet Peek [a local pilot and aviation historian] and I walked over the field. We marked all the bad spots in the field with toilet paper, but there was one spot that was a foxhole—so we agreed that Chet was going to stand in that



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foxhole when I landed, so I'd be sure to miss it. I turned final, and I kind of fishtailed a couple of times when I landed, and I planned to roll out just to the east of him. I thought I was doing just fine," says this southern aviator with a laugh, "until I looked out the side window and I saw Chet bolt and run, leaving the field. So then I'm on my rollout, and I'm thinking maybe I'm going in the hole, since he's running away! So I kind of put it into a right turn and got it to a stop—I think he thought that I was going to run over him. I saw him; he just didn't know that I saw him!" Defending his actions with characteristically good-natured humor, Chet explains, "When you see a big Curtiss Robin headed straight at you from a hundred yards away, you don't ponder the situation . . . you bolt and run!"

For screenwriter Donna, the creation of *Pearl* was an especially gratifying experience. "It was very special, and the pilots spread the word about the movie, and now everyone wants to see it. We want to have family movies that we can show that are educational, that are true, and are a good story. Pearl had a real passion for aviation, and we did receive her family's stamp of approval for the film," shares Carlton. "In fact, the family came on the set as well, and they're actually extras in the movie. We were excited about screening *Pearl* at Oshkosh, because some of the staff and the crew joined us there, and it was like 'old home' week for us."

Additionally, the Taylor family invited the crew to hold a screening

in Blakesburg, Iowa, during the 2010 Antique Airplane Association/Air Power Museum Invitational Fly-in, and pilots David Mars, Ted Davis, Chris Price, and Clay Adams attended with their airplanes, along with Donna and actress Angela Gair, who played Lucy Carter. Now that the movie is nearing the end of its promo tour, *Pearl* should be available on DVD by early November. As an extra perk to the AAA/APM fly-in screening, David's Robin won the Antique Pre-1936 Sweepstakes Award.

## Phenomenal Aviation Community

Just as the spirited young Pearl discovered more than 80 years ago, powerful and transformational events can unfold when one's life is touched by aviation. Donna discovered this for herself during the production and screenings of the movie and conveys this message: "I have to say that the aviation community has been absolutely phenomenal: fun-loving, passionate, genuine, warm, welcoming, and generous. I never knew such a large, unified group of good-hearted people existed. It's very encouraging to know that there are so many people like this at the core of this country. They love God, America, and the principles on which it was founded. My trips throughout the Midwest have brought me so much joy, because the aviation enthusiasts I've met seem to stand for all that's good and right. How unfortunate for the future of our country that the mainstream media, by and large, ignores this huge segment of our population."

A refreshing and uplifting experience yielding new perspectives—that's just part of the transformation that occurs when you bring together a Curtiss Robin, a few barnstormers, and a young girl named Pearl.

# Conveying Pearl's Passion for Aviation




**P**earl was filmed in Oklahoma during September and early October 2008 and has marvelous cinematography depicting the era of the 1920s and 1930s. The scenes easily transition from the Carter family's everyday life to colorful flights aloft. At times tender and touching, the film illustrates Pearl's special relationship with her father, as well as her flying mentor, Wiley Post. The cast was carefully selected, and lead actress Elijah DeJesus looks remarkably like the historical photographs of Pearl, a Chickasaw girl who at 13 became the youngest certificated pilot in the United States. Elijah (who, coincidentally, was 13 years old when the movie was filmed) easily conveys Pearl's contagious enthusiasm and exhilaration—passionate feelings with which most aviators will identify. In Pearl's own words, "Once you have known the freedom of flight, it never leaves you—even with your feet on the ground . . ."

*Pearl* was independently produced by the Chickasaw Nation and Media 13, and several key figures involved in the movie's production are Chickasaw, including the producer, David Rennke; the head screenwriter, Donna Carlton; and several actresses and actors. Though Angela Gair (who plays Lucy, Pearl's mother) isn't Native American, she received the high honor of being specially recognized as Best Supporting Actress at the International Cherokee Film Festival for her portrayal of a Native American woman.

Many of the staff wore several different hats throughout the production. Donna smiles warmly as she explains,

"We all did a lot of different things; I helped facilitate the pre-production process, I was head writer and a photographer, and I did whatever else needed to be done. First of all, Pearl was just an amazing person, and after she retired from aviation, she helped the Chickasaw people as a community health representative and as a legislator. Through her work with the tribe, she got to know Chickasaw Nation Governor Bill Anoatubby really well, and the governor always wanted her story told. A few years after Pearl passed away in 2005, we finally had the resources and staff in place to produce this movie. There was a lot of research involved, and we visited with the family. At first, it was supposed to be a nice little movie to show in our cultural center, but it got such a warm reception, and people were asking to see it, that we brought it to EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where more than 3,000 people came to watch it. During production, everybody was pulling triple duty, because we all believed in the project. So much could have gone wrong but

we faced. But we never worried about it, because we knew the 'Pearl mojo' would kick in, and we'd get around that obstacle."

Their efforts culminated in an inspirational movie about a young girl whose heart soared high in the sky on Robin wings. *Pearl* has won nine awards to date and has been shown at nearly two-dozen film festivals across the country—in addition to screenings at aviation venues including AirVenture and the AAA/APM Invitational Fly-in. While each award is significant, Donna, in her eloquent manner, shares, "The two awards we brought home from the Trail Dance Film Festival in Duncan, Oklahoma [Best in Festival, Best Native American Film], were deeply meaningful because we were in the heart of 'Pearl Carter country.' Many people at that screening already knew who Pearl was, and a good percentage of the audience had personally known her. As the head scriptwriter, that was a validation that touched my heart. When you pour your heart and soul into a project, as we all have, there's no better feeling than being told by the people who were closest to Pearl that they approve of the final product." For more information about *Pearl*, visit [www.PearlTheMovie.net](http://www.PearlTheMovie.net). 



Elijah DeJesus masterfully portrays the daredevil Pearl as the young aviatrix grows into adulthood.

MONTE WILSON, www.WilsonArtMedia.com © the Chickasaw Nation



Donna Carlton, head writer for the movie *Pearl*.

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didn't. We called that the 'Pearl mojo.' Many people sacrificed a lot for it, there were a lot of things we did on our own, and a lot of obstacles that