

The Twin City Motor

America has long been fascinated by the automobile. From its first appearance, the horseless carriage was heralded as being better than a horse—and faster. When trouble overtook an automobile, however, the owner was usually taunted with shouts of “Get a horse!” Nevertheless, the lure of speed and convenience overcame the need for relative dependability. In the United States, automobile assembly lines began mass producing vehicles in 1901, when Detroit’s Olds Motor Works built 425 of its low-cost “Curved Dash Olds” models.¹

Physicians were early auto proponents, as the *American Medical Journal*, a publication “in the interest of eclectic medicine and surgery,” revealed in 1906. When it questioned readers about the merits of the automobile versus the horse, almost all of the 68 respondents favored the auto. Dr. C. E. Rogers of Montevideo recommended a car of at least 12 horsepower and top speed of 40 miles per hour, an incredible pace for rutted, muddy country roads. Dr. F. E. Daigneau of Austin wrote that he was wasting too much time on the road with his horse and buggy; he “dispensed” with his rig and bought an auto in 1903.² Another physician and automobile enthusiast, Dr. Charles E. Dutton of Minneapolis, would soon play a large role in building the much-ballyhooed Twin City Motor Speedway.

As speed became king, dirt tracks sprang up everywhere, often in farmers’ cow pastures. Aware of the great interest in the sport, the Minnesota State Fair Board sponsored its first auto race in 1907 on the dirt oval used for horse racing. The following year, an auto race was the feature attraction at the fair, and soon the event was drawing famous drivers who followed the race circuits. Auto racing was here to stay.³

Seeking ever-greater speeds, the racing world began experimenting with track surfaces other than dirt. In Surrey, England, for example, Brooklands arose atop a reclaimed swamp in 1907, its banked, concrete driving surface supported by six inches of gravel and Portland cement. In Indianapolis, investors were also building a new hard-surfaced track. At its inaugural race in 1909, the crushed-stone-and-tar oval proved hazardous to drivers and spectators alike. Repaved with millions of bricks,



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Speedway

Alvin W. Waters

the speedway in 1911 hosted its first 500-mile race, a dramatic and highly successful venture at which winner Ray Harroun coaxed his Marmon Wasp to an average speed of 74.59 miles per hour. By 1914, the track's founders were looking around for another racing site and settled on Minnesota.⁴

Extant correspondence shows that at least two of the Indianapolis principals launched the Minnesota venture: Carl G. Fisher, an entrepreneur and auto dealer for Stoddard-Dayton and Packard, and Frank H. Wheeler, owner of the Schebler Carburetor Company. After considerable wrangling, the Twin City Motor Speedway—also known as the Fort Snelling track—opened on Labor Day weekend, 1915. This concrete oval of two miles, direction counter-clockwise, promised, as its opening-day program announced, to “give the citizens of the entire west the opportunity to enjoy the most thrilling of all modern sports.”⁵ Despite its founders' confident dreams, by 1917 the speedway was defunct.

In 1914 Wheeler and his son took the train to Minneapolis to explore possibilities for a new super speedway. There, they linked up with Dr. Charles Dutton, perhaps one of the most influential “automobilists” in the Twin Cities. By 1915 the 53-year-old surgeon had an office in

the Pillsbury Building at 602 Nicollet Avenue and a residence on West Thirty-First Street in Minneapolis. He was just finishing a two-year stint as Minneapolis health commissioner. He also held offices in both the Minnesota chapter and the national American

Automobile Association. Furthermore, he was the customary driver of either the pace car or the pathfinder car that set the routes for long-distance races, such as the Minneapolis-to-Helena race of 1911. In 1913 he had chaired the Glidden National Tour committee, handling the details for the last of these famed tours—a long-distance reliability run that followed the Great Northern Railroad tracks from the Twin Cities to Glacier Park.⁶

Wheeler, probably feeling that he had found the right



Charles E. Dutton, 1921, photographed by Lee Brothers as part of the “Historical Collection of Portraits of Prominent Minnesotans of the Twentieth Century”

person to assist him, formed a speedway board of directors made up of Twin Cities businessmen, with himself as president. James F. Sperry of St. Paul, owner of a large real estate and investment business, was named general manager. Dutton, as secretary, became Wheeler's official correspondent and conduit for his directives. Their almost-daily correspondence covered many details, such as the pressing need to acquire land for the track. On September 17, 1914, Wheeler, in Indianapolis, prodded Dutton: "Your architect was here yesterday and I laid out the Speedway plans very carefully to him. What have you done to secure more ground? We have got to have at least 400 feet back of the grandstands on the west side of the track, in order to make turns, etc. I have laid him out a Speedway that is a beauty and there is nothing like it in all the world."⁷

This same letter reveals unspecified trouble between the two Indianapolis principals. Wheeler instructed Dutton to "leave Fisher entirely out. It is possibly just as well that he is out, as his ideas and mine would probably differ, as to how this track should be laid out and I certainly know what I want and have got it right. It might be a good idea to make it a popular subscription affair. I have been thinking it over and the more people you have in it, the less liable we will be to have the state pass a law prohibiting racing. This stock will pay 30% or 40% net as long as we can race."

***"St. Paul and Minneapolis
are the best spots on this earth
to build a big Speedway."***

Wheeler went on to evaluate the cost for concrete versus wood for the grandstands.

I find that it will run at least \$5.00 for each spectator for a concrete stand. We can build wood grandstands for about one quarter the cost of concrete and I have laid out a grandstand that will have about 900 boxes, six people to a box would be about 5400 box seats. These boxes would bring in about \$60,000, without the price of admission. . . .

I hope your people are going ahead to get things moving, as St. Paul and Minneapolis are the best spots on this earth to build a big Speedway and we have the right ground.

Do not under any circumstances let Fisher's name be known in the affair, nor make him an official or director of any kind.

I am sending you three more of my photographs for the newspaper. Be sure and use these.

The Minneapolis partners confidently proceeded to sell stock and purchase 342.5 acres of slightly rolling farmland just west of Fort Snelling. Plans were completed for the track, and work began in the late spring of 1915, just a few months before the planned opening on Labor Day. General Manager Sperry monitored construction, overseeing the daily labor of 1,500 men and many horses. Some 300,000 cubic yards of earth were moved in grading the track. Six wooden grandstands with boxes for 75,000 spec-



Aerial view of the new speedway, "the last word in motor track construction," according to the opening-day program

tators went up, along with bleachers for another 25,000 people. Ingvaldstad Lumber Company, a Twin Cities firm, supplied 3.5 million feet of lumber and 30,000 barrels of cement for the track. Hanlon and Okes, headquartered in Minneapolis and Sioux City, Iowa, laid the concrete in a “record breaking” 35 days, completing the task on August 26—just nine days before the big race.⁸

Promoters boasted that the new, two-mile concrete oval, with its uniform thickness of six inches, was a world-class super speedway surpassing even the famous Indianapolis track. It would withstand years of racing and permit speeds not previously attained. Oriented in a slightly northwest-southeast direction, it was sited roughly parallel to Thirty-Fourth Avenue, just south of the Minneapolis city limits where Highway 62 now runs. Its inaugural contest would be the first annual 500-Mile Motor Derby, which owners touted as the race for the “speed championship of the world.”

On September 2, 1915, a *Minneapolis Journal* headline predicted, “Million Dollar Speedway Will Attract Thousands Saturday,” and the next day’s paper declared, “Drivers Set For Auto Derby Start.” Front-row box seats were available for \$60.00, and general admission spots were plentiful at \$1.00. Track officials had talked of many entrants for the time trials and expected to eliminate those not qualifying at 84 miles per hour. To the great disappointment of everyone involved, only 14 drivers entered.⁹

The promoters attempted to make the most of it and promised a field of “famous drivers from around the country, and the world!” Dario Resta would be there, driving a Peugeot. He had just broken a world record on the new Chicago Speedway, averaging 97.54 miles per hour for the 500 miles. His many victories in the United States and abroad had earned him the title of “World’s Champion.” Ralph De Palma, an Italian driving a Mercedes, was another favored contender, having just won the Indianapolis 500. Gil Anderson and Earl Cooper, driving Stutz racers, were among the other worthy challengers. Such caliber of drivers would bring thousands to the new track, its builders hoped.¹⁰

Unfortunately for the speedway owners, the fancy box seats and much of the grandstand went unsold. On September 4, 1915, only 25,000 spectators saw the race, which proved to be something of an upset: Cooper took the \$20,000 first prize, while fellow Stutz driver Anderson collected \$10,000 for second place. More ominous for investors than the low opening-day attendance was the news, as the next day’s paper reported, that the



Minneapolis Journal, September 2, 1915

track—“raw, new, and completed with no time to polish it up,” was a “disappointment.” Speeds were not up to expectation. Drivers complained that the rough concrete surface caused nearly uncontrollable vibrations in their cars, said to be “almost beyond belief,” resulting in numerous mechanical failures. Officials acknowledged the shortcomings of the track and were confident it would be “worked down.” As the *Minneapolis Journal* reported, “Concrete surfacing for a track is an experiment in America, as this is the only course of its kind in the world outside of Brooklands, Eng.”¹¹

Financial troubles were immediately evident. As *Sparks*, the publication of the Minnesota State Automobile Association, noted, “Financially we do not believe the race was a pronounced success but there are so many elements . . . that we hesitate to discuss the matter.” The article optimistically continued, “Unfortunately, the construction work on the stands, etc., was not completed and there is still some grading to be done, but this is being

MINNEAPOLIS, MINN., THURSDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 11, 1936

**COOPER IS WINNER OF THE BIG SPEEDWAY RACE;
GREAT FINISH MARKS THE AUTO CLASSIC**

COOPER WINS \$20,000 PRIZE

SPEED OF TRACK NOT

THE FINISH—EAM DOOPER WINS \$20,000 PRIZE

RESTA, DE PALMA AND BURMAN DROP OUT EARLY

Gil Anderson Pushes His Teammate to the Limit and Finishes Close Up—New Race Commences Disappointment in Its Speed Possibilities Rough Track Makes Trouble for Tires and Engines—The Race in Detail.

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THE PRIZE WINNERS

Prize	Winner	Amount
First Prize	John J. Smith	\$100.00
Second Prize	John J. Smith	\$50.00
Third Prize	John J. Smith	\$25.00
Fourth Prize	John J. Smith	\$10.00
Fifth Prize	John J. Smith	\$5.00

Nike Will Prevail
Garrison Thru

WHAT THEY WON

Team	Points
St. Louis	100
San Francisco	90
Los Angeles	80
San Diego	70
Seattle	60
Portland	50
Phoenix	40
San Jose	30
San Antonio	20
San Jose	10

MOON GETAWAY OF THE GARS IN PURSUIT OF GOLD AND GLORY

1. BEING A MEMBER OF THE RUND BUND DOES NOT MAKE A PERSON A MEMBER OF THE RUND

**SPEED OF TRACK NOT
UP TO THAT EXPECTED**

Speculators and Promoters Disappointed This Time Made by Business Did Not Reach Mark Set by Other Congress—Plans for Improvements—A New Spectacle for the Sporting Editions of the Northwest Sun Disappointment.

THE United States has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world, and it is a major cause of the economic problems that have plagued the country since the late 1970s. The unemployment rate has risen from 5.5 percent in 1975 to 10.5 percent in 1982, and it is expected to rise further in 1983. The unemployment rate is a key indicator of the health of the economy, and it is a major concern of the public. The unemployment rate is a measure of the number of people who are unemployed and looking for work, relative to the total number of people in the labor force. The labor force is the number of people who are either employed or unemployed and looking for work. The unemployment rate is calculated by dividing the number of unemployed people by the total labor force, and then multiplying the result by 100. The unemployment rate is a key indicator of the health of the economy, and it is a major concern of the public. The unemployment rate is a measure of the number of people who are unemployed and looking for work, relative to the total number of people in the labor force. The labor force is the number of people who are either employed or unemployed and looking for work. The unemployment rate is calculated by dividing the number of unemployed people by the total labor force, and then multiplying the result by 100.



The U.S. Navy's New Ship

The construction of a new ship for the Navy, the U.S. Navy's new ship, is the subject of a new article in the New York Times. The article, which is dated April 10, 1941, discusses the construction of a new ship for the Navy, the U.S. Navy's new ship, and the construction of a new ship for the Navy.

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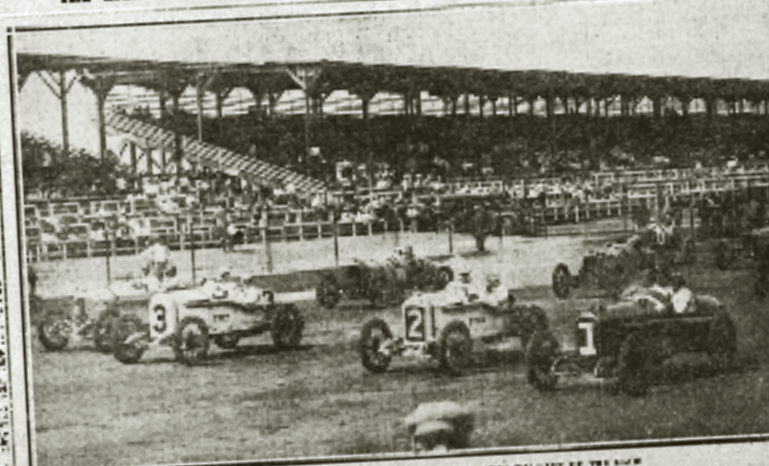
WHAT THEY WOULD

State	Year	Rate
Arkansas	1990	10.0
California	1990	9.0
Colorado	1990	8.0
Connecticut	1990	7.0
Delaware	1990	6.0
District of Columbia	1990	5.0
Florida	1990	4.0
Georgia	1990	3.0
Hawaii	1990	2.0
Idaho	1990	1.0
Illinois	1990	0.0
Indiana	1990	0.0
Iowa	1990	0.0
Kansas	1990	0.0
Kentucky	1990	0.0
Louisiana	1990	0.0
Maine	1990	0.0
Maryland	1990	0.0
Massachusetts	1990	0.0
Michigan	1990	0.0
Minnesota	1990	0.0
Mississippi	1990	0.0
Missouri	1990	0.0
Montana	1990	0.0
Nebraska	1990	0.0
Nevada	1990	0.0
New Hampshire	1990	0.0
New Jersey	1990	0.0
New Mexico	1990	0.0
New York	1990	0.0
North Carolina	1990	0.0
North Dakota	1990	0.0
Ohio	1990	0.0
Oklahoma	1990	0.0
Oregon	1990	0.0
Pennsylvania	1990	0.0
Rhode Island	1990	0.0
South Carolina	1990	0.0
South Dakota	1990	0.0
Tennessee	1990	0.0
Texas	1990	0.0
Utah	1990	0.0
Vermont	1990	0.0
Virginia	1990	0.0
Washington	1990	0.0
West Virginia	1990	0.0
Wisconsin	1990	0.0
Wyoming	1990	0.0

Nike Will Prevent
Anzian Throwing

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THE MOON BEATWAT OF THE GARS IN PURSUIT OF GOLD AND GLORY



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taken care of and will probably be all in shape before winter." The *Minneapolis Journal* soon cast doubt on that prediction. Three days after the inaugural race, it reported that unpaid speedway laborers caused a "disturbance" at General Manager Sperry's office when told to wait until the coming Friday for their wages. The disgruntled workers appealed to the speedway's corporate attorney and to the state labor bureau.¹²

The *Journal* went on to reveal that the company was perhaps more than \$300,000 in debt. It still owed money on the land, on grading and construction, and for cement, lumber, and advertising—as well as labor. Two suppliers had filed garnishments against it in Hennepin County district court, and corporate president Wheeler had requested an audit of company accounts and race receipts. He appeared confident that he could issue bonds to cover the company's liabilities but would wait for the audit before proceeding.

The company's woes continued to be front-page news. On September 10 the *Journal* reported, "500 Again Invade Speedway Offices," where Sperry emptied his pockets of about \$20 for the neediest and promised payment to the others within a few days. Wheeler was said to be ready to float a \$350,000 bond issue in Indianapolis. The next day's paper announced that time checks had been issued to some 1,500 employees, "who will be notified by their union council as soon as there is money in the bank to cover the pay checks." This news caused the carpenters to call off their strike and resume work on the grandstands and track.¹³

The track lay idle, and the winters of 1915 and 1916 were not kind to its defective surface.

There had been talk immediately after the inaugural race of a 100-mile rematch, as thwarted drivers such as De Palma and Resta wanted another chance. Wheeler himself told the *Journal* that he was seeking American Automobile Association sanction for a 200-mile race for the first available date in October. There is no evidence that these plans materialized, however. The track lay idle, and the winters of 1915 and 1916 were not kind to its defective surface: frost heaved the concrete, causing it to break up.¹⁴





By the spring of 1916, it was clear that the management team, too, was breaking up. Wheeler, in Indianapolis, peppered Dutton, in Minneapolis, with letters almost daily. On April 20, 1916, Wheeler cautioned, “Your two letters to hand and glad to hear from you. Sperry and his crowd will undoubtedly put in fraudulent claims to the Trust Company to try and get out of some

of these bonds.” Wheeler admonished Dutton to “Watch every move they make” and “Be sure and attend all Stockholders’ Meetings.” Two days later, he announced, “I don’t want any more of those bonds at over 30 [cents on the dollar], but will take the ones that you have bought at the price you paid for them. I am absolutely done with Sperry. . . . He must take everything up with the attorney and yourself. From now on, you will be the man he must do business with.”¹⁵

Correspondence continued to fly between the cities. In one of two letters sent the same day to “Dear Dut,” Wheeler created an aura of intrigue: “You may hear rumors that I will be in Minneapolis and St. Paul, but don’t pay any attention to them, as I will not come up without letting you know. I expect to go to New York . . . and will leave word here that I will be in Minneapolis; then the whole gang up there will be looking for me and they will look in vain.” About a month later, with foreclosure looming, Wheeler advised Dutton that going into receivership and selling the property would be the only way to “get rid of Sperry and his gang.” He suggested that Dutton “get together four or five first-class people” to buy the property if it was sold by the courts.¹⁶

Despite the obvious problems, it seems that Wheeler, at least, held out hope that the track would survive. As late as May 1916, he was counseling Dutton about resurfacing the concrete with a mixture of sand and asphalt—“when the time comes to fix it up right.”

It is unclear whether a limited racing program continued at the site. According to one historian, the American Red Cross Auto Derby, most likely a World War I charity event, was run at the Twin City Motor Speedway in 1916

and 1917, although there is no mention of improvements to the track. Regardless, by 1917 the speedway had held its last race. Weeds grew up through the cracked surface, and in the summer the wooden grandstands were sold to pay creditors.¹⁷

Certainly, internal dissension, shoddy construction, and unrealistic expectations all contributed to the swift failure of the Twin City Motor Speedway. Still, many questions linger. Why the low turnout of drivers and spectators for the inaugural race? Perhaps the track appeared so suddenly that there was no time to generate fans or attract racers. Indeed, advance publicity bragged: “Magnificent Racecourse Was Constructed in Less Than Two Months.” Did the board of directors, savvy businessmen with some race-world credentials, overestimate their audience and fail to realize that a \$1 million burden could not be quickly recovered? Or did they count on a superb surface and steady, lucrative race events? Wheeler’s letters make clear that he, and probably Dutton, mistrusted Sperry and other shareholders, but the missives never spell out the reasons. Did a power struggle doom the venture? Was ownership of the bonds the big issue? Did Wheeler, so full of ideas for building the track, fault Sperry for accepting poor work? No clear answers exist.¹⁸

After sitting idle for several years, the defunct speed-

Universal Air Lines buildings dot the old speedway site, where planes taxied across the concrete track in the 1920s.



way was acquired by the Twin City Aero Corporation, which had been formed to establish a properly equipped local airport. The infield of the track became a landing field. A large wooden hangar was built in 1920 for airmail service, and the property became known as Speedway Field. In 1923 it was renamed Wold-Chamberlain Field in honor of two local pilots killed in combat during World War I. In 1928 the old concrete track was broken up and buried so the airfield could expand, and the following year passenger service was added. As flying activity

increased, a building on Thirty-Fourth Avenue South became the passenger and airmail terminal. The west side of the old speedway straightaway was transformed into the main north-south runway.¹⁹

Imagine for a moment what might have been, had the speedway succeeded as its founders envisioned, surpassing Indianapolis as the supreme auto racetrack in the nation. Perhaps the sounds of speeding engines near Fort Snelling would emanate from NASCAR racers rather than jumbo jets. □

Notes

1. "The History of the Automobile," <http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aacarassemblya.htm> (accessed Aug. 21, 2007).
2. *American Medical Journal*, Apr. 21, 1906. This journal was published in St. Louis from 1873 to 1916.
3. Karal Ann Marling, *Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990), 65, 116, 130–31.
4. "Brooklands—The First Modern Race Track in the World," *Antique Automobile*, July–August 2006, p. 64–68; Ray E. Boomhower, "The Race," *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* 19 (Spring 2007): 3; www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/history (accessed Aug. 21, 2007).
5. *Twin City Motor Speedway Official Programme*, Sept. 4, 1915, p. 17, copy in Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) pamphlet collection. Much of my interest in the speedway stemmed from associates in the Antique Automobile Club, one of whom knew the company's secretary, C. E. Dutton. Dutton's letters from F. H. Wheeler (Sept. 1914–June 1916) and related material eventually came into my possession.
6. *National Tour, Twin City—Glacier Park, July 11–19, 1913*, p. 2, booklet in author's possession; Alvin W. Waters, "The Last of the Glidden Tours: Minneapolis to Glacier Park, 1913," *Minnesota History* 38 (Mar. 1963): 205–15; *Davison's Minneapolis Directory*, 1915, p. 597; "For Posterity," cover sheet of photo, Lee Brothers Historical Collection of Portraits of Prominent Citizens of Minnesota of the Twentieth Century, 1921, MHS.
7. Here and two paragraphs below, F. W. Wheeler to C. E. Dutton, Sept. 17, 1914; *Official Programme*, 2 (the other officers were H. E. L. Habighorst, vice president, and C. W. Van Orsdol, treasurer). For more on Sperry, see J. A. A. Burnquist, *Minnesota and Its People* (Chicago: J. S. Clarke, 1924), 4:91–92. St. Paul architect-engineer Walter D. MacLeith designed the speedway; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 2, 1915, p. 16.
8. Here and below, *Official Programme*, 17, 29, 46; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 2, 1915, p. 16.
9. *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 2, 1915, p. 16, Sept. 3, 1915, p. 24; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 28, 1966, p. H8.
10. *Official Programme*, 6, 26, 34, 43; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 2, 1915, p. 16.
11. *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 5, 1915, sports sec., p. 1; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 28, 1966, p. H8.
12. Here and below, "Finish At Speedway A Thriller," *Sparks* 2 (Sept. 1915): 6; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 7, 1915, p. 1.
13. *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 10, 1915, p. 1, Sept. 11, 1915, p. 6. Ingvaldstad Lumber was the largest creditor, with Sperry Realty, second; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 8, 1915, p. 1.
14. *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 6, 1915, p. 12; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 28, 1966, p. H8.
15. Wheeler to Dutton, Apr. 20, 22, 1916.
16. Here and below, Wheeler to Dutton, Apr. 24, 25, May 31, 1916.
17. Harvey West, "A Mini History of Racing in Minnesota," *The Tonneau On-Line*, June 2001, p. 3, www.scaa-lol.org/tonneau/jun01/page3.htm (accessed Aug. 21, 2007); "Twin Cities Motor Speedway," Tim Moser's Silhouette Racing, www.silhouet.com/motorsport/tracks/twinciti.html (accessed Aug. 21, 2007); *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 28, 1966, p. H8.
18. *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 2, 1915, p. 16. Wheeler's letters preserve only his side of the story, of course.
19. Minneapolis-Saint Paul Metropolitan Airports Commission, Agency History Record, Minnesota Historical Society manuscripts collection; Metropolitan Airports Commission, "A Pioneer in Air Transportation," www.mspairport.com/mac/organization/History.aspx, and Minneapolis Public Library, "A History of Minneapolis Transportation," www.mpls.lib.mn.us/history/tr5.asp (both accessed Aug. 21, 2007); *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 23, 1952, editorial sec., p. 1.

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