

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR FRATERNITY

Part I – Russ Brinkley

By: James McCarthy

This year our Fraternity will celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> year since being founded in 1958. It is fitting on this occasion to look back to our past to revisit how it began and who the people of vision were that have led us through these first 60 years. It is my plan to pull together a series of short essays to remind myself and our members of our rich history. My research will leverage heavily on our archived files of early newsletters as well as public documents and will proceed chronologically up through the present. This first installation deals with the founding of the Fraternity and some background on our founder who lead the organization from its beginning up into the 1990s.

The founder of the Silver Wings Fraternity is today generally credited to **Mr. Russell J. Brinkley**. In fact, there were several individuals that were instrumental in the formation of our Fraternity back in 1958.

The nonprofit corporation **Silver Wings Fraternity** officially began with the registration of the corporation in the State of Pennsylvania on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1958. The Articles of Incorporation listed the official address as the home of Russ Brinkley, 223 North 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, Harrisburg, PA. It also listed the principals in the Fraternity in addition to Russ as **Edwin Lyons, John Hickey, Walter Harvey Jr, and Harry Davis**.

## **Russell J Brinkley:**

As a young man Russ began his career writing for newspapers in Jamestown and Olean, New York. He moved to McKeesport, PA to write for the local newspaper there. While on an assignment he had opportunity to visit Bettis Field, in a suburb of Pittsburg, where he became interested in Aviation. He briefly left writing and worked for a while sewing fabric onto the wings of aircraft at the **Waco** factory in Troy, Ohio. Though at this point he had never flown, he next associated himself with a pair of barnstormers at the Longview Flying Field where he promoted the operations and brought in a steady supply of customers. He stayed at Longview for the next year where there was an airshow each weekend and during the week he renewed his practice of writing for aviation magazines.

Russ took some lessons from the barnstormers in 1927 but didn't get his pilot's license until 1934. In



1929 he was retained by St. Vincent College to direct their new aviation school in Latrobe, PA. Later he became the editor of several aviation magazines and he flew extensively as a charter pilot, writer, and flight instructor. He attempted to fly to every airport in the country, which even at that time would have been a very ambitious accomplishment. He finally settled in Harrisburg, PA where he published his own magazine, the "**Quadrant Aerographic**". One example of this publication dated March 1966 remains in the SWF archive. More of them remain in the New York Public Library microfilm collection, but with extensive gaps.

He set a world record in 1960 by flying forty different models of aircraft within a twelve-hour period. He reportedly wrote a book titled **Wings over Main Street** recounting his experiences in aviation, however, the manuscript was never published and has since been lost.

When Russ' friend and fellow aviation pioneer, **Charlie Carroll**, started the OX-5 Club Russ became its first president. In 1958 he was disappointed when he was not re-elected to head the OX-5 Club which motivated him to organize the Silver Wings Fraternity. The idea for Silver Wings was spawned on an August 1958 flight from California to Pennsylvania in an early Lockheed Constellation. The 5 pilots that formed the nucleus of the organization drew up the purpose of Silver Wings to:

1. Reunite and band together for strictly social, non-profit and non-political purposes, creating harmony and a spirit of camaraderie among members.
2. Perpetuate the memory of, and recognize contributions to aviation made by members.
3. Encourage and promote interest in the advancement of Aviation, including, through organized youth challenge programs.
4. Prevent pecuniary gain or profit, incidental or otherwise, to members.

Russ served as the first president and began publishing the **SLIPSTREAM** newsletter. He was the leader of Silver Wings until 1991 when health issues finally forced a change. Membership in the Fraternity was limited to aviators who had made their first solo flight no less than 25 years (i.e. the "Silver" anniversary of their solo) prior to submitting their applications.

The membership cards were a yellow plastic card with the wording "**Life Member**" printed on them and in 1958 the dues were \$5 per year. This caused some confusion as the intention was that once an applicant had applied and was accepted for membership he was a member for life – ***as long as he continued to pay his annual dues.***

Russ passed away in his home on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1992 at the age of 85. A fitting epitaph for his life might be quoted from author Richard David Wissolik, David Wilmes;

"Newspaper reporter, barnstormer, aviator, instructor, airport manager, public relations expert, promoter, airshow announcer, author and editor, TV weatherman, first president of the OX5 Club, founder of Silver Wings Fraternity – Russ Brinkley was all of these."

Many of the facts for this first article were taken from the following publications:

- A Place in the Sky: A History of the Arnold Palmer Regional Airport 1919-2001, by Richard David Wissolik, David Wilmes.
- Air Transportation magazine, July 6, 1929
- Quadrant Aerographic, Vol. 6 No. 1, March 1966
- Uncredited essay found in the SWF Archive files, Circa 1994