

GEE BEE MODEL Y SPORTSTER

Ron Peterka

Almost every aviation enthusiast recognizes the barrel fuselage of the Granville Brothers R-1 or R-2 racers. With red and white trim and absurd proportions compared to every other race plane of the day. The fantastic speed of the racers captured imaginations around the world. Air race designers, builders and fearless pilots were the rock stars of the 1920's and 30's. The prize money and prestige of the air races around the United States was a huge incentive and more than one designer or pilot depended on race winnings to bolster or survive during the Great Depression of 1929.

The five Granville brothers began the Granville Brothers Aviation Co with an advanced design biplane with side-by-side seating and numerous interchangeable components. In the early 1930's the company was struggling and the decision was made to try and capture some of the many air racing cash prizes. They designed what was to become a series of single place low wing sport aircraft that used various small engines that could enter the class races and have a good chance to win. These early designs were called the "Sportsters" and used four cylinder inline and small radial engines.

Race pilot Lowell Bayles was attempting a World Speed Record in a grossly overpowered Sportster with a huge Pratt & Whitney 1340 cu inch engine when films show the fuel cap directly in front of the pilot's canopy came off and hit the pilot in the face. His involuntary jerk on the control stick caused a pitch-up that overloaded the wing support structure and the plane spiraled into the ground at over 200 MPH.

In spite of this loss, the Granville's decided to build a two seat Senior Sportster called the Model "Y" that was just slightly larger than the earlier single seat aircraft. They built two, one with a Pratt & Whitney 300 HP 'Wasp' engine for Maud Tate, a well-known woman racer, and the other with a 215 HP Lycoming R-680 radial engine. This engine was soon replaced for racing by a new owner with a 420 HP Wright "Whirlwind" and flown by Florence Klingensmith. She was killed when, during a pylon race, a portion of the right wing's covering began to come off the aircraft at low altitude and the plane crashed.

All of the Sportsters were fast, easy to fly, and to a degree, aerobatic enough to win aerobatic contests.



The Model Y being prepped for an air race around 1932

The final aircraft series built by the Granville Brothers were the “Super Sportsters” with the now familiar barrel shaped teardrop fuselages. The X, R-1, and the R-2 were all out race machines. One with a slightly smaller engine for the longer distance Bendix cross-country races and the other with a larger engine for the Thompson Trophy pylon races held in Cleveland each year. Jimmy Doolittle flew the R-1 to first place in the 1932 Thompson race.

Zanford “Granny” Granville was killed flying his personal Model E Sportster while attempting a landing in poor weather and visibility. As he lined up on final approach he found workmen and equipment on the runway. When he applied throttle for a go-around the engine quit and the airplane was demolished with fatal results for the pilot.

An Era had ended. There were still two Granville long distance racers on the drawing board, only one of which got built after the company had been dissolved.

The TOTAL number of airplanes the Granville Brothers turned out was twenty-two. Nine of those were the early biplanes and the rest were sport and racing aircraft that captured the attention of the World.

The only known Gee Bee aircraft part is a Model E right wing on display at the EAA museum in Oshkosh WI.

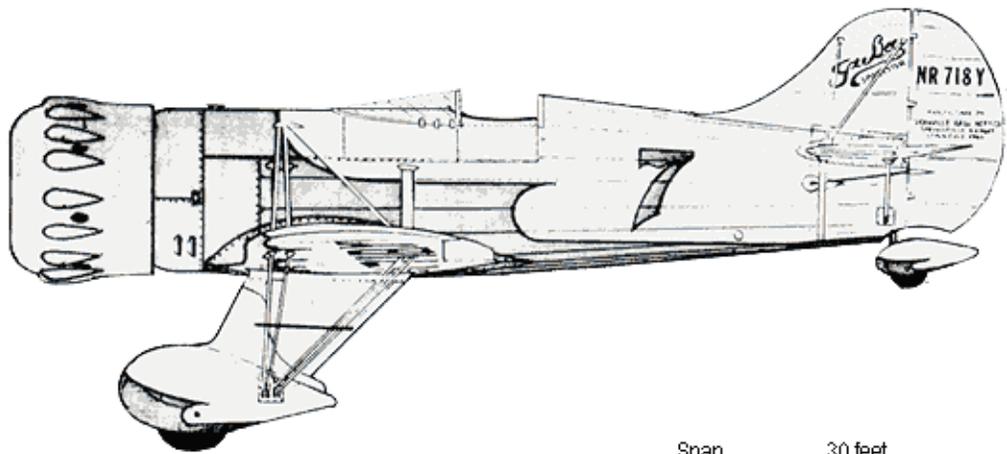
Today, several replicas exist and my favorite is the Model Y flown by Florence Klingensmith. Ken Flaglor built a replica with a slightly different engine configuration, but the only external variation is the exhaust stack exiting the left side of the fuselage

While the original aircraft spent most of its life in red & white company colors, Ken chose to use a 'temporary' paint job that was used on the aircraft when it was being prepped for the 1932 race season with the white replaced by a light tan color. The replica was issued the registration number N718L where the original had N718Y. The race number 7 is used on the replica.



I have built 1 ½ models of the Y from Henry Hafke plans. A building error built in 1 ½ degrees between the wings and the plane was unmanageable to trim. The wings were cut in half and put back together properly, but it has not been test flown since. The one-half is an unfinished version of the same plane in rough framing at this time.

Today, various size ARFs are around, none very scale, but most having excellent flying performance. I am currently considering plans for a 1:4.5 version with an 84 inch span.



Y Model

Span.....30 feet
Length.....21 feet
Motor.....215 hp Lycoming R-680
Weight.....1400 lbs



end

August 2014