

George Hardie Jr.'s unpublished book identifies this photo as the first picture of the L-4 "Midnight" airliner. Mr. Lawson is on the right. Other man not identified. Note that the wing extensions are not attached. (photo c 1920)

# Alfred Lawson

## The Man and His Airplane

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He played semi pro baseball, edited a popular magazine on flying (FLY), started 3 corporations, built 3 impressive airplanes and founded a philosophical movement that attracted over 350,000 members.

He wrote 13 books, ran a college, raised hundreds of thousands of dollars, sold thousands of shares of stock, went bankrupt several times and was called before a congressional investigating committee.

Conceived of the "hub" airline route connection technique used today, probably built the first airliner aircraft and invented the name airliner. Received a \$650,000 airmail delivery contract from the United States Post Office.

All of the above apply to one man, Alfred W. Lawson (b. 1869, d. 1954) a man who planned to put South Milwaukee, Wisconsin on the map as the center of the aircraft industry.

Lawson left home at 17 years of age, just as his brother George had done at the same age. He had no particular training other than working with cloth as a tailor, but he did have physical skills as a baseball player and the early years of the 1900's were a hotbed of the sport. Various leagues and teams and sponsors were popping up everywhere and the rigid organization we know today was non-existent. Lawson could pitch (there is some question on his fastball) and play outfield and infield positions. But one game contracts with 3 different major league teams, none of which were successful caused him to forsake the sport and seek other efforts to make a living.

Orville and Wilbur Wright had demonstrated flight in 1905 and the United States was absorbed in any activity related to flying. Capitalizing on this interest, Lawson began the Magazine "FLY" in 1908. It appears to have been very successful since an article of November 16, 1913 describes Lawson as "New York's First Airboat Commuter" traveling the 30 miles from his home in Seidler's Beach, New Jersey to Manhattan in ½ hour utilizing a float plane (what we would call a seaplane). Lawson wrote numerous articles about aircraft and their use in the forthcoming world war both in "Fly" and in "Aircraft" a second magazine he edited and published.

Lawson left the magazine industry in 1917, taking several of the technical editors (who were aircraft designers) with him and moved to Green Bay, WI. It appears that several investors in Green Bay wished to start an aircraft construction business and invited Lawson to head the activity. The initial trainer (MT-1) airplane for the US Army Air Force was unsuccessful but a follow up design (MT-2) received a very positive review by the government inspector. Unfortunately by this time it appeared World War I was winding to a close..

On November 4, 1918 the Chief of Aircraft Procurement sent the following to Lawson Aircraft in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

"You had, through Mr. Lawson, every reason to feel that when your financial position was squared with our views on the matter, a formal order for the planes in question would be forthcoming from me. However since that date and today there has been a decided change in the training program. which leaves me without a purchase requisition upon which to base an order."

World War I Armistice was signed on November 18, 1918

Discouraged – No! Disappointed – Perhaps.

The news that the Army would not purchase any trainer airplanes was certainly unwelcome!

However, now Alfred Lawson could pursue his dream of a passenger airplane. He had written about such an aircraft in FLY and AIRCRAFT – his design team was intact – but what about funding. The revenue from a sale of 100 trainer planes (probably several hundred thousand dollars) would have enabled design and prototype of the passenger craft but that did not occur.

Green Bay investors were not interested in a passenger airplane.

Vincent Burnelli had contacts in Milwaukee so it was decided to move Lawson Aircraft Company to Milwaukee. Working out of an office in the First Wisconsin Bank building Alfred Lawson, who had once sold Singer sewing machines door to door, began selling his idea of a passenger airplane to the public and anyone who would buy stock at \$10 per share. Using Lawson's concept, Burnelli and Lee Wallace began the design for a 16 passenger airliner. The cockpit was to accommodate two persons, there were dual controls and it was inside the fuselage. (no more pilot in the open air stream.) Engines were to be 400 hp. Liberty engines, government surplus from the engine program initiated at the beginning of WW I. \* Plywood, then quite new, was to be used in engine mounts, fuselage skin and internal bulkheads. Wings, fuselage and tail were constructed of spruce wood in a box shape reinforced with "X" wires. Landing gear was to consist of fixed mounts under each engine each consisting of two tires. Wings, tail and aft fuselage were covered with cloth and coated with tautening dope, a clear aircraft cloth finish.

Burnelli rented space in the Cream City Sash and Door Company in Milwaukee and construction of the craft began. Lawson had two logistical problems however. Although the rented facilities were large enough to build the plane parts they were too small to fully assemble the machine. And he needed a airfield from which to test the airplane.

Lawson wrote a letter to Daniel Hoan, the mayor of Milwaukee, suggesting that an airport would "put the city on the map" for the new airline industry. As a result a committee was formed, with Lawson as a member, to locate a suitable site. They selected a location on Milwaukee's northwest side (Now Currie Park \*\*) A grass runway and buildings were quickly constructed. Permission was obtained to use a building at State Fair Park for final assembly of the airplane.

Today a plaque at Currie Park reads in part:

*"The nation's first commercial air transport, the Lawson Airliner, took off from this field on August 27, 1919 on a demonstration flight to New York City and Washington, D.C. and returned on November 14, 1919"*

Alfred Lawson had envisioned a grand tour of the eastern United States and had written to various cities, flying clubs and aircraft manufacturers soliciting use of their landing fields and airports for his demonstration flight. He also made sure that newspapers were aware of his plans.

Extensive documentation exists for the tour, mostly as newspaper headlines from Chicago, New York, Washington D.C. and others. It was very successful from a publicity standpoint, but technically not so much.

Over New York City, with a full load of 15 passengers (one seat behind the pilots cabin was used by a mechanic (a flight engineer today) who had instruments in front of him on the bulkhead the plane achieved 5,000 ft. altitude and 90 mph. This was well under the projections of 10,000 ft and 100 mph. In addition, Lawson had come to the conclusion that a greater passenger capacity was required to compete with the railroads.

Upon returning to Milwaukee, design work began on a larger, more powerful aircraft. The L-4 or "Midnight" airliner.

\* Just prior to WW I the Army recognized the need for domestically produced airplane engine. Two engine designers, one from Packard Motorcars and one from the Hall-Scott Company were summoned to Washington, lodged in a hotel room and given the task. They designed the engine, a V-12, water cooled conventional ignition design in 5 days, between May 30 and June 4<sup>th</sup> of 1917. Called the Liberty engine over 20,000 were produced. It is believed that the WW II PT boat engines, manufactured by Packard had their roots in the Liberty.

\*\* Currie Park (New Butler Field) was eventually deemed unexpandable and decommissioned in 1926 when Milwaukee County bought Hamilton Field, now General Mitchell International Airport.

Double the passenger capacity, more power, longer range. Those were the obvious improvements needed but Alfred Lawson wanted more. His demonstration flight to Chicago, Buffalo, Washington D.C. and New York was a tremendous publicity success. Newspaper reporters, politicians and dignitaries were contacted in advance and crowds had witnessed the "leviathan" of the air.

Lawson purchased about 3 acres of land, including a large brick building in the city of South Milwaukee (909 Menomonee Ave., building demolished in 2003.) previously used by Federal Rubber. It had a railroad siding and was suitable for aircraft sub assembly but was not large enough for final assembly.

The two Liberty engines were salvaged from the L-2 airplane and a 3<sup>rd</sup> engine bought as WWI surplus. Gasoline tanks were increased to 733 gal. A cockpit heater was to be added after Lawson complained that his feet got cold flying from Chicago to Milwaukee during November of 1919 when returning from the demo tour. Multiple tire failures had also occurred during landings so a more robust landing gear and 4 ft diameter Palmer brand aircraft tires were specified.

The biplane wing was increased from 95 to 125 feet and the fuselage lengthened from about 55 to 62 feet. Seating was changed from a seat each side of an aisle to 2 abreast on one side and a single seat on the other (ie. 3 seats in each row.)

In order to advertise as "the midnight airliner" the plane could be configured with 4 bunks and a washroom for a small number of passengers. Lawson told the press that he would offer airline service to the west coast. The plane included space for "air" mail on board and a system for transferring mail bags between planes in the air.

Lawson spoke of having 50 planes under construction (he never had more than one) and publicized his "hub" airline interconnect plan. He visited many cities and emphasized the need for public airfields. His specifications for a field were 2 runways, 300 feet long each 66 ft wide total with a 40 ft width paved. When the US Postal Service asked for bids on airmail service Lawson was the only bidder and received a \$650,000 contract.

At this point, fate in the form of the depression of 1920 and 1921 intervened. Stock sales plummeted and loan funds were difficult to obtain. Lawson put ads in newspapers offering a 10% return but he was forced to lay off almost all his employees and return the air mail contract to the Post Office. L-4 wasn't finished until December 1920 and how could it be tested? Hamilton Field was only a few miles away but Tom Hamilton, who had been employed by Lawson was fired by him some months earlier. Would Hamilton allow the plane to be tested at his airport? Would Lawson even inquire? Were funds available to disassemble the plane and transport it to an airport?

A short cinder runway was built on the Lawson property and arrangements made with John Hughes, a farmer whose land abutted Lawson's. The field stone fence between the properties was opened and Hughes' field would serve as an extension of the runway. The runway ran north and south with the hanger at the north end, Hughes was to the south. Aircraft almost always take off into the wind, using the wind speed to get additional "lift"

There are several mentions from South Milwaukee residents of the plane being taken from its hanger and the engines warmed over the early months of 1921. Corporate matters had reached a critical point however, investors and investor committees tired of Lawson's promises finally issued an ultimatum - Action or resign!

On Mothers Day, May 8<sup>th</sup> 1921 the plane with Lawson, pilot Wilcox and mechanics Surini and Schory on board was prepared for takeoff. Rolling to the south it encountered John Hughes' field which had been plowed the day before in an east west direction. Diminishing acceleration caused the plane to climb slowly and farmer Hughes house, on a slight hill on Blake Avenue was right in line with the plane. Wilcox banked to the left (east) one wing struck a power pole and the plane crashed east of 9<sup>th</sup> avenue in a field. No one was hurt, Lawson had a slight scratch, but damage to the plane was extensive. Repairs were estimated at \$10,000.

Probably as a result of the financial depression, funds could not be obtained and bankruptcy ensued. The Lawson Aircraft Company was formally declared. Bankrupt in 1922.

With the crash of "The Midnight Airliner" and subsequent economic depression raging throughout the economy at the time, the era of Lawson's aircraft manufacturing business ended. However, anyone

who thought he would disappear into history was spectacularly wrong. For another 30 years his name would be before the public.

Lawson now concentrated, not on manufacturing, but on his concepts for an improved financial system, natural law and morality. He formed the Direct Credits Society, started his own publishing company and concentrated on writing books detailing his philosophies. His legacy is 18 books published between 1904 and about 1949 and the forever memory of traveling south from Milwaukee on I-94 or old Highway 41 and seeing the sign, near the Racine exit, "University of Lawsonomy"

Lawson's Direct Credits Society flourished in the 1930's with its message in support of capitalism with improved finance. People flocked to the meetings; Direct Credits offices (storefronts) sprang up across the US but particularly in the Midwest. Based in Detroit, there were rallies and parades. Many wore the Direct Credits uniform and membership was reported to be in the millions. When Lawson came to your city thousands turned out to hear his speeches.

After WWII membership lessened but in 1948 the Lawsonomy Movement purchased a defunct Baptist college in Des Moines, Iowa for \$80,000 and formed the University of Lawsonomy. Its textbooks were Lawson's writings and few if any degrees were granted. The school ran into many disputes with Des Moines officials, and state and federal authorities. In 1954 the facility was sold and most of the proceeds were used to pay taxes. However, the organization had bought a 30-acre farm in Racine County along I-94 in 1951, and the University was moved to that location. According to the Merle Hayden documentary video, yearly meetings of Lawsonomy students and leaders were held at the farm at least through the late 1990's. Eventually the property was acquired by the Township of Mount Pleasant, and it is now part of the Foxconn enterprise.

Mr. Merle Hayden (b.1920 - d.2017) donated a full set of Lawson's books, a set of plans for the 2-engine plane, copies of the Direct Credits newspaper "The Benefactor" and a copy of "Fly" magazine to the South Milwaukee Historical Society several years ago. Merle was the subject of a short subject film titled "Manlife" which was released in 2017. It may be seen on some of the online TV services. Merle began working with Lawson as a young person, knew him personally and was mis-characterized as "the last Lawsonian" (see note below). Merle had operated a booth at the yearly EAA meeting in Oshkosh, Wisconsin for 30 years promoting Lawsonomy.

Think of Alfred Lawson as an aircraft visionary, a charismatic leader, a talented salesman, a philosopher, a prolific writer and a financial reformer. He reportedly accepted little from his appearances and publications.

Lawson's South Milwaukee property was purchased by Continental Faience and Tile Company which manufactured decorative tile through 1942. The Lawson and Continental buildings were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001 thru the efforts of the then owner, Mr. Richard Schumacher. The buildings were razed in 2013.

Alfred Lawson's impact on South Milwaukee as a city was and is substantial. He had envisioned South Milwaukee as the center of the aircraft industry. That never occurred but it will always be the home of the first airliner.

Note: I have been contacted by officers of the University of Lawsonomy who assure me that the University is active and functioning. They graciously provided me with a copy of a little-known book about Alfred Lawson written by one of his secretaries called "Lawson, From Bootblack to Emancipator" ..

Ref: "Direct Credits for Everybody" by Alfred Lawson copyright 1931 and 1945. Humanity Benefactor Foundation, Detroit MI., Publisher

Ref: Wikipedia "Lawsonomy" accessed June 14, 2021

Ref: "Lawson, From Bootblack to Emancipator" by V.L.A. Farrell, Humanity Benefactor Foundation, Detroit MI., Publisher copyright 1934

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Ref: "Lawsonian Religion" by Alfred Lawson copyright 1949. Humanity Benefactor Foundation, Detroit MI., Publish

For further information, literature and books by Alfred Lawson contact:

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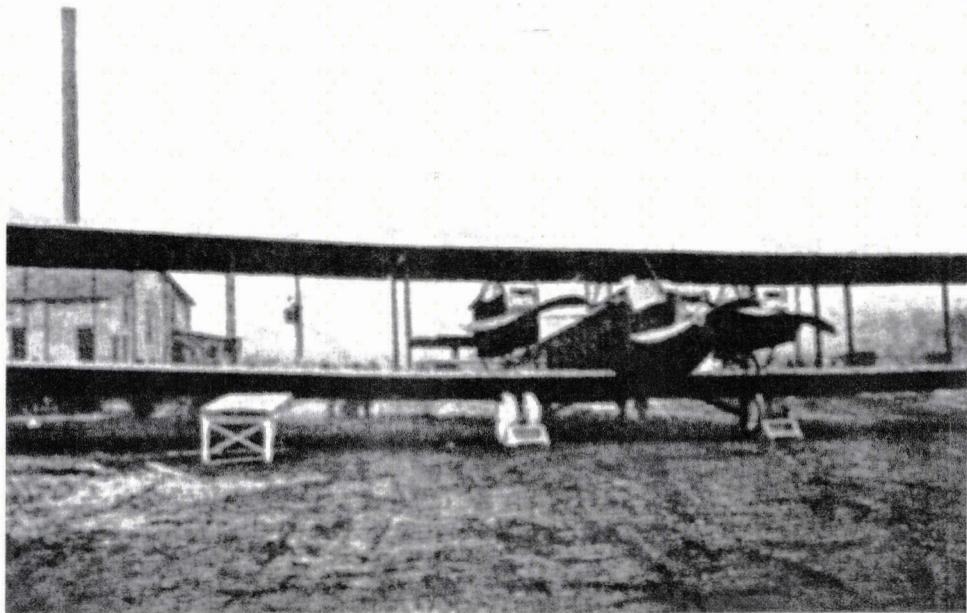
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Lawson L-4, aircraft showing 125 ft. wingspan and 3 engine design.  
(photo c. 1920)