

*"Sky Dreamer" tells the life story of Arne, a boy growing up in Billings, Montana early in the 20th century. A baker like his father? No! Arne wants to pilot his own plane through Montana's big sky. Obstacles stand in the way of his dream.*

## **Sky Dreamer**

By Dennis Gaub

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# Sky Dreamer



written by  
**DENNIS GAUB**

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*Sky Dreamer* is a work of historical fiction. Well-known people appear in the narrative, but they interact with fictional characters. Real events and locales are included in the story and provide the setting for a storyline that is completely a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

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## Chapter Two

As I continue telling my story, drawn from memory, from the journal I've kept most of my life and the newspaper clippings I've saved, it's 1957 — 55 years since I was born in 1902 in Billings. As a boy, I was slender, with brown hair and blue eyes. I stood about five-foot-four and would keep my slight build as I grew to five-foot-eight as an adult.

My parents, Karl, and Anna, were Germans, born in the Black Sea region of Russia, where their ancestors, like thousands of other Germans, had started settling rich farmland in the late 1700s at the invitation of German-born Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia. Karl and Anna met and were married in the Old Country in the summer of 1899, when they were both 21, and migrated to the U.S. about a month later. As with millions of others, they sought a better life, free of the rigid restrictions and broken pledges in Russia.

“Catherine promised us Germans we wouldn't have to serve in the military. Now the Czar is drafting Germans into the army,” my father told me once.

After getting off the immigrant steamer that brought them across the Atlantic, my parents were processed at Ellis Island and boarded a train, bound for Montana and Billings. One of my mother's brothers, Anton, had migrated from Russia earlier and already lived in Billings, where he first worked as a laborer. He was saving money so he could start farming sugar beets. He eventually saved enough money to begin raising beets

through a sharecropping arrangement on I.D. O'Donnell's large farm in Hesper, a farm community a few miles west of Billings.

"You must come to Billings," Anton wrote in a letter to my mother, which she saved and that I read later. He described a thriving town where opportunity awaited a hardworking, honest person on every block.

Karl and Anna arrived in Billings in December 1899, and by early 1902 they had become naturalized U.S. citizens. They often spoke German at home and when they were with fellow German immigrants, and I understood the language well enough to join their conversations. My father, however, emphasized the necessity of becoming fully American.

"You must speak good English — that's how you'll get ahead when you talk to the businessmen and farmers," he said.

While my parents were not rich, the bakery provided them with a comfortable lifestyle. Although Model T's already traveled Billings streets, we didn't yet have one of Henry Ford's Flivvers, but we'd get one in a few years for \$350.

I was not a difficult child, but my carefree tendencies tested my mother's patience.

"Arne, stop and think before you do things," she said more than once, her aggravation causing her to throw in a German word.

"You're giving me gray hair with your treibend."

In other words, I was impulsive. She was right. I wasn't spoiled, but I often acted first and thought about

my actions afterward, when it was almost too late to handle the consequences.

As a boy in Germany, my father worked in his father's bakery, where he learned to make bread, pastries and desserts. Thus, it was natural that he would borrow money from a Billings bank so he could open a bakery in a town where, to newcomers, it seemed that gold lined the streets. A good income, if not riches, awaited him in a venture based on something — bread — that everyone needed. Karl Schmitt opened for business on Montana Avenue in early 1902, just before I was born, and went into friendly competition with three or four other bakeries that already were in operation.

Some of my earliest memories were of the delicious smells wafting from our bakery as I walked past it on my way to school.

“Someday, you can be a baker, too,” my father said.

The idea appealed to me a bit, I must confess, but by about the time I was in the third grade, the need for adventure stirred inside me. I read about the Lewis and Clark expedition and fantasized about men battling the Missouri River's current as they trekked across Montana on their way west, then saw Clark and his group in my mind's eye as they floated down the Yellowstone River, past the spot where Billings was to spring up some 70 years later, on the expedition's return trip to St. Louis.

Montana's heyday as the northern destination for cattle drives from Texas had passed almost three decades earlier, so that romantic lifestyle was over. Still,

it was commonplace to meet aging cowboys from that period on the streets of Billings. A handful of them could recount riding the range with Charlie Russell or Teddy “Blue” Abbott. Their stories delighted me, but I knew I couldn’t live them because the western frontier was gone.

I grew up when Horatio Alger novels helped shape the character and belief system of American boys. Alger’s novels, especially “Ragged Dick,” the story of a poor shoe shiner’s rise to middle-class respectability, spoke to me. I wasn’t from a poverty-stricken family, but I could see ample displays of wealth acquired by hard work and ingenuity everywhere I looked in Billings. This was not an old-money town.

My father’s bakery took care of our needs, but it seemed to me that somehow I’d find a way to cash in on the local and state boom and rise a rung or two above my parents’ station in life. That goal, that dream, was something to hang my hat on.

Baking and waiting on Billings matrons — that seemed the easy choice, but I was sure it wouldn’t keep my interest. I needed to find new, horizons to explore, and it was becoming clear that the new, exciting field of flight and airplanes offered the excitement and escape from the commonplace that I yearned for.

Thus, when my father mentioned that a pioneering aviator was coming to Billings and asked if I wanted to see him fly his machine, I jumped at the chance. I wasn’t sure what to expect, having read just a handful of articles about flying in the *Billings Gazette*. I knew, however, that a new era had dawned in our town, and

the idea of soaring in the clouds, touching the sky and becoming birdlike absolutely was my prime desire.

As we walked toward Ely's parked airplane, I could barely believe my eyes. I was finally seeing a machine like the one the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk. I got close enough to touch the delicate fabric wings of the plane and, for the first time, smelled gasoline that had dripped from the tank and saw a few drops of oil on the engine. I was awestruck that something like the marvelous machine that I had read about, the Wright Flyer that took off from a North Carolina beach seven years earlier, had shown up in my hometown.

Reading the paper, I found out that that Ely had flown his plane to elevations of 4,000 feet elsewhere, but those flights were at sea level and benefited from dense air, which made for easier climbing. I learned that airplanes worked hardest to get started, but after momentum was gained, it was relatively easy to keep a ship in the air. Ely had tried flights in Salt Lake City and Denver but had to abandon them because his plane couldn't get high enough to clear fences.

News of the proposed flight in Billings went out over wires across the country and attracted wide attention because of Billings' altitude: 3,124 feet. Ely planned to take off from just a few hundred feet lower than the highest altitude he had ever reached in flight.

The Gazette quoted Ely as saying he was unsure what to expect during his flight, but he vowed to make "every effort to fly." He said success would mean a lot to him because no one had flown an airplane from an elevation as high as that of Billings.



If the flight succeeded, Ely said he would stay in Montana a while. Attendees of the Good Roads Convention, going on then in Billings, had approached him, hoping to talk business, he said.

The birdman tried to temper expectations among the eager crowd expected to watch him.

“I am at a loss as to what to expect in my flight tomorrow afternoon, but I am certainly going to make every effort to fly,” he said.

“It will mean a lot to me if I can make a success of this flight, as there has never yet been a machine ascend from this altitude. If I meet with success tomorrow, I could make a six months’ tour of Montana making flights in different parts of the state.”

Now, as we waited for the plane to take off, one of my father’s business associates spotted him.

“Hello, Schmitt. Good to see you. How’s the bakery going?” the man said.

“Very well. Business is good,” my father said.

“I see you’ve got your son with you today. Excited to see an airplane, Arne?” the man asked.

I certainly was, although the exotic machine parked a few feet away was outside my boyhood frame of reference. I lived in an up-and-coming city on Montana’s Great Plains, where hordes of homesteaders arrived at a busy depot and where more than two dozen trains arrived and departed each day. Those honyhockers, the derisive term used by some for homesteaders, were the talk of the town. But an airplane? That was something you read about now and then in the paper but soaring with the birds seemed to

be something that only people in big cities far from Montana saw or maybe even experienced. A real airplane was unknown to a boy like me and my friends.

The big plane's engine started, and its roar ended my daydreams. The plane accelerated, headed east on Sixth Avenue, and traveled about 200 yards toward a large arch at the opening of the fairgrounds, but Ely was unable to get high enough to clear the fence. His plane rose two or three times and climbed about 100 feet in the air each time, but it never really flew.

"Look, he's going to try again," I said to my father. I wished for Ely's success and hoped this novel experience would last as long as possible.

The pilot took a few minutes to repair a wheel that broke on his first try when strong wind hit the plane on its side and caused it to swerve into the grass. He sped up for another attempt. It was less successful. The wind picked up and forced Ely to stop after a 200-foot run.

Ely gave up for the day and told the crowd he would be back to try again the next day, which was Sunday.

We returned, and again an expectant crowd gathered along the downtown streets. It was calm, but that didn't help. Ely's machine seemed not to be working properly. The plane gained about two feet of elevation and skimmed the ground for 100 yards before settling back down on the street. When he tried again, his plane rose about 10 feet and maintained that attitude for two blocks before dropping back to earth.

I heard a man in the crowd remark sardonically: "What's all this hoopla about airplanes?"

“I think he chickened out,” someone else said. My father and I heard rumbling in the crowd that Ely was going to skip out of town with the \$400 exhibition fee he received from the Chamber of Commerce, flight or no flight.

Ely said, however, that he had “high hopes” for success, based on earlier flights on the West Coast, including one with a passenger. The gypsy flyer said he took a 135-pound passenger on a flight on the coast, so if he could get off the ground, he would be able to climb to a considerable height and stay airborne for a while.

Ely came to Billings with a list of successful exhibition flights at Sacramento, Stockton, El Paso, San Antonio, Portland and elsewhere. In San Antonio, he had climbed 550 feet above the ground. Thus, it seemed likely he would make a good showing in Billings, but several thousand spectators experienced disappointment from his unsuccessful flight attempts.

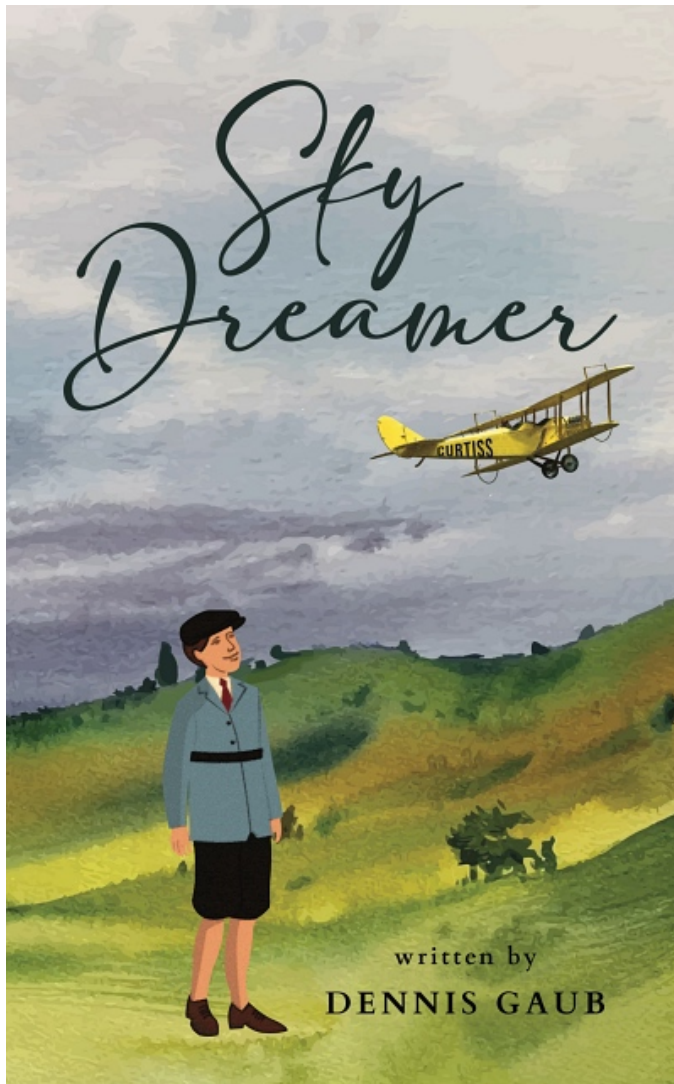
Weather conditions on Sunday were perfect, and Ely said his plane was in the best possible condition. He said he’d try again if the Chamber of Commerce wanted, but he believed a further attempt would achieve no more success than the earlier four tries had.

Spectators grumbled about the show they witnessed. As the *Gazette* put it, “It was the opinion of a large majority of the automobile men present that the aviator deliberately throttled his engine down to keep from rising to a dangerous height.” Ely left Billings and headed to St. Louis, where he was scheduled to take part in an aviation meet.

*Sky Dreamer*

When the afternoon ended, as my father and I walked back home, I wasn't sure what to think. Less jaded than adults, I told myself that getting a machine with wings, an engine and a propeller into the sky just might be possible. If so, it would open up the possibility of a grand adventure for me.

I saw flocks of geese, ducks and other birds regularly wing overhead. If they could fly, why couldn't I? That thought, of being airborne and free of the earth's bonds, kept going through my head as I drifted to sleep on a warm, early summer night.



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