

Ypsilanti GLEANINGS

Official publication of the Ypsilanti Historical Society, featuring articles and reminiscences of the people and places in the Ypsilanti area



SPECIAL ISSUE

The Force Behind the **Yankee Air** MUSEUM

BY PHIL BARNES

(Dennis Norton – The Ypsilanti Kid who Grew Up to Lead the Effort to Raise 5.2 Million Dollars that Enabled the Yankee Air Museum to Fly Again.)

Dennis Norton, son of Austin and Dorothy Norton, along with his sister Cindy, grew up on Ypsilanti's east side at 735 Lowell Street, next to Norton's Flower Shop. Dennis attended kindergarten through second grade at the old Ypsilanti High School, third through sixth grade at Central on Forest Avenue, entered the new West Junior High School as the first class in the Fall of 1959, and then graduated from Ypsilanti High School in 1965.



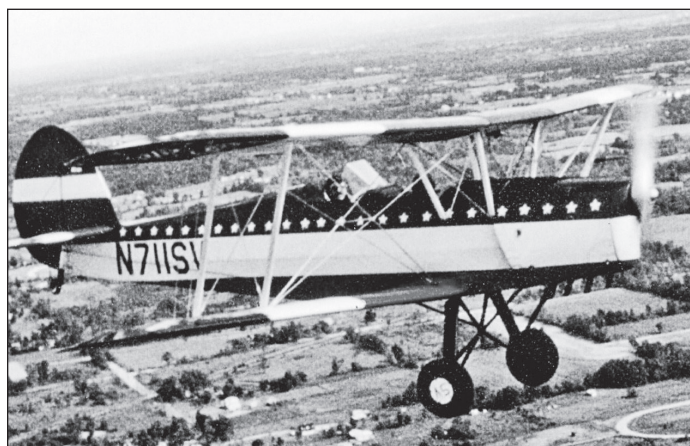
Dennis and his sister Cindy grew up on Ypsilanti's east side at 735 Lowell Street, next to Norton's Flower Shop.

He had a non-stop approach to everything, academics as well as athletics. While attending Ypsi High, he was one of the key performers on the swim team. His personal best was 23.7 for 50 yards. He, along with Roger Buxton, Doug Peterson and George Sayre, set a school record in the 200 freestyle relay. They were very proud of the accomplishment of breaking this long standing record.

As a youngster Dennis and his Dad, Austin, spent many hours at Willow Run Airport watching aircraft take off and land. Flying aircraft became a hobby later on. Dennis earned his pilot's license in 1966 and eventually became an instructor teaching new students and current pilots the intricacies of flying. In 1970 Dennis graduated from Eastern Michigan University with a Major in History. While a college student, Dennis worked at Motor Wheel and that experience convinced Dennis that factory work was not for him. He then joined his father, Austin, working in the family business, Norton's Flowers, which had expanded and moved to the Washtenaw Avenue site. Dennis also



Dennis at the controls of the B-17 owned by the Yankee Air Force. Dennis also serves as the President of the Michigan Aerospace Foundation.



Dennis at the controls of his 1947 STAMPE with son David in the front seat (1985).



“When Dennis gets an idea, even as a teenager, he has had a fierce determination to see that idea through to completion.”

Dorothy Norton

became involved in the Jaycees and worked on many projects.

Dennis Norton is well known for his boundless energy and enthusiasm and has been known as a “bulldog” by his close friends. When his mother, Dorothy, was asked about his motivation for the establishment of the Willow Run Yankee Air Museum, Dorothy replied, “When Dennis gets an idea, even as a teenager, he has had a fierce determination to see that idea through to completion.” It’s a well known story that in 1981 with his enthusiasm for flying and for preserving aircraft history, the Yankee Air Museum was born. Dennis was the founder and became its first president. Unfortunately, in October of 2004 the museum burned to the ground. However, Yankee staff and volunteers were able to rebuild and in 2010 the new Yankee Air Museum was dedicated. The Michigan Aerospace Foundation was founded to make plans for expansion with Dennis as the President. He has owned a number of planes, including a 1947 French bi-plane, a STAMPE. Through the years he has enjoyed flying the museum planes, the C-47, B-25 and the pride of the Yankee fleet, the B-17.

This all led to an idea to secure part of the Willow Run Bomber plant. In 2011 the question of “where would the B-17 be stored?” was posed. Dennis called Bob Lutz and found that the Bomber Plant was not owned by GM anymore. GM had gone bankrupt in 2010 and the Bomber (B-24) plant was turned over to the RACER trust. In 2011,

Dennis contacted the RACER Trust. Ray Hunter, who flew rescue helicopter missions in Vietnam, and Dennis then spearheaded an effort to gain control of at least part of the remaining buildings including a hangar capable of parking the Yankee Air Force B-17 and additional space to expand the Yankee Air Museum. In 2012, a Letter of Intent was signed for one year. Energies were stepped up by Dennis and the foundation to collect funds and 5.2 Million Dollars was raised.

This was the thrust Dennis needed and soon after, in 2013, a purchase agreement was signed and the funds generated by Dennis Norton were secured from the donors. Finally, on October 30, 2014, the purchase was closed and the Yankee Air Museum now owns 144,000 square feet of the historic Willow Run Bomber Plant, saving the last small piece from demolition. Only four Willow Run B-24s still exist out of almost 9,000 that were built. None of the Willow Run B-24s still fly, and only two B-24s that were built in California still fly.

A highlight of the Bomber Plant effort was a reunion of all the “Rosies” and under the new brand the emergence of women in the workforce during the war will be emphasized. In 2014, Twenty-one of the original “Rosie the Riveters” gathered to join in a successful effort to set a World’s Record for the most Rosies gathered in one place.



The section of the Willow Run Bomber Plant that was recently purchased by the Yankee Air Museum.



MUSEUM ENTRANCE AND VISITORS CENTER

An entrance to the new museum with an orientation area and visitor amenities.

SPONSORSHIP: **RESERVED**

BOOKSTORE AND GIFT SHOP

An attractive and inviting bookshop for visitors, located near museum admissions desk.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

AUDITORIUM

A major dedicated space — with 200 seats — for the museum's educational and other programming, with full audio visual capabilities as well as the capacity to support science demonstrations.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

CLASSROOMS

Three attractive classrooms with a capacity of 40 persons each to support museum programming. Movable walls also make it possible to use these areas as a single 120-person room.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

STAFF AND VOLUNTEER FACILITIES

Offices and a small conference room to accommodate the work of museum staff and volunteers.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**



WHEN THE YANKEE AIR MUSEUM MOVES INTO THE HISTORIC WILLOW RUN BOMBER PLANT, IT WILL BECOME THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AVIATION AND TECHNOLOGY.

STORY GROUP A THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY STORIES

This Story Group tells the amazing Willow Run story, and uses it to explain the larger American Arsenal of Democracy that produced both the equipment needed to win World War II and lasting social change in America.

3

Women Answer the Call

The story of how women entered the workforce to win a war, and ended-up changing America forever.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

1a

Acquisition and Display of THE B-24 Liberator Bomber

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

THE MIRACLE OF WILLOW RUN

How Americans from all walks of life came together at Willow Run to build the bombers needed to win World War II.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

SPECIAL FOCUS EXHIBIT
Funds the acquisition and restoration of an example of the type of aircraft built at Willow Run as the capstone of "The Miracle of Willow Run."

2

HOW DETROIT SAVED THE WORLD

World War II was won because of America's tremendous production effort — an effort centered in Detroit.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

STORY GROUP B OUR AVIATION HERITAGE

This Story Group explores American aviation from its earliest days through World War II, the Golden Age of air travel that followed, the Cold War, and space exploration.

4

"That thing will never fly!"

How the American spirit of innovation, experimentation, and determination led the way in the development of early 20th-century flight technology and aviation commerce.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

6

SPACE: THE FUTURE IS YOU.

The excitement and experience of space flight, space discovery, and space technology — past, present, and future.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

THE ROARING '50s

A walk through one of America's most amazing decades, the 1950s, and showcasing the promise, the developments, and nuclear fears of this new and amazing post-war era.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

5a BOEING B-52D The Cold War Workhorse

ON-SITE DISPLAY

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

PHOTO: BOEING

STORY GROUP C THE EXCITEMENT OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

This story group uses the excitement of aviation to inspire children and youth to explore education and career opportunities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

10

GENERATION GREEN

Green energy: The what, how, who, and why behind alternate energy technology in the aerospace industry and elsewhere in American industry.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

7

Exploration Station!

An ever-changing area of exhibits on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects. The emphasis here will be on "hands on" learning experiences for visitors of all ages.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

SPECIAL FOCUS EXHIBIT

ROBERTSON EDUCATION CENTER
A restored school house, one of the original buildings here at Willow Run that is used in Museum programming.

Sponsored by
DAVID & ANDREA ROBERTSON

7a



POWER!

With enough power, you can make a barn door fly. But, with too little power, even the best aircraft remains earth-bound. This exhibit traces the evolution of aircraft propulsion from early gasoline engines through rockets, and on to modern jets.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

GATEWAY TO THE FLYABLE HISTORIC AIRCRAFT EXPERIENCE



This area will contain exhibits on the Museum's flyable historic aircraft and a World War II-style pilot "ready room" providing a gateway to the flyable historic aircraft experience.



WACO
YMF-5C



B-25



C-47



B-17

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

PRESERVATION VAULTS

Two secure storage areas with independent climate control for the storage and preservation of artifacts that are not currently on exhibit.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

PRESERVATION STUDIO

A well-equipped work room for the preservation of artifacts and the preparation of exhibits.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**

AIRCRAFT RESTORATION CENTER



A dedicated work area with its own entrance for the restoration of aircraft and other large artifacts.

SPONSORSHIP: **AVAILABLE**





One of the promotional signs being used for fundraising for the preservation and renovation of part of the Willow Run Bomber Plant for use by the Yankee Air Museum.

“Rosie” was named for Rosie Monroe of Kentucky when in 1943 Walter Pigeon showed up at the plant to assist in filming a War Bond Special, and Rosie was selected to help. Vickie Croston, Rosie Monroe’s daughter from Texas was pleased to be able to attend the 2014 reunion and help set the World Record.

The new effort will expand the mission of the Museum, change its name from the Yankee Air Museum to the National Museum of Aviation and Technology, and launch a new fund-raising campaign to raise an additional 8.2 million to renovate the space and overhaul the museum exhibits. Under the new expanded mission an effort will be made to emphasize the history of the 5-million-square-foot plant that served as the Arsenal of Democracy during World War II and produced 8,685 B-24 Bombers.

Another focus of the new mission of the Museum is to advance science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education with hands-on learning stations.

Plans have been drawn up to include space needed for all the aircraft the Yankee Air Museum owns, expand the aerospace museum which would be comparable to the one at Dayton and Selfridge, and provide a meeting and convention facility that will seat up to 1,000 people, the largest in the area. The next big event will be the Air Show at the Yankee Air Museum on August 29 and 30, 2015 that will include flying demonstrations by the US Navy “Blue Angels.”

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Dennis in 2013 with the “Rosie the Riveter” re-enactors.

Dennis currently lives in Dexter with his wife Carol. One daughter and four granddaughters live in Gaylord, one son and two grandsons live in Dexter and one daughter lives on Portage Lake.

Dennis remains very proud of the success of his efforts and the efforts of the many volunteers who worked to secure pledges for funds. However, he reminds the public that 8.5 million dollars remains to be raised. Call Dennis at 734-971-2750 to pledge or donate to the project.



Dennis with Ray Hunter on November 7, 2014 when they received an award for “Deals of the Year” by the Ann Arbor News. in recognition of the October 30, 2014 purchase and saving from demolition of the last remaining piece of the old Willow Run Bomber Plant.

(Phil Barnes is a frequent contributor to The Gleanings and served on the U.S.S. Philippine Sea (CV47) in the Korean War.)

