who from the sky

By Pamela Keech

Just before Halloween, exactly 70 years ago, a murderer landed a small plane in a cow pasture four miles south of the downtown Square and put Bloomington on the front page of major newspapers across the country.

It was Saturday, October 28, 1939, an autumn day in Bloomington. The weather was clear and cool, with a chance of hard frost. Pork loin was 15 cents a pound at the A&P, and The Roaring ’20s with James Cagney was playing at the Indiana Theatre. Kids were looking forward to Halloween on Tuesday and the big parade downtown with prizes for the best costumes.

Down the road in the small community of Clear Creek, 6-year-old Bobby Joe Logsdon and his 7-year-old brother Jimmy were doing chores on their family’s small farm at the corner of South Rogers Street and That Road. It was just starting to get dark when Bobby Joe heard one of his favorite sounds—an airplane engine—but he had never heard one so loud. He looked up and saw a yellow plane fly just over the treetops.

Bob Logsdon, now 76, who has lived in Clear Creek his entire life and is co-owner of Stella’s Place Furniture there, says, “My brother and I were crazy about aviation. I never saw or heard an airplane fly that low before and it was real exciting.” But something even more exciting was about to happen. “I heard the pilot cut his engine and then he landed in the field right behind our house! Jimmy and I wanted to go over there and just touch the pilot, but our father wouldn’t let us go.”

The plane, a two-seater Taylor Cub monoplane, touched down in a cow pasture on the property of Meredith Dillman, whose family also had been watching the plane circle. When it landed, son Morris and daughter Lois jumped in the car and sped to the scene where they joined a growing crowd of men and boys.

The pilot was a young man in his late 20s, good-looking, with wavy hair swept back in a pompadour. He was wearing dirty blue overalls. According to the Bloomington Evening World, he appeared calm and told the Dillmans that he was flying from Chicago to Belleville to attend a steak dinner but decided to land because of...
quick thinking Maner told the press, "I have a vivid bulletin and notified Bloomington police. About her she immediately connected the landing with the news and called Maner. "People commenced calling in when over Frankfort, Indiana. He was heading south."

bulletin that a man suspected of murder in Missouri was anyplace to get something to eat."

Other Clear Creek residents saw the plane circling and called Maner. "People commenced calling in when the plane kept flying so low," she told reporters. When she heard the plane had landed on duty at all times. The telephone switchboard was in the home of operator Bertha Maner, 54, a widow with a son at all times. The police then called the Williams and Wampler store. As Logsdon tells it, "The phone rang and Bill Wampler answered it. The deputy instructed Bill to say 'yes' or 'no' in response to his questions. He asked if the pilot was there, then if Bill could stall him, but not to do anything foolish because the man was dangerous. Bill was firing the hamburgers for the pilot. He was a nervous, jittery kind of guy, but he just scolded the hungers over to the cool part of the grill so they wouldn't 'stiffen' at the controls, and then I fired another shot."

In minutes the store was surrounded by state and local police. Newspapers reported that although the pilot carried a .32 caliber revolver, he offered no resistance and remained calm as he was led away in handcuffs. For the next few days, the story was covered in newspapers in local and national newspapers, including the Bloomington Evening World, Chicago Tribune, Milwaukee Sentinel, P. LaRonde Evening News, Hartford Courant, and the Kansas City Star. An undocumented source said that the reporter who covered the story for the Kansas City papers was a young Walter Cronkite.

Airplanes and women

The pilot, Earnest P. "Larry" Pletch, 29, grew up in Brookfield, Missouri, the son of a prosperous Republican county councilman. A highschool dropout, he was known locally as a "genius with machinery," thought of himself as an inventor, and preferred repairing cars and tractors to working on the family farm. He had two other loves—airplanes and women.

Pletch was obsessed with flying. "I always have been crazy about flying. I would rather fly than eat," he told reporters after he was arrested.

Logsdon remembers getting close enough to see the pilot get out of the plane. "He had blood on his front."
controls, and was able to pull the plane out of the dive at 1,500 feet. He landed as soon as he could, hid the body in a thicket of trees near Cherry Box, Missouri, then took off again, heading toward Indiana and his family home in Frankfort. He spent that Friday night sleeping in a farmer’s barn.

Pletch initially said that he flew over his parents’ home to “wave at them,” but later admitted that “I flew to Frankfort with the intention of smashing the plane into the side of my father’s barn but lost my nerve.” He then flew across Indiana until darkness prompted him to land behind Bobby Joe Logsdon’s house. After his arrest, Pletch was held at the Monroe County Jail where he denied shooting Bivens, although the .32 caliber revolver he carried was the same type of gun as the murder weapon. He then concocted a story that he and Bivens had agreed to steal the plane and fly to Mexico in order to test Pletch’s invention of “extremely high-efficiency aviation fuel.” He claimed he shot Bivens in self-defense during a mid-air fight after Bivens tried to back out of the plan. That story was later discounted by Missouri police.

From Bloomington, Pletch was quickly transported to Indianapolis, where his parents were allowed to see him. “Try to make your peace with God,” his mother told him. “That’s the only thing left.” The next day Indiana state police turned him over to officers of the Missouri state patrol. He was taken to the county jail in Macon, Missouri, to stand trial for first-degree murder and theft. The crime was unprecedented. The Chicago Daily Tribune called it “One of the most spectacular crimes of the 20th century—and what is believed to be the first airplane kidnapping murder on record.” Because it happened somewhere over three Missouri counties, and involved interstate transport of a stolen airplane, it raised questions in legal circles about where, by whom, and even whether Pletch could be prosecuted.

Professor James J. Robinson, then director of the Indiana University Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, published an opinion on the front page of the Bloomington Evening World in which he discussed the legal ramifications of prosecuting what he called “sky murderers.”

“Suppose a murder is committed in an airplane out of sight of land… making it impossible to prove the county over which the offense occurred. Could the murderer be prosecuted and, if so, where?” He called for amendments to state and national constitutions if murderers using “the Pletch method” were to be “brought effectively within the range of criminal law.”

The following Wednesday, November 1, Pletch surprised authorities during a preliminary hearing by pleading guilty to first-degree murder. He was immediately sentenced to life in prison, after promising never to apply for pardon or parole at the request of his victim’s widow. His parents were relieved that he would not receive the death penalty. “Guy [Pletch’s father] had hoped maybe he could save Earnest’s life. We’re thankful to learn about it. It is a great burden off my mind,” his mother told the press.

Only five days after he killed Bivens, the “Flying Romeo” began his sentence at the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. During his lifetime he had at least one more brush with fame. In 1948 he was granted a U.S. patent for an invention, “Traction increasing device for dual wheel vehicles.” The patent document consists of precise drawings and detailed descriptive text. It is signed Earnest P. Pletch, Inventor.

Pletch died in June 2001 and is buried in Camdenton, Missouri. He has no marker, but an adjoining grave is marked “Avis Pletch, Wife of Earnest Pletch, 1904-1973.” She would have been yet another one of his spouses.

As for motive, on October 31, 1939, the Bloomington Evening World ran a front-page banner headline that quoted Pletch telling prosecuting attorneys, “I Just Don’t Know Why I Killed Him But I Did.”

Besides countless newspaper accounts, Pletch’s crime is the subject of short pieces in two books by Fred D. Cavinder. The Indiana Book of Records, Firsts, and Fascinating Facts and More Amazing Tales from Indiana. According to Bob Logsdon and his sister Evelyn, it also appeared in “at least one sleazy detective magazine,” the name of which has been long forgotten.