

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

W.F.E. "Bill" SMITH

Bill Smith was a pioneering aviator who became well known in Adelaide for a number of well publicised stunts during 1924-1925. His flying career was brief but many thousands of people were eyewitness to his feats. Most notable was dropping the ball on Adelaide Oval from the air to start a football game – an event that was described in some detail in a newspaper article decades later.

An accurate account of Smith's aviation career can be compiled from several Adelaide newspaper articles. There are also records of his relatively brief Australian Flying Corps service. His daughter, Helen Crossman, has provided several other personal documents which give details of two marriages and a divorce as well as a record of his interest in a fruit business situated in the old East End Markets.

There are two accounts of Bill Smith's aviation career located in the SAAM archives. One is a single page account written by aviation historian Charles Schaedel, who was in contact with Helen Crossman in 1998. Another is a much longer history written by Robert Brokenmouth (there are several different versions of this – it is unclear which is the final one as none are dated).

This work will try and limit the oral history – via Brokenmouth - to basic facts, and where this is believed to be the source it will be recorded as "OH". It is hoped that further information may be obtained from Helen Crossman.

Sadly, Helen died on 4 May 2013, just weeks after this profile was read to her.

Bill Smith was born in Norwood, South Australia on 6th June 1889. His parents (father John Smith) were working class people who lived in Norwood. Bill was the youngest of five children, and the only male child (OH).

He was educated at Sturt Street School, Adelaide. He must therefore have been in Adelaide until at least the first years of the 1900s. He would have been 15 years old in 1904.

At an unknown date he moved to Melbourne where he became a motor mechanic. His AIF enlistment papers, however, say that he had never been apprenticed.

It was not until 31st December 1917 that Smith decided to enlist in the AIF at Melbourne. It is not known if this peculiar date – New Year's Eve – was of any particular consequence. Smith was a 28 years, 6 months old motor mechanic. He had no previous military service and had not tried enlistment previously. He was only of very modest build: 5 foot 7 inches tall and 124 lbs, and had brown hair and brown eyes. His father was listed as next of kin, and he gave his father's address as his own postal address: 81 Kensington Road, Norwood, SA.

Smith's formal service began at the Australian Flying Corps Depot, Laverton, on 15th January 1918 as a 2nd Class Air Mechanic. The training period was brief – barely six weeks – before he embarked for

England on His Majesty's Australian Transport *Nestor*. After a couple of months at sea he disembarked at Liverpool on 20th April 1918 and was immediately posted to the AFC Training Depot at Wendover.

There is sparse detail on the nature of Smith's service in the UK. Even the AFC Official History contains little material on the nature of the AFC training organisation in the UK. Given Smith's relatively quick embarkation it can be presumed there was an urgent need for skilled mechanics. The following is of interest in describing the training of AFC mechanics and their importance:

Mechanics – the training of the mechanics of the squadrons was a highly important work. A mechanic could make or mar the efficiency of a machine in air fighting, and every successful pilot during the war learned the importance of having his machine well kept. The tradesmen of whom air-mechanics are composed are: Acetylene welders, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, fitters (engine), riggers, electricians, magneto-repairers, fitters (general), and machinists. The school at Halton Camp, where the Australian air mechanics were trained, was divided into eight technical sections ... (there follows a page-long description of the training and nature of the work)¹.

(NB to this day RAF Halton is an important training base and one of the largest Royal Air Force stations. It is located near the village of Halton, Wendover, in Buckinghamshire.)

During 1918 the AFC used the Avro 504 as a training aircraft. This was – at that time – a modern and successful design. More Avro 504s were produced during WWI than any other type, and it continued in use as a trainer throughout the 1920s and even into the 1930s. It is presumed Smith became familiar with Avro 504s at this time – it was the type he was fated to fly in Australia. However the AFC training organisation also used other types.

On 9th August 1918 Smith was posted to the AFC Nucleus Flight at Stonehenge and then on 5th November 1918 to 1st Australian Wing, Tetbury. This refers to the AFC 1st Training Wing which had a headquarters at Tetbury. This headquarters oversaw several training squadrons, but it is unclear which unit Smith was posted to.

When he arrived back in Melbourne, Smith eventually became co-owner of a civil Avro 504K with Keith Farmer. Farmer was much younger than he, and had arrived in the UK in 1917 also as a trainee AFC mechanic. However, by late 1918 Farmer had become a trainee AFC pilot. He trained on Avro 504Ks and had his first solo on 25th November 1918. His last flight in the AFC was also in an Avro 504K on 15th March 1919.

It can be surmised that Smith and Farmer came into contact at this time. Of course by now the war had ended, so both men must have been thinking of their future civilian lives in Australia. Smith is believed to have had some flying experience at this time (OH), although there is no formal record of it. Further, it is believed that he "took demobilisation in England to work in aircraft industry" (OH). The possibility of this is backed up by an only partly legible entry in his service record, which, on 3rd February 1919, refers to him remaining on the "nominal roll" of the 1st Wing at Tetbury.

¹ Cutlack p.431-433.

Finally, on 6th May 1919, Smith embarked aboard the *Kaiser-I-Hind* for the voyage back to Australia. He had been in the UK for just over 12 months. The return voyage was somewhat quicker, and he arrived back in Melbourne on 16th June. Just two weeks later, on 1st July, he was formally discharged from the AIF at the 3rd Military District (i.e. Melbourne). He was given the standard service medals for a returned member of the AIF, despite the fact he had not seen active service. No doubt reflecting bureaucratic oversight, he was awarded the 1914/15 Star (despite not commencing service until 1918!), as well as the British War Medal and Victory Medal.

Smith is understood to have returned to his former employment as a motor mechanic. He certainly remained in Melbourne as he married Florence Gertrude Smith at St. Silas Church, Albert Park, Victoria, on 17th January 1920. It is understood that his wife already had a daughter, Jeanne, from a previous relationship (OH).

Meanwhile, Keith Farmer had also arrived back in Melbourne and around 1920 he undertook a refresher flying course at Point Cook. In February 1921 Farmer purchased Avro 504K H7499, but within a very short time – on 29th March 1921 – the aircraft was damaged in a landing accident and did not fly for a long time. During this period the aircraft was registered as G-AUCY, and on 14 December 1922 the registration was in joint names of both Farmer and Smith.

Thus both men had agreed to sink their funds into the very risky business of aircraft operation, apparently under the name of “Keith Farmer’s Aerial Circus”. This was the barnstorming era, when flyers would make money out of joy flights, appearances at public events, advertising or any other method they could dream up. There was some physical risk attached to the flying itself, but the financial risk was extreme. If the aircraft was damaged it would not earn income until it was repaired, and there was no insurance if it was written off.

A week after the new registration – on 21st December 1922 – G-AUCY took to the air again for the first time in almost two years. Possibly Smith and Farmer had spent much of this period planning and saving to get the aircraft operational again. Presumably Smith initially acted as a mechanic for Farmer, but it seems Smith was interested in flying too. Then on 2nd February 1923 Smith purchased G-AUCY outright, and named it *Skylark*. Farmer may have lacked funds for investment in the aircraft. There had been no falling out between the two – they continued joyriding operations throughout Victoria during the first half of 1923 with Farmer doing the piloting.

Smith obtained his own pilot’s licence in June 1923, and from around that date took over the piloting, now with the aid of a “youthful” mechanic named W.J.R. Ambery. Farmer, meanwhile, had other plans: he went back to Point Cook and obtained a commercial pilot’s licence in July 1923, and the following year travelled to the USA. Among Smith’s operations in late 1923 was a contract to give a joy flight to each buyer in a land sale campaign, in a new town planned for Victoria’s Western District. This was typical of such barnstorming operations: the aircraft was used to attract attention to a commercial scheme.

In late 1923 Smith returned to Adelaide in G-AUCY with Ambery. A possible reason was to get away from his wife, as his marriage was in difficulty. It is believed she attempted to follow him to Adelaide (OH). His domestic situation would not be resolved until the 1930s.

What was the aviation scene like in Adelaide when Smith arrived in late 1923? The Royal Flying Corps veteran, Captain Harry Butler, had been active from 1919 in several well known aerial ventures. From 1920 some joy flight operations had been conducted from Glenelg. Albert Park aerodrome had been set up by Butler, and he operated it until it was compulsorily acquired by the Commonwealth in 1921.² In early 1922 Butler crashed near his home town of Minlaton and ceased his aviation activities. Albert Park subsequently became a government aerodrome, and it was there that Smith flew into in late 1923.

The Commonwealth Civil Aviation Branch issued pilot's licences but by May 1923, just four "South Australian" licences were current (other pilots, such as Smith, presumably had interstate licences as he was not on the list).³ Thus there were very few pilots active in SA, and there is evidence that just as Smith arrived in Adelaide the local aviation scene had started to wane. After a few years of high profile flights and some locally based "barnstormers" the initial burst of public interest had faded. What was needed was not just a talented pilot, but one with a flair for business and publicity.

Enter Bill Smith. On New Year's Day 1924 Adelaideans were met with the local newspaper headline "NORWOOD AVIATOR – Pilot Smith Arrives – May Carry Passengers". Clearly this was a pre-arranged media stunt – indeed in the article Smith admits to having left Melbourne a fortnight prior (although providing joy flights at towns en route). Thus he had probably flown into Adelaide already and arranged a deal with the newspaper for a high profile New Years Day arrival. He boasted of flying from Taillem Bend to "Woodville" (Albert Park) in just sixty five minutes. Further, he advised the reporter that the Avro 504K had recently been "classed by civil aviation authorities as the finest machine of its type in Australia".

Probably Smith made a clever arrangement for publicity and sponsorship with this newspaper, the Adelaide paper *The News*. A number of articles featured his activities in January 1924 and there is a photo (undated) with this newspapers' logo painted on his aircraft.



Believed to be Smith with G-AUCY at Albert Park Aerodrome. The News logo identifies this as being from his South Australian period.

² <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/butler-henry-john-5446>

³ Information from Nigel Daw, via email to author January 2013

Just two weeks later another article described him as “one of the best-known commercial aviators in Australia”. Smith had taken onboard a newspaper photographer and flown over the Test Match at Adelaide Oval. This was said to be the first aerial photos of a cricket match in Australia and was a big feature in the newspaper over two consecutive days. Smith said he had decided to remain in Adelaide to give joy flights, and had flown as many as 30 passengers on a recent day.

It seems Smith did not mind talking himself up. The article described the land sale campaign over The Grampians, which was over land “previously prohibited for the carriage of passengers”. He claimed having flown 3,500 miles (!) and said that Col. Brinsmead (Controller of Civil Aviation) had “personally congratulated” him for the feat – most unlikely. He also described having to land on the way to Adelaide for petrol, when a large Kangaroo jumped towards his plane and was killed by the propeller – this would be a favourite story repeated in later years.

The newspaper publicity continued on 26th January 1924 in an article titled “Aeroplane v. Hydroplane” and featuring a large photo of G-AUCY flying over a crowded Henley Beach jetty. Smith had organised a race between seven “hydroplanes” and his aircraft, over a course of 20 miles. This involved an unknown number of laps, probably back and forth along the coast with the Henley Beach jetty being one of the turning points. Smith apparently flew close in to shore at a height of barely 20 feet. According to Wikipedia: A hydroplane (or hydro, or thunderboat) is a fast motorboat, where the hull shape is such that at speed, the weight of the boat is supported by planing forces, rather than simple buoyancy.

Smith was probably being over-enthusiastic in claiming seven hydroplanes would participate. Four were apparently unable to leave the Port River “owing to rough weather”. However the names of three other participants were given. The boats were given a one lap head-start but Smith was able to win easily: “there was no comparison in speed, as the boats appeared to the spectators on shore to be standing still.”

Then there was a setback. The next day contained another article “*Skylark* Damaged - New Parts to be Purchased”. When about to take off on the last joy flight of the day from Henley Beach, Smith was taxiing at 30 miles per hour when the aircraft swerved and went into the ocean. The propeller was smashed along with parts of the undercarriage. It is probable that this was a simple accident. Possibly one wheel hit rough or dry sand forcing the aircraft to swerve. However Smith had another explanation and the newspaper praised his “presence of mind in preventing a serious accident”. Smith said he was taxiing the plane when the “crowd rushed forward. There was no chance of stopping the machine ... I had the option of running into the spectators or turning into the water. I took the latter course, and the machine ended on its nose in two feet of water.”

The wings were removed from the aircraft and it was towed back to Albert Park. Smith praised two mounted constables for protecting the aircraft from the crowd. He planned to take the express train back to Melbourne and return with parts. Surely thinking of future business, Smith talked down the damage and said the accident was “not due to any defect in the machine”.

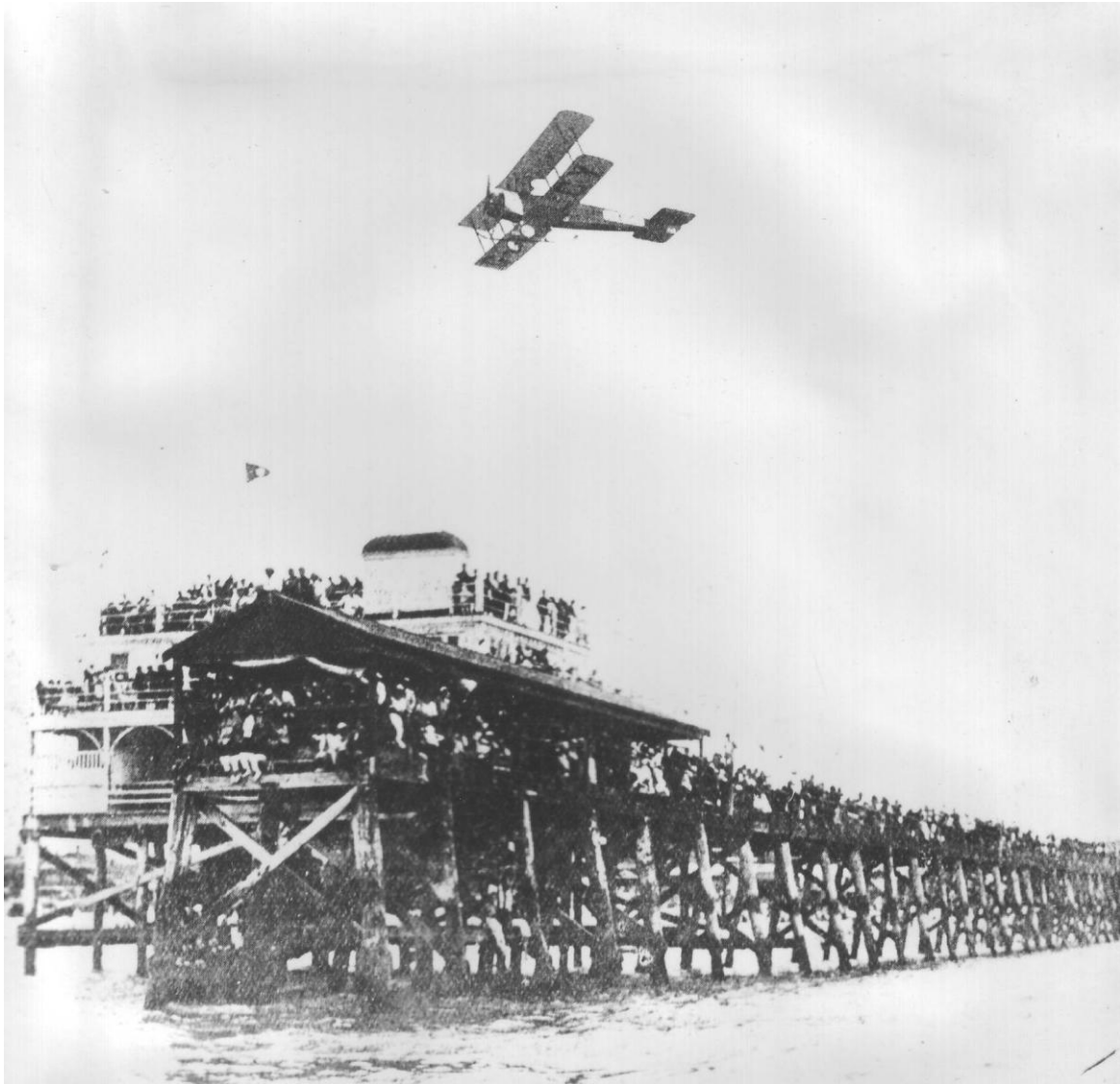


Photo believed to have come from a newspaper archives of G-AUCY over the Henley jetty during the "regatta" when he raced hydroplanes (the original is photo-film rather than newsprint).

It is not known how long it took to get G-AUCY repaired, or if Smith had financial difficulty in doing so. However, it is quite likely there was some significant delay, as the brief flurry of media articles now ceases for almost 18 months.

Thus it is not until mid-1925 that there is direct evidence once again of Smith's aerial activities. This is another publicity stunt – again connected with Adelaide Oval. However it was to be the event for which Smith was most remembered – and would be recounted in some detail in a newspaper article decades later in the 1980s.

Australian Rules Football games are begun by bouncing a ball in the centre square. Smith's idea was to bounce the ball by dropping it from the air. Photos show a large crowd in attendance – a later newspaper article quoted a figure of 45,000. Smith cruised nearby as the start time approached, waiting for a signal from the central umpire. Smith then made three approaches before the ball was dropped, aiming for a white circle placed in the centre of the playing field. It seemed the ball landed some distance from the centre square – perhaps on the half forward line towards the Cathedral End.

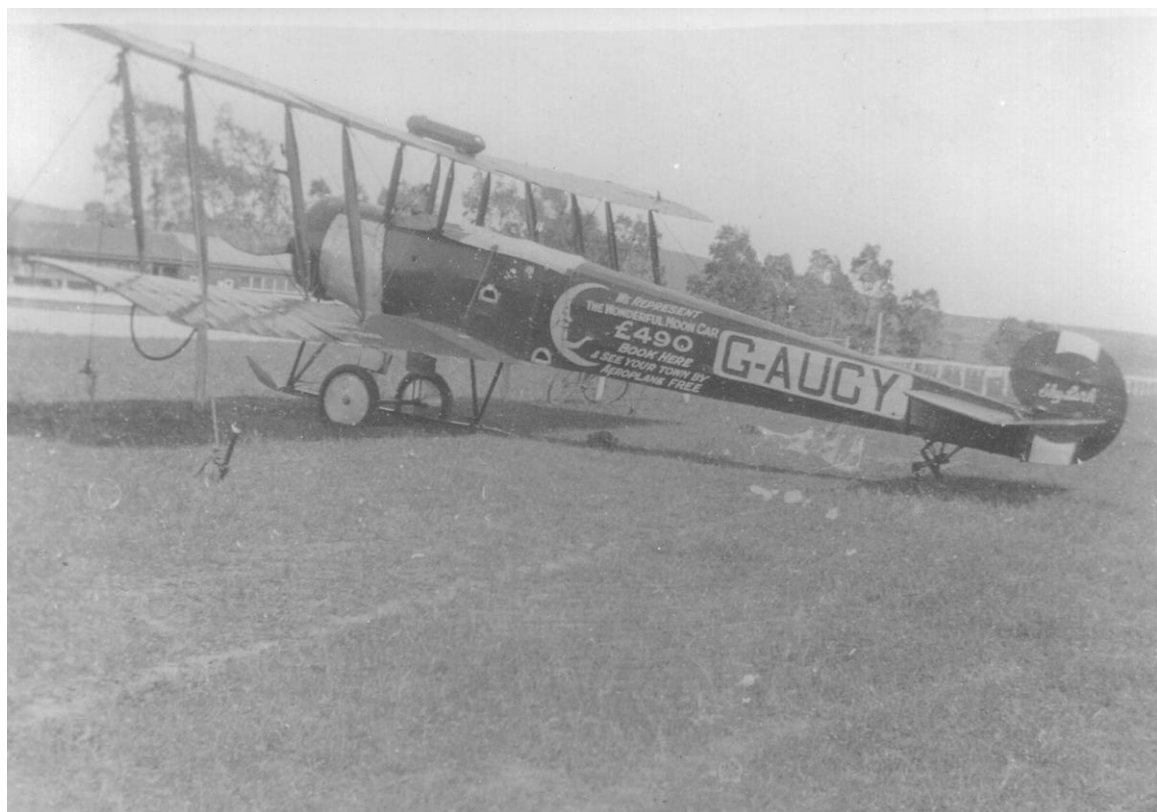
However, the game did begin with the bounce from the air – he was not just delivering the match ball. Notably this was not a league game but a charity match, involving “Veterans versus League teams”. The date was 20th June 1925.

Spectators mention that Smith dived steeply and then climbed up over the grandstands. The grandstands were along the western side of the oval. It may sound more dangerous flying towards them but this would have been flying into the prevailing south-westerly wind. Probably Smith was keen to maximise the visual spectacle of the stunt also. Not surprisingly, the newspaper article trumpeted this feat as being a first “in the history of football”.

One other story about Smith’s activities is that he taught a Miss Marjorie E Burford of Kirkcaldy (which is believed to be an Adelaide suburb name no longer in use) to fly. She was described by *The News* as the “the first woman aviator in Australia”. As it is attributed to *The News* it might relate to his association with that newspaper in early 1924 - but this article does not appear in the same list of newspaper articles in Helen Crossman’s file. Otherwise Charles Schaedel has noted this honour of first Australian woman aviator is more usually attributed to Mrs F Taylor who flew a glider in 1909 or Mrs M M Bryant who obtained her pilot’s licence in 1927.

Unfortunately nothing else is known about Smith’s feats for the subsequent months, although it seems likely he remained active in Adelaide and probably regional South Australia as well. Another – also undated – picture of G-AUCY has the following advertising on the fuselage:

We Represent
The Wonderful Moon Car
£490
Book Here and See Your Town by Aeroplane Free



G-AUCY with Moon Motors advertising. From R Blum collection

This must have been another enterprising advertising deal struck up by Smith. Moon Motor Car was an American automobile manufacturer that operated until 1930. Smith wrecked his plane in November 1925 and this advertisement was still visible on the twisted fuselage – so it must have dated from the second half of 1925.

On 3rd November 1925 Smith was conducting joy flight operations from the town of Burra, north of Adelaide. The engine of *Skylark* suffered ignition failure and it crashed near Koorunga. Fortunately Smith and his two passengers, Mr H Tiver and Miss E Sims, suffered only minor injuries. Photos show a well wrecked aircraft: G-AUCY on her back with a snapped fuselage, crushed wings and broken tail fin. The aircraft was never rebuilt.

And Smith never flew again. This underlines the risky nature of his operation: he was probably unable to rebuild G-AUCY for financial reasons even if he wanted to. Otherwise perhaps he wanted to move on to more secure employment? It is understood he became a land broker (OH). Formal records of what he did in the next decade, however, are not available.



Two views of G-AUCY crashed near Burra in 1925. It would appear that Smith and his passengers were lucky to walk away with only minor injuries.



By the mid-1930s he was back in Victoria briefly to clean up his affairs. On 27th June 1934 the Supreme Court of Victoria heard his request for divorce. His wife failed to respond, and divorce was granted on the basis of the wife having deserted for at least 3 years. It appears some expense went into the hearing as a number of witnesses were called. However, the following year he was still attending to documents and details relating to the divorce. He gave his address as 8 Watson Avenue Rose Park.

While operating from Albert Park he boarded with two old ladies at the Rose Park address: Miss Aish and Miss Aish. Probably years earlier he would have virtually walked past this location on the way to the Sturt Street School he attended. After some time the Aish ladies died and left the house to him – evidence, seemingly, of his charisma. Decades later, Helen Crossman got Burnside Council to name the lane that runs behind Watson Avenue “Aviator Lane”.

The first definite information about Smith’s post-aviation activities is in 1937 when documents survive regarding *Smith, Fenton & Miller Ltd* who operated a fruit business from the old East End markets in Adelaide. This appears to be a business of some significance, judging by the letterhead and various surviving documents that concern changes of share ownership. Finally, in 1955, Smith sold his own interests in the company. Probably this was a necessity on him reaching retirement age (65 years).

Smith did not serve again in WWII but worked in an official capacity visiting factories and assessing which employees were fit for war service (OH).

On 12th April 1941 Smith married Ethel Vera Conroy (also divorced) at Brougham Place, North Adelaide. Both gave their existing residential address as 8 Watson Avenue Rose Park. Smith was 51 years old.

Bill Smith passed away on 16th March 1962 aged 71. There is a headstone for W.F.E. Smith in the West Terrace Cemetery in Adelaide that carries the epitaph “you are the wind beneath my wings”.

This is not intended to be a definitive biography of Bill Smith. Rather it is written with access to accessible documents donated by Helen Crossman or otherwise held in the SAAM archive. One intention is to give proper context to the Brokenmouth essay, and hopefully leave a much improved account of Bill Smith and his pioneering aviation activities in South Australia. It is recognised that there are various sources that could be checked much more thoroughly, so this record should be treated as a starting point only by future researchers.

Updated by Peter Ingman
History Group Member
South Australian Aviation Museum Inc
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Particular Sources:

Oral History: (OH) this has mostly been taken from previous essays written by Robert Brokenmouth, but it has been limited to some basic facts. In March 2013 Neil Laidler read this essay to Helen Crossman and she did not dispute any of these facts, although she is in a hospice following cancer treatment.

WFE Smith file held in SAAM archives. This includes multiple newspaper cuttings featuring Smith circa 1925-26; also single page histories of Smith and Keith Farmer written by aviation historian Keith Schaedel. In early 2013 Helen Crossman's personal records were added to this file. It includes Smiths wedding certificates and some business records.

Emails from Nigel Daw regarding early SA aviation

Cutlack, E.M. The Australian Flying Corps, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1923