

Pole

by

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Hardly ever is there a picture of the ‘old’ barnstormers where you don’t see the Curtiss JN-4. Originally produced as a training aircraft for the U.S. Army, the "Jenny" (nickname derived from "JN") continued post-World War I as a civil aircraft as it became the backbone of American postwar aviation. Thousands of surplus Jennys were sold at bargain prices to private owners in the years after the war and became central to the barnstorming era that helped awaken America to aviation through much of the 1920s. At her max takeoff weight she weighed a full ton and was severely underpowered... but she could fly.

Overall Length:	27 feet, 4 inches
Overall Height:	9 feet, 10 5/8 inches
Net Weight Empty:	1430 lbs.
Useful Payload:	490 lbs.
Max. speed:	75 mph
Min. speed:	45 mph
Max. rate of climb:	200 fpm
Engine:	Model OX-5, Vee, Four cycle, 8 liquid cooled cylinders
Fuel Consumption:	9 gph
Fuel Capacity:	21 gallons
Oil capacity Crankcase:	4 gallons

September 1928 ‘Popular Aviation’ Magazine - page 89 – advertisement for aircraft parts.

Still at Post-War Prices!

Jenny Axels	2.75
Jenny Radiators (Ilbome-Turfley)	28.00
Jenny Radiators (Fetters)	9.00

Jenny Radiators (Harrison)	15.00
Jenny Hisso Radiators	20.00
Jenny Landing gear (steel tube)	35.00
Jenny Landing gear, Front Struts	1.00
Jenny Landing gear, spreader bar, each	1.00
Jenny Gas tanks	10.00
Jenny Ailerons, good covering	4.00
Jenny Center section, uncovered	5.00

“It’s not a pole; it’s a stick.” Gerdi told Robert pointing to the thing she knew made the wings waggle. The young Skunks were standing on their grandfather’s biplane looking into the small cockpit, which to them looked very large.

“It looks like a pole to me,” Robert told her, or maybe a baseball bat.

Robert didn’t actually own a baseball bat but when he played ball with the other children in one of the many empty pastures, one or two of them would be miraculously produced; these being hand carved by a loving parent. It was the era of ‘make do’ and along with the bats there was every kind of glove imaginable from garden gloves to an actual puffy pie shaped catcher’s mit belonging to Earl Rabbit.

Robert next pointed to the pieces of wood holding the upper wing to the aircraft. “Those look like poles too,” he claimed, knowing it would inflame his ‘know-it-all’ sister.

“You’re a pole!” she yelled at him, whereupon he smiled at her innocently.

“Nawwww... I’m a Skunk. Polecat’s a name I don’t like none.” He pointed to the bracing wood between the wings and told her, “Those are poles too.”

“What are you two doing up on my aereoplane,” their grandfather called out as he walked towards them. He wore a clown’s head of flaming red hair and carried a heavy ten gallon gas can brought over from the back of his old Model T pickup truck. The big red nose and painted on lips gave him a look of hilarity, though he wasn’t laughing. Each time he flew in Mel’s Flying Circus the Skunk risked life and limb doing whacky stunts in his old Jenny bi-plane... and every time he did Mel demanded he make them even whackier because, ‘The crowd loves it.’

Gerdi made to jump down but Robert leaned over the forward cockpit, winked at her, and whispered, “I got this handled. Hide yourself in the passenger cargo place and we’ll give Gramps a scare. You can jump up when he climbs in and go ‘BOO!’” Hopping off of the wing he yelled, “I wanna be like you Gramps! Teach me to fly!”

“NO!”

When the elder Skunk came closer, Robert asked him respectfully, “Why?”

“Because I said so,” his grandfather growled. Shooing the young skunk away he climbed up and made his way forward to right behind the engine, where he unscrewed the airplane’s gas cap. The Jenny creaked a bit with his weight and the tin gurgling sound the gas made as it was poured in attested to the emptiness of the tank. Times were tough, gas was expensive; and there were mouths to feed. It took another trip to the old pickup truck to fetch a second can to almost top off the tank.

Robert, keeping right in step with the Skunk he’d been named after, did his best to wear his grandfather’s resolve down. “Can I please learn to fly please huh huh huh?”

Robert the elder set his gas can on the ground and then climbed back up onto the wing motioning for his grandson to pass the can up. “How much does gas weigh?” he asked.

The young Skunk, struggling with the heft of the can told him, “A lot.”

“Be specific.” his grandfather instructed as he grabbed the handle on the can and lifted it.

“I don’t know.”

There was the sound of the metal cap again being unscrewed and the gurgle of flowing liquid. “Just over six pounds per gallon, so you just lifted up sixty pounds plus cuz the can’s heavy all by itself. Yor gett’n to be a big fella.”

“Then teach me to fly?”

Finishing the pour, his grandfather turned to face him, his over painted red lips deepening his frown. His eyes appeared wild looking and the flaming red hair of the wig he wore flickered from the wind playing in it. “Life and death are in the skies,” he told his grandson, “You’re up there and you’re all on your own. Something happens and you’re going to be dead, wrapped in shattered wood and wire. Is that what you want?”

“Yes... I mean, no. But I do want to fly.”

The clown sighed and began screwing the gas cap back in its place. “You don’t even know the terminology of the craft you want ta pilot.”

“What’s termin...terminocogee?”

The clown grandfather, toting his now empty gas can, hopped off the wing and looked at the boy. “Terminology is what stuff is called. You have to know the right names or you can’t speak the language of airplanes.” He pointed to the wooden pieces the upper wing was mounted upon.

“What are those called?”

“Poles?” Robert asked him.

“Wrong. They might look like poles to you but they are properly called the ‘cabane struts’.”

“Why?”

His grandfather turned and looked at them. “Danged if I know. They was probably named after the fella who invented them. More likely it’s for the sound they make when you crash and the wing shears off... CABANE!!!!”

Robert laughed and this made his grandfather smile.

What’s the area between the fuselage and interplane struts called?”

“What’s an inter-thing strut?”

His grandfather didn’t yell at him. Instead he patted him on the head. “Those are the poles between the wings outboard of the fuselage. The area in between them and the fuselage is called a ‘bay’. The wires running between all of that are called the ‘tension members’. They keep everything rigid so it don’t flap all over the place.”

Stopping to think he came to a decision which was the opposite of what he’d promised his wife.

“All right then,” he said, “I’m running late for my part in the show over at Chesterfield. I need you to stand by the magneto switch for me while I swing the prop. I have to swing the engine through to prime her up and lubricate things. When she starts I’ll come back and climb in. You then stand by the chocks. When I’m all set I’ll give the signal and you pull the rope to remove’em. Make sure you go towards the back of the airplane and stay well clear of the prop cuz it’ll kill ya dead.”

“Yes sir!” his grandson replied suddenly excited for being asked to help.

Tossing the gas can to the side, Robert the elder told Robert the younger to put it back in the pickup truck when he’d left and then leaned into the cockpit to prime the carburetor and adjust the throttle for engine start. Next he turned and made a stirrup with his paws to help his grandson obtain the cockpit where he stood him on the seat.

“When I tell you to ‘make’er hot’ you push this lever here up to where is say’s ‘on’. The OX engine’s only got the one magneto,” he explained, though the explanation was lost on his grandson. “Then you yell back to me and tell me she’s hot. Got that?”

“Yes sir.”

“Don’t touch nothing else.”

The clown headed pilot did exactly what he said he would do, taking the prop through a full three rotations before he had his grandson arm the magneto. When they were set, he got the engine to a good compression stroke and swung his left leg full up in the air before swinging it back through with the weight of his body as he pulled the prop through. With a spout of blue

smoke and a quiet flurr of sound then engine began running, the exposed fingers of the rockers playing the valves like a musical instrument.

Running back around the wing to the cockpit Robert helped his grandson climb out and then he climbed in. Parachutes were costly so having none to wear the old Skunk buckled himself in and yelled for the chocks to be pulled. In short order he'd taxied out to the end of the pasture and pushing the wooden knob of the throttle forward became airborne.

It was about this time that Robert the younger remembered his sister hidden away in the forward cockpit. Though he ran out to the field waving his arms it was too late. Grandpa Skunk neither heard him over the roar of the engine nor saw him as he was already looking towards his destination. He was late and Mel was going to be right pissed.

Thirty minutes into the flight Gerdi became brave enough to climb out of the small cargo hold and peek up over the seat combing to look at her grandfather. What she saw was a road map doing its best to fly away in the prop wash and mostly it obscured a flaming head of red hair. Just as she was about to duck back down again the map escaped and the clown face, complete with goggles took on a shocked look compounded by a completely round mouth of astonishment. The mouth then screamed some strange noises coinciding with a wild shaking of the left paw. This scared her even more as she knew it meant a spanking was coming on.

By now they were approaching the farm in Chesterfield where Mel's show was taking place. This hardly concerned Robert now that his granddaughter had appeared like a magical pixie. If she fell out of the airplane there would be no surviving the fall.

Cutting the engine to idle he yelled at her, "Sit down and buckle the belt around yor lap!"

The aircraft immediately began to descend and this floated Gerdi up slightly and she screamed. Robert, veteran flier that he was, panicked slightly and pushed the throttle all the way in again. The engine roared back to life giving him lift and his granddaughter's feet again touched the face of the seat. Chopping the power again he tried once more to give her instructions which he repeated a third and fourth time as he flew over the farm with all the picnic blankets spread out marking the place the same as if the flying circus owner had erected a huge billboard.

Mel, feet firmly on the wood of his announcer's box and thinking the old Skunk had come up with a better routine, adlibbed. Picking up his speaking trumpet he called out, "It might be engine trouble folks or it might be the old boy is drunk again. There's no tell'n with them Skunks... moonshine, banjos, and a good time for all... right?!"

In the Jenny, the wild haired clown pilot made a gentle bank around, coming back over the farm again never even realizing there were people watching. Getting the airplane straight and level he unbuckled his own seat belt, slowly stood in the cockpit and swung a leg over the side trying to get it up on the wing. The Jenny was stable enough that he could possibly climb forward, get his granddaughter's belt fastened and then get back to the controls; hopefully without a fuss. Chopping the power one last time he yelled out, "I'm coming baby girl, just don't you fret none!"

“Grandpa I’m scared!” she yelled back to him.

Increasing the throttle again and holding onto one of the cabane struts, Robert managed to swing his leg over the edge to find the wing with a bare foot. Carefully then he stood all the way up, the wash of the wind from the prop whipping at him. Pushing any thought for his own safety aside he managed to get his other leg over and his other paw onto the same cabane after which both feet slipped off of the wing and he was left dangling.

The crowd he flew over went wild. Some of the women fainted and more than a few angry voices could be heard saying this was just too dangerous. Mel almost wet himself and without taking his eyes off of the airplane reached into his coat pocket for his own flask from which he took a large swallow. Not knowing what to yell out as he really had no idea what the pilot was up to, he watched in horror with everyone else.

With a cry of, “GRADNPA!” Gerdi was out of her own place and sliding back over the fuselage on her belly. Reaching the cockpit she was dumped in head first, her body coming up against the control stick which nosed the airplane over and to the left where it quickly circled around coming back to aim itself right for Mel’s announcer box.

Mel, having picked up his speaking trumpet missed this fact as he tried to calm the crowd. Their outcry of fear and the number of bodies next to the platform scrambling up to run alerted him to something going on and he turned in time to see the old Jenny aimed right for him with the clown still dangling from the side of the cockpit with his legs a’kicking.

“Pull the stick back Baby Girl!” Robert yelled, “Pull the stick back!”

Gerdi, managing to get herself upright, reached out and did exactly what her grandfather demanded, pulling back on the stick for all she was worth. With a flattening of the engine the nose lifted enough that they passed over the speaking box by a scant ten feet.

“And after that,” the old Skunk told everyone at Sunday dinner, “That little girl gave the stick a good yank to the left and with a wing over I was tossed up into the air like a rag toy ta come right back down over top of the cockpit where I was able to take the stick back and get us upright. After that, I slid my boney bottom back into the seat, got Gerdi there all situated on my lap and then we made another flyby just to wave at the city folks. After that we landed close by and waited for them all to come on over to say hello. I took a bunch of’em for a ride and that’s how we paid for this huge feast.”

“Amen to that!” both his wife and daughter said loudly, not buying a bit of it.

The truth of the matter was that Robert, once he had them safely on the ground again, climbed out of the cockpit and immediately threw up all over the landing gear spreader bar. Gathering his wits about him he managed to wash it off with the water in his canteen while Gerdi stood in the cockpit and waved to the people as they ran up to the airplane. All of this was their secret of course.

“And so I would like to announce,” Robert the elder told everyone, raising his glass of apple juice, “That I have decided to give Gerdi flying lessons.”

The immediate uproar was almost equal to that of the crowd when they saw themselves almost crashed into on a pleasant Saturday’s afternoon; though the results were far less pleasant.

Initially thriving in North America during the first half of the 1920s, by 1927 competition between acts demanded more and more dangerous tricks and flight maneuvers. A number of highly publicized accidents forced the government to implement safety regulations that resulted in the demise of barnstorming. Using the excuse ‘a need to protect the public’, and in response to political pressure by local pilots upset at barnstormers stealing their customers, the federal government enacted several laws to begin regulating fledgling civil aviation. These laws included safety standards that were nearly impossible for barnstormers to meet.

The military was also instructed to stop selling the old Jenny trainers as the glut of these aircraft flooding the market made the sale of expensive newer models near impossible.

Slowly but surely, barnstorming died out, though some pilots continued to wander the country giving rides as late as the fall of 1941.