

Biography offers glimpse of Bush pilot

by **Patty Ginsburg**

for the Tundra Times

For Alaskans who have grown accustomed to modern day air travel and for those who've never known anything else Dermot Cole's light biography of Bush pilot Frank Barr offers a glimpse into the recent past of Alaska aviation, with its adventures, dangers and tribulations.

Cole, a reporter with the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, presents a chronological record of Barr's exploits, from his restless youth in Illinois and his early flights in Detroit, to Barr's foray into Alaska politics in the 1950s.

But the bulk of this narrative is devoted to Barr's bush pilot years of the 1930s and 40s. As Barr told Cole, "I was not a businessman. I just wanted to fly. If somebody couldn't afford to pay, I'd work out a deal — trade something or give them a cut rate or whatever, just so I could fly."

And fly he did.

In the mid-30s, "Barr flew everything from bales of hay and powder puffs to groceries and prospectors throughout the Yukon, Southeast Alaska and northern British Columbia." He flew in aircraft ranging from a World War I Moth biplane to a model S Stinson to a Pilgrim monoplane.

A few years later, he moved on to Fairbanks, which had become the air crossroads of the North and took up the mail route on the Kuskokwim.

Throughout the book, Cole relates harrowing stories and humorous anecdotes, many of them common companions of Alaska's Bush pilots: forced landings, makeshift repairs, plenty of improvising and even weeks of strand-

ed isolation in Arctic winters.

Yet, Cole writes, "the biggest obstacles he ever faced as a pilot were boredom and hard work. He spent thousands of uneventful hours in the air, ferrying passengers and cargo over the roadless wilderness in complete safety."

But in what appears to be understatement typical of Barr, he tells Cole there was some excitement now and then.

There was his crash landing between Big Delta and Chicken in the summer of 1938, the subsequent volunteer search waged by concerned Fairbanksans, and his walk back to "civilization."

And Cole recounts how five years earlier, Barr survived six weeks in 50-below weather, as he repaired his crashed plane in the Yukon Territory.

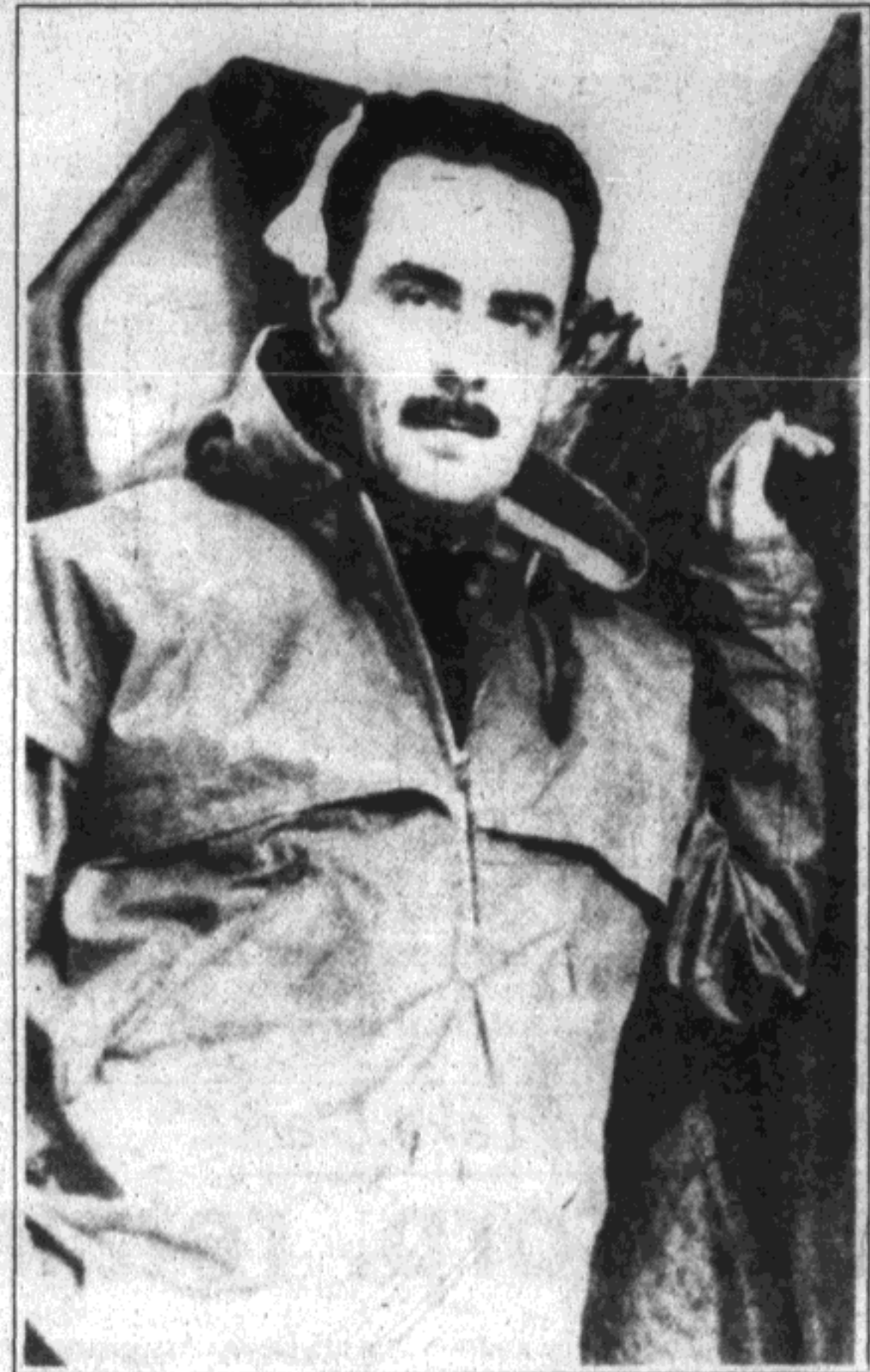
The book is primarily on interviews with Barr before his death in 1983. Cole actually inherited the project from aviation writer Archie Satterfield.

The book has flaws. Perhaps the biggest is that the reader never gets inside Frank Barr.

It reads as a string of narrative tales, with only superficial treatment of the man Frank Barr was. We are told he was good-humored, but the humor isn't demonstrated.

The picture is one-dimensional. Cole's writing is straight-forward, but his tangents on other people can be distracting from the main story at hand.

Despite those flaws, "Frank Barr" is an entertaining tale of the exploits of one of the Alaska's diminishing population of Bush pilots. It is a



Frank Barr and his Pilgrim, taken in about 1936 at Juneau.

Alaska Northwest Publishing Co. photo

refreshing look at the not-so-distant past and a pleasant read for a winter's evening.

The soft-cover book is available for \$7.95 from Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., of Edmonds, Wash.