

Insights into a Ruse

by Louis Chmiel

Susan Brinchman's recent book on Gustave Whitehead is an amplified reiteration of the work of Stella Randolph and Susan's father William O'Dwyer. While suitably organized, it offers no new compelling evidence for the case that Gustave Whitehead ever flew. When one trolls out into the most abstruse minutiae of a myth it is not hard to create a voluminous text without adding anything significant to the story's body of knowledge. For those who have parsed the previous agenda driven works attempting to make a case for Whitehead, the grist of this book is completely unrevealing. For those who come to the story new, naive and uncritical it may engender some musing.

The convoluted and contorted rationalization woven throughout this book, in attempting to rewrite the truth is at times almost painful to absorb. Ms. Brinchman at times is walking all over herself and her own protracted rationalizations to get to places where in the end it is found that she has only dug the hole deeper.

In August of 2013, in the throes of the 2013 first flight dustup being precipitated by Whitehead advocates, an article [The Phantom 22](#) was published by Louis Chmiel and Nick Engler in which they offered ten points of evidence indicating that the plane in which Gustave Whitehead claimed to have made a 7 mile flight on January 17, 1902 didn't even exist. The plane was never built. It was simply a figment of Gustave Whitehead's imagination and yet he submitted a "story" to a national publication, the *American Inventor*, for nationwide distribution telling of this "flight." The article by Chmiel and Engler, [The Phantom 22](#), is a testament to the character of Gustave Whitehead.

It is evident from the writing of Ms. Brinchman that she became familiar with *The Phantom 22* article, and on pages 139-40 of her book she has gone to great lengths to attempt to discredit a significant point of evidence from that article, the written testimony of John Whitehead, Gustave's brother. John Whitehead in 1934 replied in writing to a request from Stella Randolph for his perspective on the work of Gustave Whitehead for a book she was working on. With an effort to put the best possible face on his brothers story John Whitehead went into significant detail about what he found at his brothers work shop when he arrived in Bridgeport, Connecticut in early April of 1902.

John's arrival was just three months after Gustave Whitehead claimed in his story to the *American Inventor* that he had flown 7 miles in a newly constructed plane he called the No. 22. According to Gustave in his submitted story, "Machine No. 22 is made mostly of steel and aluminum...The body is well stayed with steel tubing and braced with steel piano wire. It is covered with aluminum sheeting and made so it will float like a boat on in the water...The ribs are of steel tubing in the No. 22 instead of bamboo as in No. 21." John Whitehead, in his zeal to be helpful, went into great detail to describe the only plane he found upon his arrival. He called it the "original" plane, the No. 21. He said it was the plane that was seen in ground photos in newspapers in the fall of 1901. His detailed description revealed it was in fact the old 1901 wood and canvas covered plane with bamboo ribs, rotting away from the rigors of a typical New England winter.

In her efforts to discredit the evidence that the No. 22 was a fantasy, a figment of Gustave Whitehead's imagination, Ms. Brinchman on pages 139-40 of her book has offered a most convoluted and contrived rationalization, where she supposes to get into the mind of Gustave Whitehead and explain to us what he was actually thinking. In the process she has thrown Gustave Whitehead under the bus.

In his *American Inventor* story Gustave Whitehead clearly went to great lengths in his ruse to make the reader believe that the plane he “flew” 7 miles was a plane of much greater substance than his original plane from the fall of 1901. He submitted a photo of the No.21 and wrote that the No. 22 looked exactly like the photo, but it was much more substantially built, of metal and aluminum with a metal skinned body. Clearly Gustave was stating that the No. 21 and No. 22 were two separate planes.

In Ms. Brinchman’s version of what Gustave was “actually” thinking and saying she explains that he “aspires” to a metal, metal clad, aluminum ribbed plane, but only has the money to modify the old wood, bamboo, and canvas No. 21. At the bottom of page 139 she says, “John Whitehead gave a detailed description of the airplane he saw in Gustave’s yard, which appears to be “No. 22” as “No. 21.” (The reader is left to imagine exactly what this contortion of words might mean.) Ms. Brinchman further writes, “The machine John Whitehead viewed was of wood. The lightweight steel frame envisioned by Whitehead had not yet come to fruition...” In summation of her ruse, on page 140, she writes, “The modifications to “No. 21”, seen in the plane John viewed, indicate that in April, 1902, Gustave Whitehead had, in his yard, an improved version of “No. 21”, which certainly could be designated as the next model, “No. 22”, though without all its formerly envisioned developments, due to lack of funds.” Ms. Brinchman is clearly swimming desperately upstream in trying to negate the claim of Chmiel and Engler that the No. 22 never, ever existed. In fact, the No. 22 was as much a fantasy as was the 7 mile flight.

Finally, to completely paper over the truth of what Gustave Whitehead wrote about his planes construction in the *American Inventor* article, when Ms. Brinchman got around to discussing the January 17, 1902 “flight” allegations (pages 189-93), she quoted heavily from the *American Inventor* article, however she completely omitted any reference to Gustave Whitehead’s statements that he had a brand new machine, No. 22, a machine that was built out of metal and aluminum.

What Ms. Brinchman has asked us to believe in her book is that Gustave Whitehead made a 7 mile flight 200 feet in the air in a rickety old wood, bamboo, and canvas plane, “a No.22 as No. 21”, and what Gustave Whitehead has asked us to believe in the *American Inventor* is that he had a brand new plane, a No. 22, made of metal, with a body skinned in metal, with tubular aluminum ribs (which his brother could not find), and he had flown it 7 miles. Ms. Brinchman and Mr. Whitehead, with the help of John Whitehead, both seem to find themselves under the bus.

Unfortunately Ms. Brinchman’s book is replete with these sorts of massaged and contorted rationalizations, as were the books of Stella Randolph. Ms. Randolph on page 13 of her 1937 book wrote this of the “alleged” 7 mile flight: “A known witness was Anton Pruckner who once worked with Whitehead...Regarding this report (*in American Inventor*) Anton Pruckner said, “I personally know the facts as stated in Mr. Whitehead’s letter of the *American Inventor*, and published in the issue of April 1, 1902, to be true.” Clearly Ms. Randolph in her introductory overview of the story, on page 13 of her book, presented Anton Pruckner as a “known witness” to the 7 mile flight of January 17, 1902

On page 53 Ms. Randolph reiterated the importance of Anton Pruckner’s testimony when she wrote, “Both Anton Pruckner and Junius Harworth make affidavit “verifying” (*italics mine*) the published statements of Whitehead.” And she again presented Anton Pruckner’s “I personally know...” statement. Then on page 54 she dropped this bomb: “The writer misunderstood Mr. Pruckner and thinking he referred the Long Island Sound flights of January 17, 1902, when he said he had flown with Mr. Whitehead, included this statement in the original affidavit returned to Mr. Pruckner for signature after her first visit to Bridgeport in July, 1934. Mr. Pruckner made it clear in

reply that while he had upon occasions flown with Whitehead on briefer flights, he had not been with him when he flew over the Sound...”

While this is startling enough, Ms. Randolph made no attempt to enlighten as to exactly what it was that prompted Anton Pruckner to testify that he “personally knew” the *American Inventor* story to be true. Later (in her 1966 book) Anton Pruckner said he knew of the flight because he had heard about it from people he believed. Yet Ms. Randolph was never able to turn up any of these “alleged witnesses” in her search in 1934, and Mr. Pruckner in his 1934 signed affidavit stated, “I do not recall the names of any other persons who witnessed this particular trial, or assisted in towing the boat to the shore.” These were people he “believed” and yet he knew none of their names. In the end there are in fact no known witnesses to the alleged 7 mile flight and there is an abundance of evidence that the plane No. 22 never existed (see [The Phantom 22](#)). There was no Number 22 and there was no 7 mile flight.

The fact that Stella Randolph presented in the roll out of her story (first and third pages, 11 & 13) a statement that she knew to be untrue completely diminishes the creditability of her work. Her “known witness” of page 13 turned into a story teller passing on here-say on page 54, and Ms. Randolph saw no need to rewrite her opening to reflect that truth. Also, Ms. Randolph freely used John Whitehead’s letter interchangeably as evidence for both planes, the No. 21 and No. 22. On page 16 of her 1937 book Ms. Randolph called John Whitehead’s description of the plane he saw, “the No. 21”, and then on page 57 she called it, “the plane that made the Long Island Sound flights”, which is the No.22. She then stated that John Whitehead said this plane had deteriorated. By disposing of the No. 22 Ms. Randolph didn’t have to justify the outrageously claimed 7 mile “flight”, and try to explain away why the flight was never repeated. These are either unconscionable acts of deceit, or totally inept scholarship.

If all this weren’t enough, and well it should be, 29 years later in Ms. Randolph’s 1966 book, we learned that Anton Pruckner wasn’t even in Bridgeport, Connecticut on January 17, 1902, the time of the alleged 7 mile flight. On page 116 of her second book Ms. Randolph revealed that Anton Pruckner had moved away, for two years (pg. 168, Randolph 1966), and was living and working in Elizabethport, New Jersey on January 17, 1902. And this is the man Ms. Randolph passed off as a “known witness” in 1937. Absolutely remarkable.

Finally, the now thoroughly discredited witness Anton Pruckner, in the 1978 Randolph-O’Dwyer book (pg.54), after 63 years of silence suddenly “remembered”, in an affidavit signed in 1964, that he was also at the initial “alleged” ½ mile flight of August 14, 1901. This in spite of the fact that the two alleged Whitehead assistants that night (neither being Pruckner according to the newspaper story), had been parsed to death over the course of decades by Randolph and her fellow researchers. And Ms. Randolph in the 1978 book saw no reason to address why Mr. Pruckner’s recent epiphany was in conflict with the protracted advocacy of her previous two books. One may wonder if on Mr. Pruckner’s part it wasn’t an effort to get back into the story after he had been marginalized by the 1966 revelation that his perspective as a “known witness” was divined from afar, in Elizabethport New Jersey.

The above illustrated mish-mash of ideas, which are indicative of the totality of the Whitehead ruse, initially by Whitehead himself, then by Randolph, then by Randolph and O’Dwyer, and now by Ms. Brinchman, are contorted, convoluted, and at times outright concocted, deceptively presented scenarios. In attempting to create the illusion of a 7 mile flight, their story has in the end come full circle, with Ms. Brinchman testifying against her own fabricated icon. There was no Number 22 and there was no 7 mile flight.