

## ***The Graveyard***

Tragedy and death were constant companions of early aviators. Death was a patient follower, eventually taking the lives of many airmen and women. Airplane crashes became so common that Arrigo Balboni made a business out of it, forming the first airplane “junk yard” in Los Angeles in the late 1920's. Balboni said he had a good business, but he had a hard time keeping employees. The last three men who worked for him quit after claiming to have seen ghosts wandering about among the remnants of airplane wings and fuselages which surrounded his modest establishment. Were these phantom airmen loyally sticking to their planes even in death?

Balboni bragged that all of the planes in his establishment, with the exception of one, had killed someone. All of his talk brought tourists to his junk yard, which was located in the dry Los Angeles riverbed between Pasadena Avenue and the Hyperion Avenue Bridge in Los Angeles. He loved to regale visitors with the gruesome histories of his stock-in-trade. He told people he got the idea for his junk yard from having a crash of his own in 1926 and offering to sell the wreckage for half of what it cost. He found that he had hit upon a good “racket.” Planes that couldn't be put back together would be scraped for the parts; others would be rebuilt and sold as used aircraft, Balboni doing his own flight testing.

Balboni's buying was done mostly between the hours of midnight and 4 p.m., when the telephone long distance rates were the cheapest. Someone would crash a plane, crawl out and survey the wreckage and that night Balboni would get a call. It might be a call from San Luis Obispo, or from the lower end of the Imperial Valley, his business stretched far and wide. He soon found that pieces could also be sold as souvenirs to tourists. Balboni told of buying a plane that had killed two people for \$25 and selling the radiator from it to a friend of the pilot for \$25. The friend wanted to mount it like a deer's head for a wall decoration. Balboni's yard contained many historic relics, such as part of the plane in which famed entertainer Will Rogers died, and parts of the ill fated Hindenburg air ship.

None of the purchasers appeared bothered by the ghostly tales because Balboni made no secret of the fact that there were plenty of bloodstains and grisly history connected with all of the parts he used in constructing planes. Aviation tragedy had become a ghoulish tourist industry. Sight-seeing buses made regular stops at Balboni's aviation junk yard, and visitors frequently snipped pieces of fabric from fuselages to take home as a souvenir. Aviators were always welcome and asked to sign his “Gold Book,” which eventually came to include some of the most famous names in aviation history.

On April 11, 1946, the 52-year-old Balboni died in an automobile accident. He had never had a bank account, all of his business dealings were in “cash.” After his death, no assets were found. Neither was the Gold Book.