FORWARD

At the New York State Museum in early 1979, I encountered Schuyler Lathers, who, as I, had lived in Elmira. Our conversation turned to inventors and mechanics in Elmira’s past, especially to Daniel Hungerford.

Recalling in the 1950s I had seen the rocket car built by Daniel and his brother Floyd Hungerford, I contacted the Chemung County Historian, Thomas Byrne. I wrote, “Hungerford is dead, and, I think, his house is gone. But I wonder if any of his engines or airplanes or automobiles or manuscript material have [sic] survived.”

As both historian and newspaper writer in Elmira for many years, Byrne responded, “He [Daniel] was so destitute in the terminal years. Possibly the Curtiss Museum at Hammondsport might have an item or two.” Byrne sent me clips from the Chemung County Historical Society archives about the Hungerfords. And he suggested, “Look this material over and keep in touch, will you?”

I replied with thanks to Byrne, hopeful I would learn about relics at the Curtiss Museum. I added, “I was interested to note that the rocket car was being rebuilt near Albany in the 1960’s. Perhaps I’ll find someone who remembers it here.”

Then, in a short time, I found the rocket car. And now, many years later, I’ve written about Shirley Lois “The Moon Car” and the Hungerford brothers.

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The story of Daniel D. and Floyd S. Hungerford has fascinated observers and writers at least since the 1930s, when the Elmira newspapers reported inventive exploits, principally of the older brother, Daniel. In the mid-1960s, Keith Marvin’s “The Wizards of West Second Street”, a biographical essay published by Automobile Quarterly, brought the brothers’ exploits to a much wider audience. That piece prepared the way for additional Marvin articles which inspired local Elmira writers as well as authors as far away as Sidney, Australia (Igor Spajic in Restored Autos). To the late Keith Marvin, in particular, I am indebted, not just for his several Hungerford stories, but also for the donation of his Hungerford files to the New York State Museum. Among the items received by the Museum (where I served as a curator for over 40 years) are informative and invaluable letters from Daniel Hungerford to Marvin as well as photos and other documentary materials.

Over several decades members of the Hungerford family have written to me with their observations and thoughts about the Hungerford brothers. Notable are Daniel Hungerford’s daughter, the late Shirley Lois Hungerford Hyde, and the grandchildren of the inventors’ other brother, William J. Hungerford. These grandchildren were Joan Hungerford Schatz, Linda Hungerford Lathrop and Jon Elan Steen.

Men associated with Daniel and Floyd Hungerford during their working lives have shared fascinating stories. These men have included George Mapes, Robert Boyles, Cliff R. Towner, Schuyler Lathers and H. Steven Sekella. The family members of other Hungerford collaborators also have provided insight, notably Joseph E. Kosmicki, whose grandfather Stanley Kosmicki piloted the Hungerfords’ Bleriot airplane in the 1910s, and J. Royce Hunt, whose grandfather J. Emory Botsford helped construct the Hungerford rocket car and was a life-long friend. T. J. (Thomas Jack) Carpenter met Daniel Hungerford late in the latter’s life and has mailed me his observations and conclusions.

David Smith, a Cincinnati-based television cameraman in the early 2000s, planned a documentary film or video of the Hungerfords’ exploits. To that end while traveling the country to investigate potential sources, he performed prodigious and comprehensive research. While his production seems not to have been completed, he shared his findings in the forms of a large number of photocopies, as well as photographs as electronic images in disk form, deposited at the Glenn H. Curtiss Museum in Hammondsport, New York and the Chemung Valley History Museum in Elmira. Staff members at both institutions have been generous in making that material available to me. Former and present curators at the Curtiss Museum also have shared information about the Hungerford material in the collections there.

After the deaths of the Hungerford brothers and of Ralph L. Hodge, who had acquired the Shirley Lois “The Moon Girl” rocket car, the vehicle became the property of Daniel S. Dwyer. Shortly before his death, he presented the car to the New York State Museum, where thanks to his generosity the vehicle has been displayed in Albany as well as elsewhere in other museums for the enlightenment and entertainment of visitors.

Helpful and careful readers of the manuscript of this book have included Joan Hungerford Schatz, the Hungerfords’ grand-niece; George Mapes, who added corrections as well as expanded data; Jennifer Lemak, my colleague historian at the State Museum; Myra Rynderman, a helpful volunteer in the history collection at the State Museum; Thaddeus Beblowski who processed photo images; Carol Cooper who designed the manuscript and Leigh Ann Smith who was the cover artist. At the State Museum patient managers included Robert Weible and John Hart. Additional credits for contributions to this work are to be found as endnotes and in a short bibliography. The author apologizes for possible oversights in naming all those who have added to the Hungerford story.

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