

THE FIRST DRAFT

Driggs: Man behind the mansion was prone to flights of imagination

Author's note: Newspapers produce the first rough draft of history, former Washington Post Publisher Philip Graham famously said. I chose "The First Draft" as the name of this monthly column because it is a history column that will rely heavily on those first rough drafts, as they appeared in The Daily Sentinel and in other newspapers. Separately, I want to take

note of the history column the late Kathy Jordan wrote for this newspaper for so many years. I only hope to engage readers' interest as well.

As darkness gathered one October evening in 1920, Arnold Adair swept up Unaweep Canyon in his biplane, then climbed above the canyon walls and soared over the treetops in the nearby national forest. When he spotted the small forest fire, he banked low over the blaze and dropped chemical bombs to extinguish the flames along its leading edge.

Adair hadn't put out the fire, but he had demonstrated to his forest-ranger passenger that "aero planes" could be used to quickly spot and limit the spread of wildfires.

Arnold Adair and his high-flying firefighting were fiction. They burst from the imagination of a man who knew both Unaweep Canyon and early aviation: Laurence La Tourette Driggs.

Driggs was way ahead of his time. The first actual use of an airplane to fight fires by the U.S. Forest Service was in 1930, when a wooden beer keg full of water was dropped on a blaze. It wasn't until the 1950s that the Forest Service used airplanes to drop chemical retardants on fires, according to the Forest Service website.

Driggs' name is recognized in western Colorado as the man



CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/The Daily Sentinel

A three-man crew with Alpine Archaeological Consultants Inc. of Montrose worked on Driggs Mansion in Unaweep Canyon last fall to stabilize the mansion. The mansion was constructed in the early 1900s by Laurence La Tourette Driggs on 320 acres of land acquired through the Desert Land Act.

who built the Driggs Mansion. The Daily Sentinel has published several articles recently about the efforts to stabilize the remains of that mansion, which lie just off Colorado Highway 141 some 18 miles east of Gateway.

When Driggs and his family began work on their home, probably in 1914, it was in an extremely isolated part of the West. But Driggs was hardly a recluse.

He was born in 1876 in Saginaw, Mich., grew up in Oregon and became a lawyer in New York. He married Mary Ogden in 1904, and the couple later had two sons. Driggs became a deputy attorney general for the state of New York in 1909.

Driggs' life changed in 1913, when he learned to fly. He soon became an outspoken advocate for aviation and one of America's leading authors on the subject.

It's not clear what piqued the family's interest in western Colorado, but by 1915, Laurence and Mary had moved their family here, son Ogden recalled.

In 1916, Driggs acquired the mining rights for the Mayflower copper mine in Unaweep Canyon. Through the Desert Land Act, he obtained legal title to 160 acres near Mayflower Gulch in 1917, and another 159 acres the following year. He began work to acquire title to the land several years earlier.

In 1914 or 1915, Driggs hired the Grasso family, Italian stonemasons from Grand Junction, to build a home, the sandstone structure we now know as Driggs Mansion.

But Driggs was gone during much of that process. He and Mary were in Europe, where Laurence observed and wrote about air battles in World War I, becoming one of the premier authors on aerial combat.

He met air aces like U.S. pilot Eddie Rickenbacker, with whom he cowrote a book on heroes of the air war.

He accompanied Britain's Royal Air Force to the front. Later, he joined the Royal Air Force Flying Club, a model for the American Flying Club that Driggs organized in 1918.

Before the war ended, he conjured up the character of Arnold Adair, "American Ace." Adair would appear in four novels from 1918 to 1930. He also would be the lead character in short stories such as "Fighting Forest Fires From the Air," published in Outlook magazine in January 1921.

Driggs enthusiastically promoted and explained aviation to the American public, discussing issues such as military airplanes, and using aircraft to assist commercial fishing.

He also lamented in print the fact the United States wasn't rapidly developing a commercial air industry. He touted the safety of flying, gave regular talks about aviation, and garnered publicity with events such as taking the founder of the Girl Scouts, then 70-year-old Juliette



MUSEUM OF WESTERN COLORADO/Special to the Sentinel

The cover of one of Driggs' novels featuring Arnold Adair.

Lows, for a ride in his biplane.

Throughout the 1920s, he and Mary were active members of the East Coast elite, getting frequent mention in both society columns and news articles. Perhaps that's why they lost interest in western Colorado. They sold their mansion and property to George E. Turpin in December 1923. Driggs died in 1945 while living in Maryland.

He left behind an iconic structure in Unaweep Canyon. But his larger legacy is the U.S. aviation industry. He was an early investor, through Colonial Western Airways, a predecessor to American Airlines. More importantly, he was a tireless advocate and booster for aviation — with the daring assistance of Arnold Adair.

Thanks to Zeb Miracle of the Museum of Western Colorado for providing important information for this article.

Have a history question or column idea for Bob? Email bob.silbernagel@gsentinel.com.



MUSEUM OF WESTERN COLORADO/Special to the Sentinel

Laurence La Tourette Driggs, right, author and builder of the Driggs Mansion, with his son, Laurence La Tourette Driggs Jr., left, and grandson Laurence La Tourette Driggs III in a photo from 1938.

PEOPLE

Maggie Smith doesn't watch Lady Grantham

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Millions of people have watched Maggie Smith on "Downton Abbey." But she's not one of them.

The 78-year-old actress, who portrays the Dowager Lady Grantham in the popular PBS series, told "60 Minutes" that she hasn't watched the drama because doing so would only make her agonize over her performance.

She said she may watch it someday.

Smith told Steve Kroft, in an interview to be televised Sunday, that what she takes from the role is "the delight of acting."

She has three Oscars, two Emmys and a Tony Award, but said the "Downton Abbey" role has given her more public recognition than anything in her career.

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Former San Diego mayor's gambling wagers topped \$1B

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN DIEGO — A former San Diego mayor and fast-food heiress acknowledged Thursday that she took \$2.1 million from her late husband's charitable foundation in a decade-long gambling spree when she wagered more than \$1 billion.

Maureen O'Connor, 66, pleaded not guilty in federal court to a money laundering charge under a deal with federal prosecutors that allows her to defer prosecution for

two years as she works to repay the debt.

O'Connor's game of choice was casino video poker. Her attorney, Eugene Iredale, said she played for hours at a time at the Barona Resort & Casino near San Diego.

Her net gambling losses topped \$13 million from 2001 to 2009, the lawyer said. He estimated his client's personal fortune once totaled as much as \$50 million but said she is now virtually broke.

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Janet Brink of Brink's Fine Jewelry, Downtown Grand Junction, has decided to close the business at the end of February. This was a very difficult decision for Janet and the staff, but after John's death in July, 2012, the joy of running the business together has faded. We wish to thank the community for their support and friendship over the years. Please stop by and let us tell you goodbye and offer you deep discounts for the remaining "Brinkets" we have left.

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