

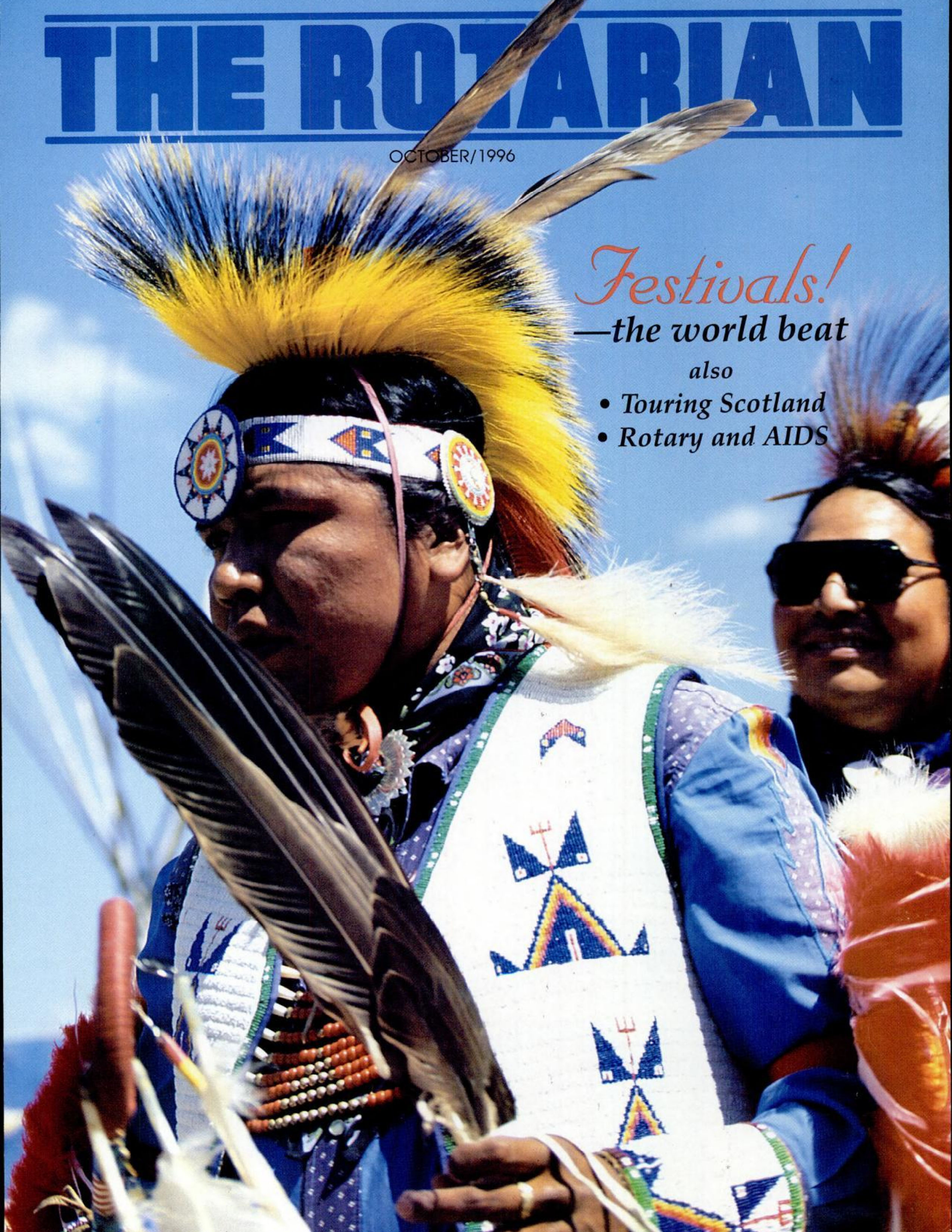
THE ROTARIAN

OCTOBER/1996

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PROFILE

Airborne publisher— editor, reporter, ad salesman, too—flying high at 92

BY BILL UNDERWOOD

For nearly half a century, north-eastern California, U.S.A., newspaper publisher Hal Wright has delivered the *Sierra Booster* to remote subscribers by airplane.

No wonder. The 92-year-old flying paperboy traces his lineage to aviation pioneers—and cousins—Orville and Wilbur Wright. "They were the first fliers and I intend to be the last," he says.

"I just slide back the window and toss out the paper when I think the plane is over the house," says Hal, describing his delivery technique. "I can hit the porch when there is no wind, but I've also found a few roofs and gardens. I usually don't see where the newspapers land, though, because I'm already headed off for the next ranch. My customers have to track them down."

How does the member of the Rotary Club of Loyalton, California, shoot the aerial photos of rugged mountains and high desert, taken from his trusty Aeronca Sedan, that

often grace his Page One? "I just put it on automatic pilot and lean out the window," he reveals. He is also fond of "signing" his scenic aerial shots with the aircraft's shadow in the corner of the frame.

Hal writes and edits the 3,500-circulation *Booster* out of his home in Loyalton, Sierra County, one of California's most isolated and sparsely populated areas. He says the upbeat tabloid is published "fortnightly because we don't want to be working all the time."

Nowadays, Hal concedes, he trusts the U.S. Postal Service to handle the bulk of his newspaper delivery chores. "I've made him slow down a little bit," adds Associate Editor Allene Wright, Hal's wife of 56 years. "I want to keep him around awhile." Daughter Janice Buck, who lives next door to her parents, serves as the newspaper's business manager.

For several months in 1995, in fact, all of Hal's papers were delivered by mail due to a bitter stand-off with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) over Hal's flight status. FAA officials had grounded the veteran pilot by refusing to renew his medical certificate, thrusting him squarely into the middle of an ongoing dispute between senior pilots and government regulators.

"It was age discrimination!" charges Hal, who eventually prevailed and is currently believed to

be the oldest active pilot in the U.S. "They tried to keep me out of the air just because I'm over 90. I'm in perfect health except for a little dandruff."

Hal, a member of the International Fellowship of Flying Rotarians, has been a member of the Rotary Club of Loyalton since 1949. "That makes me a 49er," he quips. He learned how to fly in 1953 from flight instructor, longtime friend, and fellow Rotarian Frank Nervino.

Frank, 83, started flying in 1935 and still holds a valid instructor's license. He has been a member of the nearby Rotary Club of Portola, California, since 1957. The tiny Nervino Airport in rural Beckworth is named after him and serves as Hal's home base.

Harold "Hal" Wright was born in San Francisco, on 1 April 1904, two years before the city's earthquake that "would make a great story if I could remember it." He raised a pet buzzard at age 12 and took up boxing at 15. "I thought I was pretty good, but nobody else did."

He was good enough at football and basketball to earn a scholarship to the University of San Francisco. He excelled in the local industrial athletic leagues, which before the advent of professional sports hosted America's stiffest competition. The legendary Max Baer was a coworker in Oakland before becoming heavy-weight boxing champion.

Hal got the "journalism bug" after injuring his shoulder in 1931 while mining gold in California's Mother Lode. He worked for the *Nevada City Nugget* before settling in Loyalton, where he founded the *Sierra Booster* in 1948. Besides his journalistic scoops, Hal helped establish Grandparents Day on the California Senate calendar as the second Sunday in September.

Once while Hal was delivering newspapers, a passing truck driver mistakenly thought he was witnessing an airborne narcotics delivery, or "drug drop." Hal and a passenger were met by the county sheriff back at Nervino Airport.

"They tried to hang it on me, but I was with a Baptist preacher," says Hal. "Associated Press got hold of



Hal (right) receives a friendly sendoff from Rotarian and flight instructor Frank Nervino.

BILL UNDERWOOD



PHOTO COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Ready for his newspaper route, Hal Wright gets comfortable in the cozy cockpit of his plane.

the story and it went out all over the country."

Hal's aerial exploits have garnered wide publicity over the years. Newspaper coverage has ranged from the sensational *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* to the staid *London Daily Mail*. He has been on television's "What's My Line," as well as on TV in Canada and Japan. Radio programs have included the "Paul Harvey Show" and "Voice of America." Most recently, he has been profiled in *The Wall Street Journal* and the "Sunday Morning" television show on the CBS network.

Not bad for an aviator who didn't take up flying until mid-life. "But I was a quick study," the airborne publisher explains with a wink. "It's in the genes."

• *Free-lance writer Bill Underwood keeps his feet on the ground in Carmichael, California, U.S.A.*

Rotarian honors

Charlene P. Kammerer is the first woman in the U.S. Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church to be elected bishop. Charlene, pastor of St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Tallahassee, Florida, and a member of the Rotary Club of Tallahassee, was elected to the episcopacy in July.

Bishop Kammerer has been assigned to Charlotte, North Carolina.

• The American Bar Association (ABA) recently appointed **Bruce L. Dorner** to a three-year term on the ABA Standing Committee on Solo and Small Firm Practitioners. Bruce, a Paul Harris Fellow, is a charter member of the Rotary Club of Londonderry, New Hampshire, U.S.A. He runs his own law office and management consulting service for small law firms in Londonderry.

As a member of the three-person ABA committee, he is responsible for representing the views of attorneys in small firms and individual practice.

• On 30 June, the U.S. Certifying Board of General Dentistry elected **Patrick E. Crow, D.M.D., M.A.G.D., C.B.G.D.**, to a three-year term on its Board of Directors. He will also serve as Board Treasurer.

Director Crow, a member of the Rotary Club of Decatur, Alabama, since 1981, is one of only 274 general dentists in the U.S. who have become Board Certified. He maintains a private practice in Decatur, where he also serves on the staffs of Decatur General Hospital and Parkway Medical Hospital.

During his term on the Certifying Board, Rotarian Crow will contribute to the development of the board's written exam, serve as an examiner during the board's oral certification exam, and advise and vote on matters related to the board's administration.

• **John Collentine**, a member of the Rotary Club of Sacramento, California, U.S.A., is the new president of the Board of Directors of Solar Cookers International (SCI), a nonprofit corporation that provides information and training on using the sun for cooking food and pasteurizing drinking water. Sacramento-based SCI has developed low-technology solar cookers for use

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