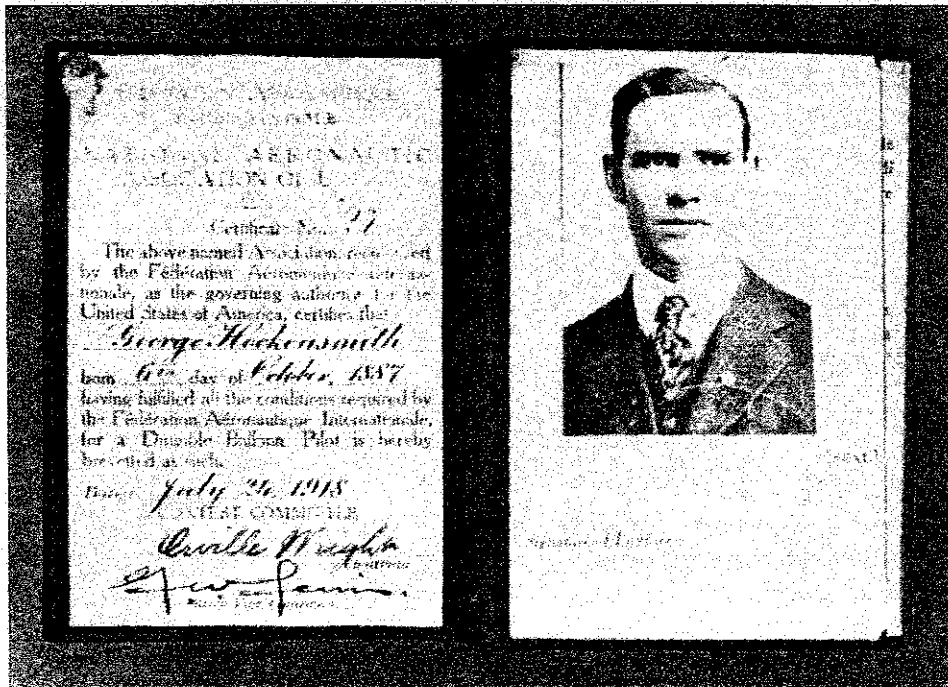


# The Remarkable Mr. Hockensmith



Hockensmith's dirigible pilot's license was signed fifty years ago by Orville Wright.

Pioneer aeronaut George Hockensmith was the first man to fly the U. S. Navy's first Akron-built dirigible in 1917. At the time he was a construction superintendent for Hunkin-Conkey.

Hockensmith had been hired by Hunkin-Conkey in 1914 to supervise the construction of the Detroit-Superior High Level Bridge in Cleveland. By the time the bridge was completed in 1916, World War I was raging in Europe. Although not yet in the war, the United States was approaching a showdown with Germany over the sinking of American vessels by German submarines. The Navy asked the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company to develop and build navigable balloons or dirig-

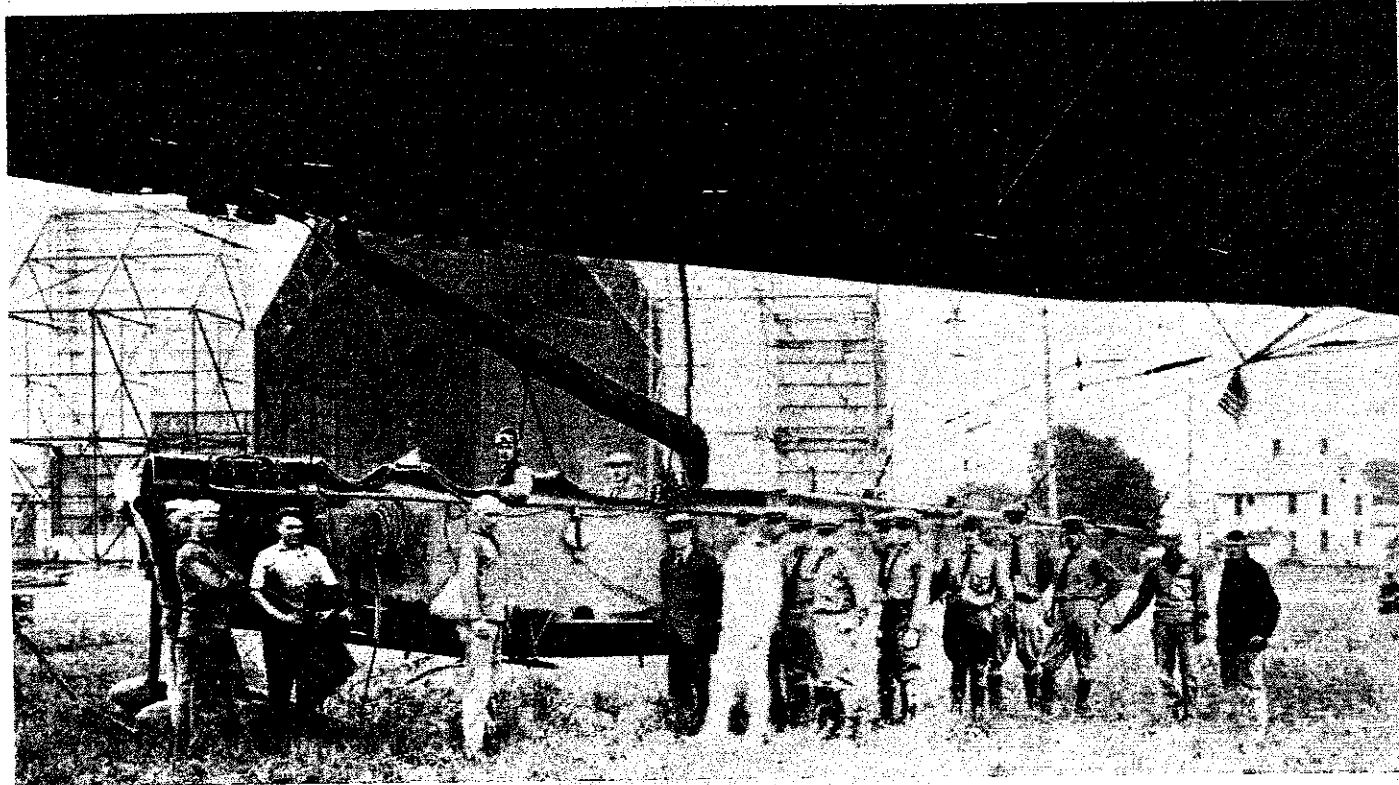
ibles for anti-submarine warfare.

Hunkin-Conkey, which had built most of the Akron rubber plants, was awarded the contract to build Goodyear's blimp facilities at Wingfoot Lake on the outskirts of Akron. Hockensmith was assigned as construction superintendent.

The first dirigible was being readied before the construction of all the Wingfoot Lake facilities was completed. Hockensmith was fascinated by the blimp and frequently was found at the hangar where his construction knowledge proved helpful to the blimp builders.

High-ranking Navy officers were on the way from Washington to witness the first flight when the test pilot balked at flying the ungainly

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cross between a balloon and an airplane fuselage. Leaden feet paced Wingfoot Lake until Hockensmith, now thoroughly familiar with every device on the blimp, boldly volunteered to take it aloft. And so, without any previous training or experience in either balloons or airplanes, George Hockensmith cast off the mooring lines and rose to a place in the history of American aeronautics.

"Hockensmith was a daredevil—absolutely fearless—and always carried a six-shooter when I knew him" said S. E. Hunkin, now chairman of the board of Hunkin-Conkey. "He had been raised as an orphan by the Texas Rangers after marauding Mexicans raided and burned his family's Texas home, and a rod was more a part of his dress than a tie."

Hunkin, a young college graduate

at the time, was timekeeper for the Wingfoot Lake project. He recalled that "Several days before Admiral Benson of the Navy was to arrive for final acceptance of the first blimp, the rip cord broke way up in the bag beyond reach.

"Hockensmith ordered me to dispatch a diver's suit from our yard in Cleveland so he could enter the hydrogen-filled bag to fix the cord. When he got into the diving suit, he found that the breast plate was too large to pass through the opening in the bag's appendix.

"Hockensmith swore a blue streak as he removed the suit, and before anyone could stop him, he filled his lungs with air and rushed up the ladder into the bag. After tying the broken line he fell from the ladder, landing in the bottom of the bag.

Luckily, he was close enough to the opening so those outside could reach his foot and thereby drag him from the bag. His lungs were filled with hydrogen, but he was revived through artificial respiration."

According to Hunkin-Conkey old-timers, Hockensmith once landed a blimp on the roof of Cleveland's Hotel Statler to the surprise of the onlookers below. As part of a July 4th celebration, he had piloted a blimp from Wingfoot Lake to Cedar Point, a Lake Erie summer resort some 75 miles northwest of Akron.

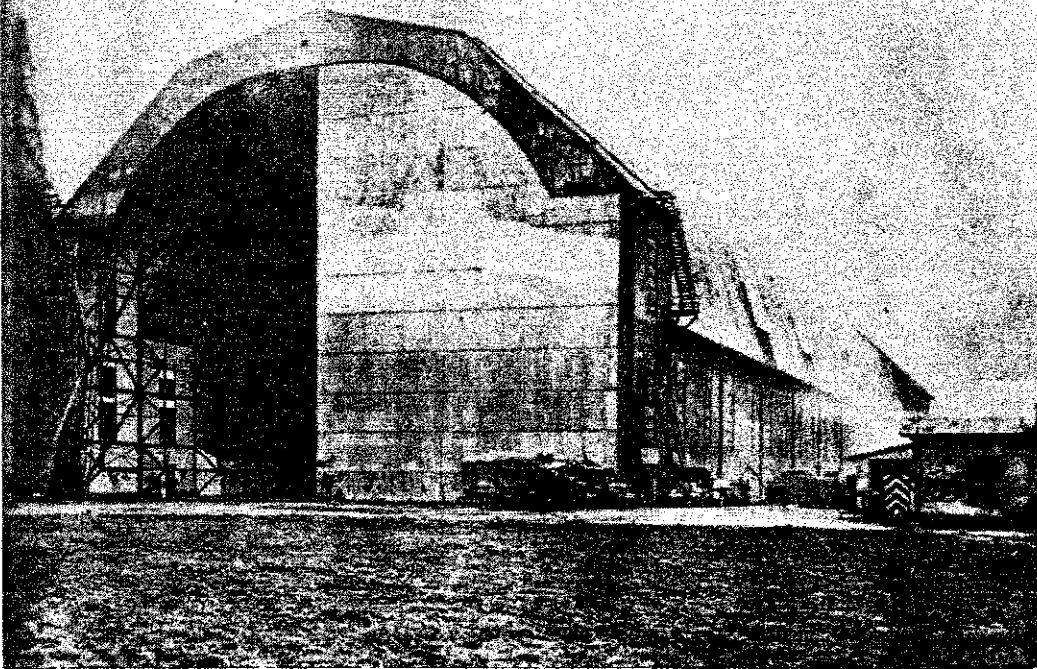
After circling the holiday crowds there, he flew eastward along the Lake Erie shoreline to Cleveland where he was to circle the downtown area before returning to Akron. The spectators gasped as the blimp settled down on the hotel's roof. Un-

*In adjacent photos, left to right:*

*Hockensmith at controls of first Navy dirigible built at Wingfoot Lake.*

*Goodyear's Wingfoot Lake dirigible hangar built by Hunkin-Conkey in 1917.*

*In an early publicity stunt, Hockensmith landed blimp at Pickfair to present tires to Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford (right).*



known to anyone else, however, a landing party had secretly made its way to the roof and waited to grasp the mooring lines.

Hockensmith remained with Goodyear Aircraft Co. after Hunkin-Conkey completed the Wingfoot Lake facilities. He supervised the fabrication of dirigibles and balloons for the Army and Navy, served as test pilot, and trained other pilots. Goodyear decided to remain in the airship business following the end of World War I and established its own fleet of dirigibles and supporting facilities at strategic points around the country. Hockensmith was appointed manager of Goodyear's Los Angeles flying field where the company undertook the development of a small "Pony Blimp."

In an effort to develop practical

commercial applications for the "Pony Blimp," Hockensmith once mounted a whalegun in the cockpit and cruised over coastal waters in search of whales. Fortunately, perhaps, he never had an opportunity to fire the harpoon. A sizeable whale could have taken the blimp on an exciting, if not dangerous, ride.

Another of his west coast experiences was described by Hugh Allen in "The Story of the Airship:"

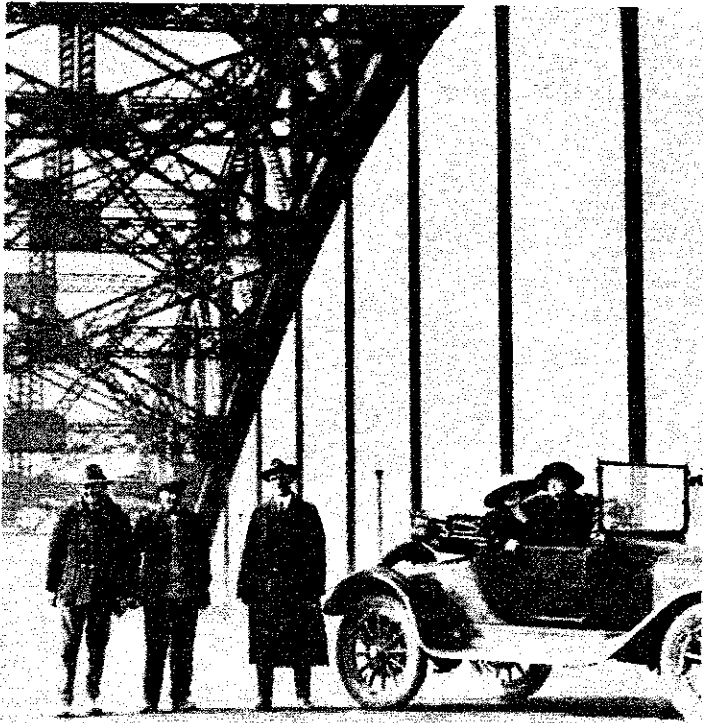
"As early as 1920, Hockensmith, flying the 'Pony Blimp' from Los Angeles to Catalina Island, got lost when his compass failed in a fog so dense he could hardly see the nose of his ship. Flying low and slowly, barely off the water, he presently spied a dark shape ahead, came on a U. S. submarine, with decks awash, and an officer on lookout in the

conning tower. He landed on his pontoons, taxied along side, borrowed a compass, went on to his destination."

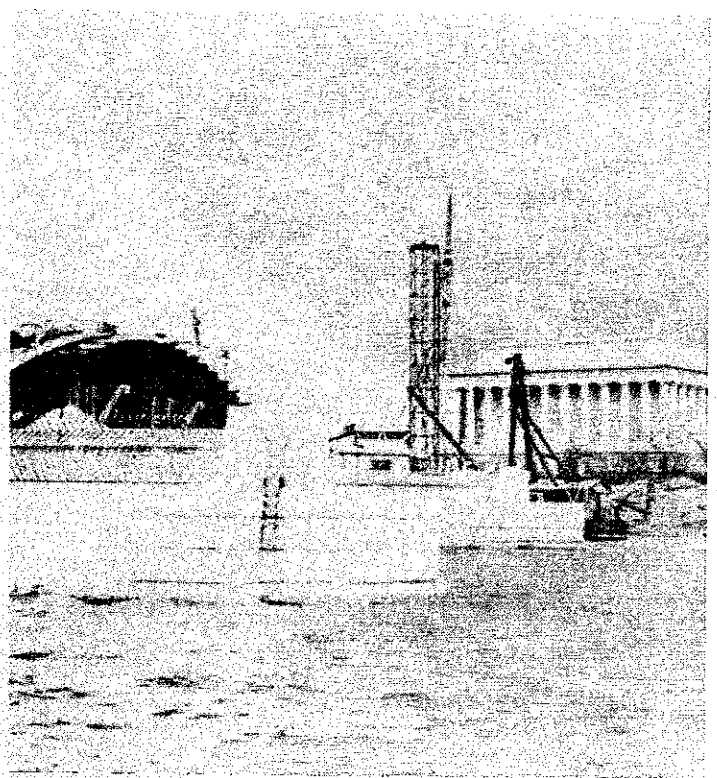
After supervising the construction of Goodyear's Los Angeles tire plant and cotton mills, Hockensmith started his own construction business. In the late '20s, Hunkin-Conkey again sought out Hockensmith to supervise the construction of the Arlington Memorial Bridge in Washington, D. C.—now a national landmark. Following the completion of the bridge, he joined Booth and Flinn in Pittsburgh, where he supervised the construction of the George Westinghouse Bridge and the Ohio River Boulevard, which included 11 bridges.

Hockensmith continued to serve the field of heavy construction un-

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*Hockensmith (center) stands on Cleveland's Detroit-Superior High Level Bridge prior to 1916 opening. His wife, Anna, is in car (left).*



*Arlington Memorial Bridge is shown under construction in Washington, D. C. Hockensmith was Hunkin-Conkey's project superintendent.*

til his death, at the age of 64, in 1951. He was responsible for the construction of the Albany Rensselaer Bridge, Albany, N. Y.; the two Grand Island Bridges across the Niagara River near Buffalo; the Montgomery Lock and Terminal on the Ohio River near Beaver, Pa.; the Yolo By-Pass near Sacramento, Calif.; the Trinity River Bridge, Dallas, Texas; the British Guiana Air Base at Georgetown, British Guiana; airbases in Brazil; and several New Jersey Turnpike bridges.

Carrying on his father's tradition is Harold N. Hockensmith, senior vice president of Brown & Root, Inc. — a large, international construction firm based in Houston, Texas. Another son, George, is an engineer with Solvay Iron Works, Inc. in Syracuse, N. Y.

Hockensmith's widow, Anna, recalled when he fired a laborer on Hunkin-Conkey's Detroit-Superior High Level Bridge project. "After telling the laborer to pick up his pay, my husband asked him his name so he could write it on the pink slip. The laborer replied, 'George Hockensmith.' My husband wrote it down and handed the slip to the man. When I asked him why he didn't comment on the name, my husband said, 'What for? He was no damn good anyway. Why would I want to find out that he might be related to me?'"

George Hockensmith was remarkable—one of those dauntless men who pioneered this nation's development. As General Eduardo Gomes, then commanding general of Brazil's 2nd Air Zone, said in a 1944 letter

to Mr. Hockensmith:

"As proof of my special appreciation of your services to my country, I appointed you to our government for decoration with the 'Ordem do Cruzeiro do Sul,' which by itself proves our gratitude for your devotion and self-sacrifice demonstrated in building airfields, often-times risking your health in order to complete the work of paving the roads of progress."

