

# Photogrammetric Pioneers

## Chicago Aerial Survey Company

ROBERT W. MEIBORG

CHICAGO AERIAL SURVEY COMPANY was founded in 1922 by E. W. Fuller and Fred Sonne.

E. W. Fuller was a World War I aviator. Returning to Chicago after the war, he worked for James Levy, a prominent Buick dealer. Levy also sold Curtiss Aeroplanes and operated an airport which later became Midway Airport. Fuller sold aeroplanes and promoted airshows for Levy.

Fred Sonne was too young for World War I. He learned the machinist trade while employed by the Otis Elevator Company. After the war, he was taught how to fly by local "barnstormers" and helped them repair and rebuild their flying machines. Sonne purchased a Standard J-1 and opened an airport on the family farm in the Morton Grove-Skokie area of Chicago and began his own "barnstorming" career.

Land speculation and promotions of the 1920's created a need for aerial photography. E. W. Fuller foresaw this need, purchased an aerial camera, and proceeded to take aerial (oblique) photos from open cockpit aircraft. He wasn't successful until he got together with Fred Sonne, whose mechanical background and inventive genius enabled him to modify and improve the cameras of the time. Most photos of this era were oblique (angle) shots, with an occasional vertical taken while standing on the wing of the aircraft. During this period, Sonne complained about the unfair competition they were getting from the U.S. Army Air Corps. The army training school for aerial photography was located at Chanute Field, Rantoul, Illinois (100 miles south of Chicago) and the military personnel at the base would use government aircraft, film, fuel, and lab processing, competing with Chicago Aerial Survey for private work.

The 1930's saw Chicago Aerial Survey move up from the Standard J-1 to a Fokker Universal Aircraft. The cameras of this era were Folmer Graphic/Eastman Kodak K-1 and K-5's with 7 by 9 inch format and 12 and 20 inch focal length lenses. Sonne recalled that the Fokker was so noisy that he had to tie ropes on the pilot's shoulders and he could guide the pilot right or left. Sonne would reminisce how he hated to take low-altitude photography over cities on Monday (wash day) because all he would see was wash on clothes lines in the back yards.

The Chicago World's Fair of 1932 provided aerial photographic work, and the U.S. Agriculture Department's contract flying of the late 1930's provided additional work. As the war in Europe heated up, Sonne foresaw a need for a new type of camera, due to the increase in speed of the modern aircraft.

Sonne built a camera based on the principle of the circuit (360 degrees panorama) camera and/or photo-finish race track camera. In Sonne's camera, the film moved across a slit in the focal plane, synchronized with the ground speed of the aircraft. Several prototypes were built and shown to the military at Wright Field, Ohio. From this initial demonstration, Chicago Aerial Survey received contracts to build Sonne strip cameras, strip printers, and support equipment. World War II grounded Chicago Aerial Survey's aerial photo crews, but made their manufacturing division a major producer of aerial photographic equipment. After World War II the Chicago Aerial Survey Company continued manufacturing equipment for the military, and the aerial photographic division was reactivated.

The company continued with little change until 1954, when E. W. Fuller retired and sold his interest to the Loeb family of Chicago. Fred Sonne became president and began expanding the aerial photo division with the purchase of Zeiss RMK 15/30 cameras and Galileo-Santoni IV stereo plotters. New photo-lab equipment was purchased. The division grew from 10 to about 40 persons during this period. At this time also, the company name was changed to "Chicago Aerial Industries" (to reflect the products of the largest portion of the company). The aerial photo division became a division of Chicago Aerial Industries. In 1962, Bourn, Inc. (an electronics manufacturing company) purchased Chicago Aerial Industries.

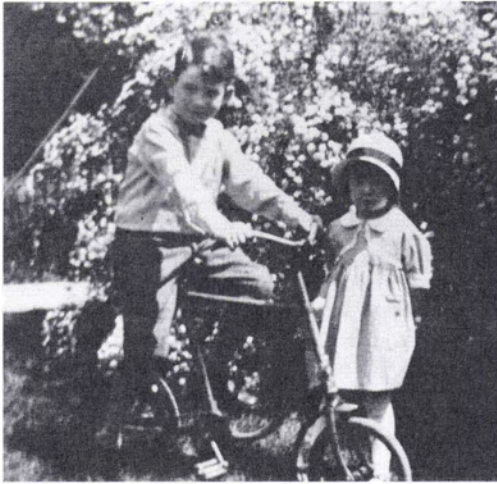
In 1972, "American Appraisal" of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, purchased Chicago Aerial Survey during their expansion into the mapping business. It was at this time that Chicago Aerial Survey entered the digital mapping field.

Martel purchased Chicago Aerial Survey in 1982 and is the present owner.

The people responsible for the guidance and direction of Chicago Aerial Survey through the years are:

E. W. Fuller, founder and President  
Fred Sonne, founder and Vice President  
R. R. Fuller  
Hugh J. O'Boyle  
R.W. Meiborg  
John Wolvin  
Glenn Sumerfelt  
Don Mohr  
Jerry Robinson





*Kenneth S. Curtis* enjoying a 1934 family picture-taking session with bowtie, knickers, junior bicycle, and sister, when he was 9 years old.



*Robert O. Davis* Christmas Shopping in Chattanooga, TN, 1936.



*Frederick O. Diercks* as a 2nd Lt. in the Engineer Aerial Mapping Detachment, Wright Field, Ohio, 1937, his first assignment after graduation from West Point.



*Alice Dillbeck* in Anchorage Alaska, October, 1936.



*Frederick J. Doyle*, August 1933. One never knows whether he owns a cat, or the cat owns him.



*G. Brooks Earnest*, 1934.



*John O. Eichler*, in May, 1933.



*William S. Karr* in 1933, 12th Photo Section, France Field, U.S. Army Air Corps, Canal Zone.