



Submitted Photo

W.F. Zehler's planned Independence Day flight above Hamlin Park made headlines in the June 27, 1912, issue of the *East Aurora Advertiser*. Although Zehler showed up for the festivities, his plane never made it off the ground. According to newspaper reports,

Zehler refused to fly the plane because too few tickets were sold for his show. For more than a decade afterward, *East Aurora* struggled to provide a successful airplane show on the Fourth of July. Weather conditions and accidents always seemed to get in the way.

EA's Fourth of July Airplane Show Struggled to Get in the Air

by Robert Lowell Goller
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There were no fireworks at East Aurora's Independence Day celebration in 1912, but organizers were still hoping to provide a spectacular show in the skies above Hamlin Park.

After many communities took the so-called "safe and sane" approach to Fourth of July celebrations more than a century ago, East Aurora's civic leaders turned away from fireworks and toward a new invention—the "aeroplane"—in an attempt to wow the crowds.

There was a great deal of excitement as the big day approached in 1912; most people in the East Aurora area had never seen an aircraft before.

Unfortunately, organizers of the town's Fourth of July celebration struggled to get their plans off the ground. Their struggles continued for more than a decade.

In an article published in the *East Aurora Advertiser* a week before the Fourth of July in 1912, local residents were promised an impressive exhibition.

"Arrangements have been completed to have Mr. W. F. Zehler give an exhibition flight in his Curtiss By-Plane, at the Hamlin Park on July Fourth, for the benefit of the Sons of Veterans," the newspaper reported on June 27.

The flight, which was to take place in the late afternoon, "will afford the people of the vicinity, and surrounding country, a great opportunity to see an aeroplane and witness a flight, something that the people of this surrounding part of the country have never seen and a possibility that they will never see again," the *Advertiser* added. "The machine will be on exhibition during the day to all those who care to see it."

"An admission of 10 cents will be charged to see the machine," the newspaper reported, "and 25 cents to see the flight."

While the usual games, food and music went on as

planned, the much-hyped aircraft demonstration was abruptly cancelled. According to an article in the *Advertiser* a week later, Zehler decided that too few tickets were sold to make it worth his while. However, according to the newspaper, it seemed to be the prevailing opinion that Zehler had never intended to fly the small plane above Hamlin Park. In fact, the newspaper reported that many people at the celebration doubted Zehler had the ability to get the plane off the ground.

Some people "wanted to wager that he could not make the accession," the newspaper reported.

When the East Aurora branch of the Red Cross was in charge of organizing the Fourth of July celebration five years later, it attempted to bring back the airplane as a major attraction. However, East Aurorans were left disappointed once again.

This time around, an accident involving the Curtiss Company's plane at a Buffalo airfield—not an uncooperative pilot—sidelined the much-anticipated show.

As a consolation, the Curtiss Company flew a plane over the village a few days later, on Monday, July 9.

"The aeroplane flight, which the Curtiss Company promised the local Red Cross branch, was made on Monday evening, when Roland Rohlfs, of the aviation school, appeared over the village at 6 o'clock," the *Advertiser* reported. "The whir of the propellers was plainly heard by all who were out of doors, and from all reports practically everyone in the village saw the flight."

"Rohlfs circled several times at a height of over a mile and was seen from points several miles distant from the village."

"He did dips, spirals and other amusements for the watchers and returned to Buffalo at about six-thirty o'clock."

By July 4, 1925, the newly formed East Aurora Country Club had already been hosting a

fireworks display for four years, but organizers of the hometown celebration in Hamlin Park tried one more time to make the airplane the biggest attraction of the day.

This time it worked. Sort of.

Despite a threat of rain that kept many people away from the usual midway, picnic and baseball game at Hamlin Park, the small aircraft from Curtiss Field in Buffalo "furnished a real thrill to scores of local people."

However, plans for a parachute descent and other stunts in the center of the celebration on the baseball diamond in Hamlin Park were thwarted.

Celebrants were left disappointed yet again when, according to the following week's newspaper report, "it was decided that, with the adverse conditions of wind and rain, coupled with danger of the nearby grove of trees, it would be unwise to perform these stunts at Hamlin Park."

Instead, the parachute descent was performed in an open area off Maple Road outside the village.

Despite the setback, organizers were finally able to at least get a plane off the ground on the Fourth of July, 13 years after the original attempt.

"Altogether, the unfortunate weather conditions prevailing throughout the day rather marred the complete success of the big celebration planned," the *Advertiser* reported of the 1925 celebration, "but the advent of the aeroplane proved such a popular form of entertainment that for many the occasion had its enjoyable features."

Aurora Town Historian and East Aurora Village Historian Robert Lowell Goller is also director of the Aurora Historical Society. The Aurora History Museum and Town Archives are open at the Southside Municipal Center, 300 Gleed Avenue, from 1-4 p.m., Fridays, and by appointment. Call 652-7944 for more information.