

Dr. William Greene Mason - Dentist - Aviator



From a very early age, William Greene lived and breathed a desire to fly. His first attempt at flight came before he was 12 years old, when he jumped from the second story of a building using an umbrella to slow his descent. Only the prompt action of a neighbour saved young Bill Greene from his first test flight crash disaster. For the next 28 years, William Greene continued on this quest. His major aim and passion was aviation.

For the last 40 years of his life, he didn't even admit he knew how to fly. He quietly practiced dentistry in the Peace River country, enjoying pursuits such as hunting, trapping, dog sled races, and entertaining his fellow citizens. Only occasionally did he travel to his other world to visit his family in the United States or attend meetings of the Early Birds of Aviation, a club with a membership of people who had flown before 1916.

The last 40 years of his life he never piloted a plane and seldom talked about his accomplishments. Neighbors and friends didn't even realize that their dentist Doc Green had been one of the first, and one of the best.

Born to a wealthy San Francisco family in 1872, Bill Greene led a fairly privileged life - private schools, vacations at Monterey, the paradise spot partly developed by his own father, and for cultural variety and fun, visits to and from his uncle Clay Greene, co-founder and for many years "shepherd" of the famous Lambs Club in New York.

All this privilege apparently didn't go to Bill's head for he finished University with two degrees, one in medicine and one in dentistry.

He did his first actual flying with man lifting kites. These he constructed himself and got his friends to pull them in such a way that they lifted briefly and carried him for a long "hop." In 1902, after he had finished University, he drifted down to the Central American countries, not sure of his destination but more and more interested in the whole puzzle of flight. In Guatemala City, he was helped out by some scavenger buzzards, a species that particularly infested that city, by closely observing their flight. He made some aerodynamic decisions and decided to build himself a balloon.

The first flight was made in the state of Chipas, Mexico. Its length is not a matter of record, but the fact that the balloon split and tumbled its passenger out on the fourth trip is known. By this time, news of the glider experiments going on at Kitty Hawk filtered down to Bill Greene in Central America, so he left for New York to see what the Wright brothers were up to.

That was the beginning of a tremendous rivalry between the Wrights, Glenn Curtiss and Dr. Greene for "firsts" in the field of aviation. The problem was money to back the necessary experiments and Dr. Greene's rivals had better luck than he in mounting support. He did, however, get a factory established in Rochester where he constructed a number of "Greene" biplanes.

There is a record on file that a craft built by William Greene, then the treasurer of the US Aeronautic Society, had a wing span of 40'0" and was powered by three props, two tractors, and one pusher. There is no record of whether the flight of this aircraft was successful.

It seemed that something always went wrong at the last minute for Dr. Greene. In 1909, he built a machine to compete for the \$10,000 prize offered by a New York newspaper for the first flight from Albany to New York, but just before the plane was quite finished, he heard that Glenn Curtiss was ready to go. Promptly, Dr. Greene went to New York and was there in time to wish his rival good luck and hold his machine for the take off. Curtiss won the money.

Then in 1910, Greene planned to take part in the Belmont Air Meet, but one of his planes crashed just before the Meet and another could not be finished in time. He did fly in the Meet, but he had to fly other people's machines.

All of Dr. Greene's machines were biplanes and all but one had the controls in front. As for the instruments, it didn't take up much space. A string tied to a strut formed a sort of altimeter. When the string fluttered on a horizontal plane, the airplane was on an even keel; if it fluttered above the plane, then the craft was descending, and it fluttered below, the plane was climbing.

Dr. Greene was keen on string experiments - maybe that's all he could afford. In an effort to prove that there was a vacuum on the top of the wing, he attached a number of silk cords to the top, and these obligingly stood up for him in flight, thus proving his point that some lift is in the top surface.

He also experimented, along with all the other anxious aviators, with problems of lateral stability, ailerons and how to cut down non-effectual head resistance. He didn't join the other aviators, however, in the race to make the sharpest possible cutting edge. He knew from his buzzard watching days that the cutting edge is not a decisive factor in flight - witness the edge on today's planes.

What he soon realized was that the engine was going to be the most important flight factor. At one point he argued that he could make a wooden desk fly if there were enough power behind it. But it was almost impossible to get engines for the biplanes. A factory which produced engines suitable for small planes was completely committed to the Curtiss outfit, and no amount of money could buy one from a competitor. So Greene ended up using marine or automobile engines which were heavy and not very powerful - a ration of approximately 25-30 horsepower for 350-400 pounds of weight.

Many years later when Dr. Greene was interviewed in Edmonton, he paid tribute to the airworthiness of those early planes, in spite of their unsophisticated machinery. "I am just wondering," he said, "whether modern designers are not sacrificing efficiency of the airplane to speed. In my opinion, they are depending too much on motive power to support the craft and pull it through space. That's all right, except when the power fails," he said.

His planes had a gliding ratio of 1-14, or a glide of fourteen feet to every one foot drop. When the power failed, as it often did, he could usually glide to a safe landing.

Writing about the flight of a Greene biplane, J. deJara Almonte said in an aeronautical magazine, "The flight of the day had two noticeable features, the most important of which was probably the short run required before the machine rose into the air. In the first trial, the aviator had run along the track only a scant 50 yards before he elevated his forward rudders and the machine rose gracefully from the ground for a flight of 250 feet. The other feature remarked by the spectators was the remarkable smoothness with which the biplane went through the air. There was a total absence of the undulating motion so noticeable in the flights of the Wright machines, and there was a general impression that the Greene machine would be easily controlled. This impression was strengthened when Dr. Greene waved one hand to the spectators while in the air."

But flying was still very dangerous and in spite of the daredevil spirit of it all, the men were cautious. Dr. Greene recalled that, "I have seen the Wright brothers, Curtiss and the rest, as well as myself, go out on the race track or field - there were no flying fields then as there are today - and suspend a handkerchief. If it fluttered, we would shake our heads and say, "No, too much wind for flying today."

In 1909, Greene expanded his flying experience and tried a dirigible. It was powered by a motorcycle engine and the controls were casual, to say the least. To descend, the operator would run forward and tip the nose down; to ascend, he'd go the other way.

Greene also accompanied two other men who were seeking to set an endurance record in an international balloon contest. They started out at North Adams, Mass., drifted over Boston and out over the Atlantic. In order to get back to land, they had to drop to 300 feet before they caught a current and were able to regain land.

However, all the enthusiasm, courage and interest in the world couldn't pay the bills and by 1910, Bill Greene had pretty well exhausted his resources and those of his friends and family. He was broken in spirit and body - he'd lost badly at the Belmont Meet and he'd injured himself seriously in a crash - so he went from one extreme to another.

As to exactly when Dr. Greene made his first airplane flight, and whether he was third or eighth or whatever, is hard to say. Dr. Greene himself said he thought he'd built planes that "hopped" pretty well in 1907. A letter written by Dr. Greene in 1918, quotes the year 1906, which would

have made him the third man in the world to fly. Other sources such as the May 22, 1910, issue of the New York Sun, place him solidly in the top eight. The article states, "The only American machines that have made successful flights are the Wright, Curtiss-Herring, Greene, Pfitzner, and Herring-Burgess airplanes. Besides the Wright brothers, the only other aviators in this country are Curtiss, Williard, Dr. Greene, Hamilton and Pfitzner."

Other of his flight records are more accurately established. In 1909, flying one of his own biplanes, he established a world record for quick starting, getting into the air after a run of only 30 feet. That same year, he flew with three passengers and set a record for that.

The books don't say too much about his last record, but it should be noted that Dr. Greene was able to stay out of all the legal hassles that attended those first few years of intense rivalry in the aviation business. One article put it this way, "Nearly every machine that can get off the ground in this country has been enjoined by the courts."

Dr. Greene's downfall came through the lack of money and salesmanship. "I am no businessman and never was," he admitted years later. "Salesmanship is the greatest force in the world and if you haven't got it, it doesn't make much difference whether you have anything else," he said.

In 1911, he travelled to Canada and found his way by railway to Edmonton and then to the settlement of Peace River. From there, he travelled another 300 miles, this time by oxen team, to Hudson Hope in the Peace River area of British Columbia. He lived there for four years with his wife and family as just plain "Bill Greene," trapping and homesteading and living a life about as different from his former life as anything could be.

The Greene's daughter Ursula was born while they were in the north. In fact, she was supposed to have been born in Edmonton but she came en route; thus she first saw the light of day in a small room above a saloon in Grouard, Alberta, which at that time was a Hudson Bay post. In a 1943 Star Weekly article, Ursula (who became a movie actress called Toni Crane) was said to have driven her own team of dogs, felled trees, blazed trails and caught a lynx: while living the life of a pioneer in Hudson Hope.



Mrs. (W.M.) Evangeline Greene on her 92nd birthday, in Florida.

When news of the war finally filtered up to Hudson Hope, Dr. Greene came out right away and enlisted with the Royal Flying Corps in Toronto. They discovered his age, however, and rejected his offer. He then went back to the United States and was appointed research officer in charge at Kelly Field, the largest flying field then in the United States.

Eventually, he ended up in Toul, France, with the Second U.S. Army Air Service, and in the course of his service there, he devised an automatic cut-out switch for the de Haviland airplanes. Up until that time, the de Havilands had been known as flying coffins because of their tendency to burst into flames upon crashing.

In 1922 after the war, he came back to Canada and the Peace River country, although he settled for the comparatively civilized town of Peace River rather than head into the far north and Hudson Hope. He never flew a plane again, and described himself merely as an interested onlooker in the developing aviation field.

While in Peace River, Dr. Greene helped organize and stage several musical operettas including "Journeys End" and "China Shop" in which Dr. Greene was the Stage Director, and his competing dentist, Dr. Lesley Robinson, who had arrived in Peace River in 1925, was the Musical Director. An article from the Edmonton Journal, January 23, 1930 reads: "Arrangements for the production of the greatest war play, 'Journey's End', in Peace River are now practically completed. In view of the nature of the pay it was unanimously felt that all principals in the cast should be selected from those who had actual experience in the trenches, and a result the following cast as submitted by Dr. Greene and S. Grimwood was approved: Frank Smith, J.A. Caw, S. Grimwood, W.H. Thorne, Collison, Gibson, Copeland, Clarke and Young. No detail will be left out to ensure the success of the pay here. The stage management will be in the very capable hands of Dr. W. Greene, whose previous record along these lines has been a magnificent success."

Dr. Greene also had a large horse-drawn van which he fitted up as a magic show and toured the Peace River Region. He favoured an "Oriental" theme as a magician and put on many acts with his daughter Ursula as his assistant who also playing the part of the girl who was sawed in half.

Dr. Robinson recalled that shortly after he arrived in Peace River, he found Dr. Greene in the lobby of the Peace River Hotel, trying to thaw frozen cocaine and other solutions above the large heater so that he could treat patients. At a later date, when both dentists were slightly better established, Dr. Robinson ordered a small sign to be put up in front of his office. Dr. Robinson's sign was not ready, when Dr. Greene ordered and installed a very large sign for his office using the same blue colour. When Dr. Robinson's sign was hung, Dr. Greene protested to the town that Dr. Robinson was copying him!

Dr. Greene settled down to be a dentist and a good citizen, and was a colourful character in Peace River. He obviously had an itchy foot and would sometimes disappear for months without warning on long trips. Sometimes trapping, sometimes making a tour as an itinerant dentist, and other times to visit the US. He was cynical at times, and was apparently quite temperamental when it came to certain topics concerning dentistry, but he was considered to be a warm hearted man, and a great asset to Peace River.

As to why he stayed in northern Canada, Dr. Greene is quoted as saying, "It's a grand country. Mountain sheep to hunt, bears, deer, moose, everything. There's a whole world to range when you're in the mood. I can close up the office and go away for months with a tent, some grub and a gun. That's happiness."

Long time residents of Peace River recall the dog sled races that were held on the streets of the town. The race would begin at the top of the main street, near what is now a Hotel, loop around, and the final leg would be from the bottom of the hill, near what is now the shopping mall, back to the start. Dr. Greene, had two rather unusual dogs that he had trained to pull his dog sled for

when he travelled to other communities during the winter, and he would enter them in the race with his daughter Ursula as the driver. With the two non-traditional dogs pulling the sled, and a young girl driving, Dr. Greene's team was not considered to be the favourite. However, when the dogs turned the corner at the bottom of the street, Dr. Greene would whistle and the dogs would take off like a shot, passing any team that happened to be ahead of them, and came in first.

Dr. Greene thought so much of the northland that he and another Peace River old-timer, Norman Soars, persuaded the government to preserve a parcel of land up and down the valley from Peace River town for several miles. Known now as the Greene Valley Game Preserve, the land perpetuates his memory.

Dr. Greene died of a stroke on August 28, 1952, in Edmonton, Alberta. After his death, his wife Evangeline, moved to North Carolina in the United States to be with her daughter Ursula and her son-in-law Robert Reinhart. The Reinharts and Mrs. Greene eventually settled in Key Biscayne Florida where Mrs. Greene became well known for her painting. At the tender age of 91 in 1965, she celebrated her birthday with a show of her paintings at the Key Biscayne Community Church.



Therein lies the enigma of Bill Greene. He started off in the clouds, set all sorts of records, made all sorts of achievements in that area, but is remembered by very few. He returned to the earth, lived a quiet and quite unremarkable life in some ways, but ended up with a piece of the beautiful Peace River valley named for him, something which will commemorate for all time his name and memory. His wife continued after his death, barely remembered even by the people of Peace River, but accomplished in her own way as Dr. Greene

was in his.

As a memorial to Dr. Greene, a stone cairn is located on a hill above Peace River with a bronze plaque commemorating his contributions to the community and to the organizations to which he belonged.

The plaque on the cairn reads;



IN MEMORY OF
WILLIAM GREENE M.D. D.D.S.
SAN FRANCISCO - MAY 2, 1874
EDMONTON - AUGUST 28, 1952
ONE OF THE FIRST TO FLY
INVENTOR
EXPLORER
PIONEER
TO LIVE IN THE HEARTS
OF THOSE WE LOVE
IS NOT TO DIE

The plaque has several emblems surrounding the text, including the Square and Compasses.

At the bottom of the plaque for Dr. Greene is a smaller plaque honouring his wife, which reads;

“Mary Evangeline
Hilliard Greene.
07 Nov. 1872 Waterloo Ont.
21 Aug. 1972 Miami Fl.
Lifetime Companion.”

NAME		PEACE RIVER LODGE NO. 89, A. F. & A. M. PEACE RIVER, ALBERTA.	LODGE REG. NO.	C. LODGE NO.
Green William			51	10864
DATE OF BIRTH	PETITION RECEIVED	MEMBERSHIP BY DIMIT		
38/2 May 79	11 July 17	ELECTED		
CITY, TOWN, STATE.	ELECTION	LODGE INITIATED IN		
San Francisco, Cal.	8 Aug. 17	LOCATION		
OCCUPATION	INITIATION	LODGE LAST MEMBER OF		
Dentist	8 Aug. 17	LOCATION		
RESIDENCE	PASSING	LODGE LAST MEMBER OF		
Hudsons Hope	8 Feb. 18	LOCATION		
DEATH DATE.	RAISING	LODGE LAST MEMBER OF		
28 Aug. 1952	8 Feb. 18	LOCATION		
WHERE BORN, TOWN	OMITTED	SUSPENDED, U. C.	SUSPENDED, N. P. D.	
Edmonton,				
STATE	EXPELLED	REINSTATED, 1	REINSTATED, 2	
Alberta,				
CAUSE OF DEATH	REMARKS			
Stroke				
OFFICE SPECIALTY 87818 12-8-17				

That Dr. Greene was involved with the Masonic Lodge in Peace River is well-known among Masons in the area. While a resident of Hudson Hope, he petitioned Peace River Lodge on July 11, 1917, was elected to receive the degrees of Masonry and initiated on August 8, 1917.

Records indicate that he was passed and raised on the same evening of February 8,

1918. This is very likely due to the distance from Hudson Hope and Peace River, and the difficult travel at that time in history. His exact involvement with Peace River Lodge, offices he may have held and other information has been lost as the records of the Peace River Lodge were destroyed in a disastrous fire that nearly destroyed the entire downtown of Peace River.

One past District Deputy Grand Master, Gordon Paul, who served District 13 in 1988, grew up with Ursula Greene, and recalls his father going to Masonic meetings with Dr. Greene. In fact, when RW Bro Paul returned from WWII, he purchased the house he now lives in from Ursula. Up until that point, Ursula had refused to sell the house, and only did sell it then because she knew Gordon, and knew that he would not turn around and sell the property just to make a quick profit. A testament to how Ursula viewed RW Bro Gordon in particular and Masons in general from her knowledge and her fathers involvement.

I first became aware of Dr. Greene when on holiday in Peace River. My wife, Marianne, and I were on a tour of the town and decided to go to the Twelve-foot Davis grave site and followed the directions we had been given. When we saw a small sign which said “Historical Site”, we parked and followed the trail, not realizing until reaching the cairn and reading the inscription that we had found an even more important personal historical site. From that day, I resolved to find out more about Dr. William Greene; Mason, Aviator, Dentist, Pioneer, Explorer, Trapper, Dog Sled Racer, Thespian, Magician, Husband and Father. A man and a Brother deserving to be remembered.¹

RW Bro. Richard Ashby

¹ Resources: Dr. B. Sandercock, Peace River Archives, Peace River Remembers, the US Aeronautic Society, Grand Lodge of Alberta AF&AM, and Dentistry Internet site.