

“Don’t sell this farm!” Earle Brown and Minnesota’s first commercial airport

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

Nestled today just south of I-94/694 and Highway 100, the Earle Brown Heritage Center, formally the Earle Brown Farm/Brooklyn Farm in Brooklyn Center, retains a remarkable amount of agricultural cachet. The farmhouse and barns, painted in the traditional colors of red and white, are arranged cozily around a courtyard that once was home to purebred cattle and draft horses. You might be expecting a farm story here, but for just about every farm boy who ever lived, including this writer, nothing was more distracting from the organic nature of things in the barn than the sound of an airplane overhead from a far-off place.

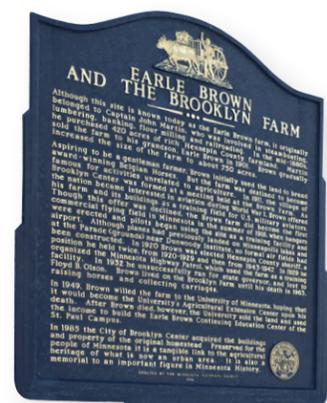
And so it must have been for Earle Brown, except that he had the power to bring that airplane down to earth amidst his own 750-acre farm and establish, for just a little while, the earliest-known commercial airfield in the state of Minnesota.

Brown’s grandfather, Captain John Martin, a California Gold Rush prospector and pioneering developer in Minnesota lumber and flour on the Mississippi River, established “Brooklyn Farm.” His only daughter, Jean, married Cyrus Elwood Brown in 1873 and Earle came along in 1879, their only child to live to adulthood. Not long afterward, Jean and Cyrus’s marriage failed. Jean was the first woman in Minnesota to be granted a divorce, and Grandpa John became the male role model in young Earle’s life. Before he died in 1905, he thoroughly instilled in Earle a plea all farm kids hear: “Don’t ever sell this farm, boy.” Earle’s mother had died four years earlier, and his

biological father was out of the picture — at 26 years of age, Earle Brown was sole heir to an estate worth \$2 million.

Between inheriting the farm and 1918, Brown made extensive improvements not only in animal husbandry but in the buildings that still stand strong and foursquare today. For a man who preferred draft horses over tractors in his fields, he had an intense interest in the blue skies over Brooklyn Farm and the technological progress of the airplanes aloft. Pilot Alex Heine became the first person to fly over downtown Minneapolis in 1913, and by February of 1918, Earle Brown was not only a member of the fledgling Aero Club, but also its director. Enter Walter R. Bullock (1899–1986). Walter, now known as the “Father of Aviation in Minnesota” got his first airplane ride from Alex Heine *standing* (not sitting, mind you, because there wasn’t any room) on the skid of a Curtiss Pusher biplane. Bullock went on to be the youngest person in the United States to obtain a pilot’s license at the age of 17 in 1916, and then demonstrated flying exhibitions from the ice of Bde Maka Ska (Lake Calhoun) a year later. He also gave another Minnesota aviation legend, Charles W. “Speed” Holman (for which Holman Field is named) his first flight.

It was 1918, the First World War, and the United States was “Over There.” In February of that year, Brown put his farm at the disposal of the Aero Club free of charge to be used by the United States Army as a training field for pilots. The army turned down the offer because it had more proffered locations than it could use. Still, the offer was too good to refuse when it came to Minnesota educational institutions like Dunwoody Institute and the University of Minnesota. The airstrip was



In 1990, the original farmstead became the Earle Brown Heritage Center, a conference and event space. The barns, tack room, carriage hall, and various other buildings are used for groups from 20 to 1,000 people.

located southeast of the intersection of today’s Highways 100 and 694. Highway 100 now divides the old farm. By July of that year, students from Dunwoody under the direction of army and navy trainers were turning out 50 aviators per month, and newly named “Brown Field” was ranked with Boston, Massachusetts, and Seattle, Washington, as one of the three aviation training centers in the country.



Earle Brown outside Barn E on one of his draft horses.

After the Armistice in November of 1918, Brown Field became the first commercial flying field in Minnesota. Walter Bullock had already erected a hangar with canvas doors and was barnstorming around the state. In addition he was selling the Curtiss JN-4s, the famous Curtiss “Jenny” that was the staple of military pilot training during the war and later sold in large numbers as “surplus” to civilian flyers. Charles A. Lindbergh learned to fly in a Jenny.

Bullock moved his operation to Robbinsdale in 1920, and Brown Field essentially fell out of favor when it failed to get the air mail contract from the US Postal Service. Big-time aviation moved to St. Paul at Curtiss Northwest Airport on the southeast corner of Snelling and Larpenteur, then later to Speedway Field, renamed Wold-Chamberlain Field, and present-day site of Minneapolis–Saint Paul International Airport. It was probably a good thing Bullock moved his operation because he was busted for flying liquor across the Canadian border during Prohibition in 1932. Earle

Brown had also gone on to found the Minnesota State Patrol and was known by then as the “Shooting Sheriff” of Hennepin County. It would not have looked good for Brown to have to arrest Bullock for flying liquor out of his own airfield — guns or no guns.

In 1929 a tornado destroyed Bullock’s old hangar and outbuildings on what was left of Brown Field. As a boy who heeded his grandfather’s request to “not sell this farm,” Brown kept the promise and used it for a number of “firsts,” not the least of which was the state’s first commercial airport.

PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS: There’s no need! The Earle Brown Heritage Center has 40,000 square feet of event space and plenty of parking. It’s located at 6155 Earle Brown Drive in Brooklyn Park. For more information on the facility or to learn about reserving space for an event, visit earlebrown.com.

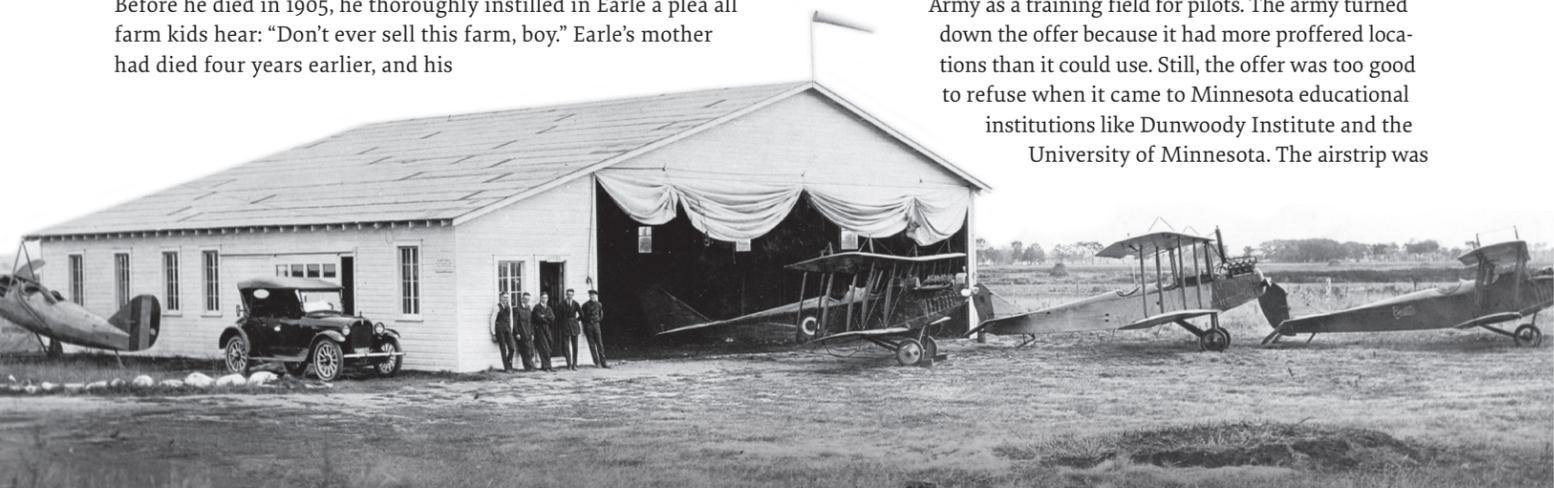
SOURCES

- *History of the Earle Brown Farm*, by Jane Hallberg, Leone Howe, and Mary Jane Gustafson. Published by the Brooklyn Historical Society, 1983.
- *Information Guide*, Earle Brown Heritage Center pamphlet.
- *Looking Back*, Earle Brown Heritage Center pamphlet.
- Noel Allard, chairman of Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame and author of *Minnesota Aviation History, 1857–1945*, MAHB Publishing, 1993.
- *Minnesota Flyer* magazine, mnflyer.com.

Charlie Maguire is a traveling songwriter and musician who makes frequent stops in Hennepin County.

Photo of Earle Brown Heritage Center grounds and historic marker by Charlie Maguire.

Photo of Earle Brown on horse, Hennepin History Museum.



Walter Bullock leased land from Earle Brown and established the first commercial flying field in the Twin Cities. In this rare photo taken in March 1919, a group of men are standing by the hangar office door near the roll-down tarps that kept out weather.

The bare fuselage against the building on the left is a French WWI airplane, brought to the US just months before the picture was taken.

The three planes out in front of the hangar are what Bullock used to give flying instruction and take sightseers around the metro area. Of those three, the one on the left and far right are Curtiss JN-4 “Jennys” and the one in the middle is a Standard J-1.

Photo courtesy Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame collection.

