

Harold Gatty – International Aviator

The Richmond Village & Cambridge Aerodrome Connection

Tasmania 1931 - 39

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(Drawn from Bruce Brown's book: *Gatty, Prince of Navigators*)

It is not well known among Richmond locals that their town has strong links to the Tasmanian-born aviator, Harold Gatty, who was a household name in Australia in the 1930's although, today, he is far better known among aviation enthusiasts in the United States than in his homeland.

Harold's father, James Gatty, was the council clerk for the municipality of Richmond from 1923 until 1939 - a period which covered all of Harold's famous flights. Often, Harold would visit his family in Richmond and two of his sons attended the local St. John's School for a number of years when in the care of James and his wife.

The Gatty link with Tasmanian local government goes back further than Harold's father; with his grandfather John Gatty (a transported Irish highwayman) being one of the signatories to a petition to the colonial governor in 1862 for the district of Fingal to be declared a municipality with its own local government.

One of John's sons was James Gatty, who went on to become a teacher in a string of small country schools around the island, always followed by his long-suffering wife, Lucy. In 1901, he was appointed headmaster of the Campbell Town Government School and, in January, 1903, Harold Gatty was born there. Two years later, James was promoted to headmaster of the Zeehan State School and the family moved to the brawny, ramshackle mining town. In 1908, James left teaching and took up the position of council clerk of the Zeehan Municipality. In late February 1923, he was one of forty one applicants considered by the Richmond Council for the position of council clerk, and James was successful. He and Lucy left Zeehan in late March and records reveal that the first council meeting for which he took the official minutes was 4 April of that year.

As he had in Campbell Town and Zeehan, James threw himself into the life of the new community in which he found himself. In his early years, he had been a crack rifle shooter and in 1901, when representing Tasmania, had won the King's Prize. But his greatest community contributions in Richmond were made as secretary of the Library Board (a position he also held in Campbell Town and Zeehan). In his new office as council clerk, he also carried out the local offices of registrar of births, deaths and marriages, and registrar of pensions.

Harold, meanwhile, had become a navigation officer with the Patricks Steamship Company. His voyages took him to the west coast of the United States where he eventually took up teaching seamanship and, later, aerial navigation. From 1927 onwards, he took part in a dazzling series of long distance flights. They included setting a record for the fastest flight

across the North American continent and an aborted attempt to fly non-stop from Japan to Washington State. In between flights, he invented new navigation instruments which were adopted by his good friend Charles Lindbergh, and the Douglas Aircraft Company. In June 1931, he flew around the world as navigator with the one-eyed Oklahoma oil wildcat Wiley Post. Their flight in the Lockheed Vega named *Winnie Mae* took eight and a half days - when the previous record had been three months.

The morning after the *Winnie Mae* landed, there was a council meeting in Richmond. James Gatty could not step outside the door of the council chambers without being baled up by farmers wanting to shake his hand and congratulate him on his son's flight. When the council meeting finally convened, the warden commenced proceedings by moving a motion of congratulations to James for his son's efforts;; James broke tradition and after rising made a short thank you speech on behalf of himself and Lucy. Harold's sister Doris was staying with the Gattys at the time, and she was pressed into service at the Gatty home in Richmond to fend off the over enthusiastic well-wishers.

Harold went on to become a key figure in South Pacific aviation. As manager for Pan Am, he secretly negotiated with the Australian government for landing rights for American airlines. These secret negotiations were always in danger of being disclosed but, during his many trips to Australia, Harold would merely say he was just on another vacation, and was on his way to see his parents in Richmond. On one trip to Richmond, his eldest son Alan remained behind with Harold's parents and attended St John's school for a period. He was followed at the school later on by Ron Gatty, Harold's youngest child. Harold was also acting as Australian manager for the Douglas Aircraft Company, and in 1936 he succeeded in breaking the embargo on American passenger aircraft and sold the first Douglas DC-2 imported into Australia to the Tasmania-based Holyman Airways. After being re-assembled, its first major flight was from Melbourne to Cambridge Airport, near Richmond. Without any strain on the engines, the *Bungana*, with Harold on board, clipped an hour off the flying time for the Bass Strait route to Western Junction Airport near Launceston. At the airport, Harold was met by his father James and one of his brothers. That night, they drove to Richmond, where Harold stayed with his parents.

The next morning, Harold and James drove out from Richmond to Cambridge Airport to greet the *Bungana* on her landing. Typically, she had just set a record for the Launceston - Hobart flight as well. The *Launceston Examiner* reported the flight:

To the east, the hills of Maria Island were visible on a thin stretch of water representing Oyster Bay, with the hills of the Freycinet Peninsula jet black in the haze of the distance. The *Bungana* passed directly over the precipitous gorge of the Cole River near the tunnel on the main railway line. For some time the peak of Mount Wellington could be seen slightly on the starboard bow and as the machine drew nearer to the capital, the yellow scar of the new Pinnacle Road could be distinguished.

Harold re-joined the *Bungana* for its return flight to Melbourne.

Over the next three years, Harold Gatty travelled regularly between San Francisco, New Zealand and Melbourne as he negotiated with various governments to establish the South

Pacific air route from the United States to Australia. And during these years he regularly flew to Cambridge Airport, and motored on to Richmond.

Ironically, he, finally succeeded in establishing the commercial air route for Pan Am just six weeks before the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour closed the route to civilian traffic for a further four years. During the war, he served as Director of Air Transport on General MacArthur's staff and they shared a mutual loathing for each other.

Ill health forced James Gatty to resign as council clerk in March 1939, although he and Lucy continued to live in Richmond for a number of years thereafter.

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Drawn from *Gatty, Prince of Navigators*, by Bruce Brown

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