

Those Magnificent Boys and their Flying Machine

by Dennis Payton Knight

From tiny strips on ranches to the gigantic Denver International, airports abound in Colorado. But among the first was a field near Smith Road and Sable in what is now Aurora. That's where two teenagers, J.J. VanDersarl and his younger brother Frank put to the air in their homemade Blériot XI monoplane in 1911.

It was only five years after the Wright Brothers had accomplished man's first motorized flight, and two years after two years after the French aviation pioneer Louis Blériot first flew his Blériot XI monoplane across the English Channel.

Louis Blériot was not only an ace for putting machines in flight, he was also a marketing genius. The Blériot was a beautiful flying machine and quickly became the dream of would-be aviators around the world. It was featured in the news of the day, sold in kits, and detailed schematics were even printed in magazines.

Jules (J.J.) VanDersarl was fifteen and Frank thirteen. They lived on the outskirts of Denver with their mother who worked as a housekeeper. They had only made it through grade school, but they had innate mechanical skills and a fascination with the notion of flying machines.

J.J. got the hang of flight first, experimenting with gliders when he was twelve. Soon after Blériot's 1909 Channel flight, he and Frank mustered what publications and photographs they could, and enlisted their older brother John in their project. It took two years, but the brothers VanDersarl built their own version of the Blériot, and on June 10, 1911, they flew it.

Following their foray into the world of flight, the brothers grew up. Jules and John went into other occupations, but Frank stayed in the aviation field. He gave flying lessons, performed in air shows, barnstormed, and established Union Airport, the first operational airport in Denver.

Frank's aviation career ended with the great depression, and he spent the rest of his working years as a machinist for the City of Denver. But he had the wisdom to hang on to his and his brothers' VanDersarl Blériot XI. In the 1960's he commenced to restore it to flying condition with the help of his brother Frank and grandson Jules. That project ended with the death of Jules in 1983, and the airplane then changed hands several times, going from Colorado to New York, then Europe.



The VanDersarl Brothers first flight on June 10, 1911. Photo by Denver photographer Harry Rhodes.

In 2008, the monoplane was acquired by Javier Arango, an airplane collector, and fully restored. It was a big task, involving rigorous search for parts, materials authentic to the age, and engine reconstruction, but it flew again in 2012.

The VanDersarls were inducted into the Colorado Aviation Hall of Fame in the 1970s, and in 2011, their monoplane received the Rolls Royce Aviation Heritage Award for Arango's restoration, and is now part of the Smithsonian collection in Washington, D.C. At 109 years of age, the magnificent, Denver born VanDersarl Blériot XI is the oldest operational airplane in the United States.



VanDersarl Blériot XI on display at Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.