

Jacob Brodbeck: Flying Under the Radar

By Michael Barr

Did Jacob Brodbeck fly before the Wright Brothers? On that subject, the only thing people agree on is that they can't agree on anything.

Born in Germany in 1821, Brodbeck sailed to Texas in 1846. That difficult journey caused him to give some serious thought to the subject of transportation. There had to be a better way to travel than aboard a tiny, crowded, slow-moving, scurvy-infested sailing ship, pitching and yawing its way across the Atlantic.

Brodbeck's interest in flight took off while watching birds, and that interest became an obsession. He taught school in Fredericksburg and San Antonio but spent every spare moment designing and building models of flying machines.

Sources say he had the right demeanor for a man facing a nearly impossible task. People who knew him described him as hard-nosed, intelligent, compulsive and determined. He tackled every problem head on. When he needed money to build a full-size model, he went public, selling shares for \$1.25.

His full-scale airship had 2 wings, a steering rudder and a screw propeller powered by a coiled spring. In Germany, Brodbeck perfected a spring for self-winding watches. That device proved useful as a power source in the days before internal combustion engines.

The most popular story says he first flew in 1865, 38 years before the Wrights. Some accounts say the airship flew a short distance and crashed causing Brodbeck to lose his financial backers.

Where the flight took place is also in question. Some reports say he flew at San Pedro Springs Park in San Antonio. Other accounts say the event took place at Dr. Ferdinand Herff's place near Boerne. Still other stories say the flight carried him over a tree and across a field near Luckenbach. A final theory says Brodbeck flew several times over a 30-year period, possibly at different locations.

The most persuasive evidence that Jacob Brodbeck really did fly before the Wright Brothers came from Norman J. Dietel, editor and publisher of the Fredericksburg Radio Post. In the August 21, 1975, edition of the Radio Post, Dietel interviewed Richard Brehmer, a former Luckenbach resident, then 88 years old. Brehmer claimed to have watched Brodbeck fly his airship in 1895 across a field, 3 miles south of Luckenbach.

As Brehmer watched, Brodbeck took his position in the airship and spent the next few minutes arduously winding the spring that powered the propeller. When wound tight and ready to go, Brodbeck told the crowd to stand back. Then he spoke to Brehmer who had wandered a little too close. "Knabe . . . geh aus den weg," (Boy . . . get out of the way).

"When Brodbeck released a lock which freed the wound-up spring," Brehmer continued, "the plane whipped up a small cloud of dust and Brodbeck's long beard parted and blew over his shoulders." Then the flying machine began to move.

"The craft rose quickly," Brehmer said. It flew "over a 10 to 12-foot Post Oak tree" before "coming down and sort of coming to a sudden termination (but not exactly crashing) about another 50 steps beyond the tree." According to Brehmer, the airship traveled about 100 ft., not a great distance, but far enough in the minds of some people to qualify as a flight.

Jacob Brodbeck left only a few records of his experiences as an aeronaut when he died in 1910. Years earlier while touring the country to raise money, someone stole his papers and his blueprints.

What happened to Brodbeck's airship? Accounts vary. Most reports say it went up in flames. One story suggests Jacob burned it in a fit of frustration. Another story says Jacob's wife secretly torched it hoping to keep her wayward husband around the house. Still another story says his neighbors set it ablaze believing powered flight to be a form of witchcraft.

Did something happen in the skies over Gillespie County all those years ago? Did Jacob Brodbeck fly before the Wright Brothers? It's a debate that may never end.