

# Mike Steffen

## Man of Many Interests

By Clare Allen

**I**T WOULD BE difficult if not impossible to find a man as interested in, or who has devoted as much of his life to vehicles powered by gasoline engines as Michael F. Steffen of Grand Island. Since 1908 when he and his father built an automobile, Mike has been closely associated with automobiles, airplanes, powerboats and motorcycles, and is an authority on all of them.

He has taught automobile and airplane maintenance and repair, trained hundreds of pilots, raced autos and boats and collected motorcycles. Now, at the age of 69, when most men sit back and take it easy, Mike is as busy as ever and considers "retirement" one of the ugliest words in any language.

Mike, a native of Buffalo, is probably best known in his role of teacher, a career which began in 1917 when he joined the staff of Elm Vocational school as an instructor in automobile repair and maintenance. Ten years later a course was added for airplane mechanics, with Mike as instructor. When Elm closed in 1930 and operations were transferred to the then new Burgard Vocational High School, Mike moved too and became head of the aviation department.

**D**URING HIS teaching career, Mike, who has an abundance of energy and drive, continued his own education in night classes at Buffalo State Normal School and the University of Buffalo. He also learned to fly and earned his pilot's license in 1926.

Though Mike has always been attracted by anything mechanical, airplanes have been his biggest interest. In 1928 he founded the Steffen Aeronautical Service and was one of the first tenants at Buffalo Airport, where he sold and serviced airplanes and conducted a school for fliers and mechanics.

In 1935 he opened his own flying field, Steffen Airport, on Transit Rd. near Lockport, which he operated until 1950. He also maintained a base for float planes on Grand Island, on the site where he later built his home.

**B**EGINNING in 1939 and continuing through World War II Mike was loaned by the Buffalo Board of Education to the New York State Education Department and the U.S. Defense Department as an aviation consultant. His job was the promotion of aviation instruction in schools throughout the country. When the war ended he returned to Burgard, to head the aviation department until his retirement in 1952.

Mike's interest in powerboats came naturally inasmuch as they are powered by gasoline engines. He has owned 23 boats ranging in size from small runabouts to big cruisers. He has piloted two of his racing craft, "Mrs. Mike" and "The Egg and I," to numerous championships in the U.S. and Canada.

Automobiles have been a hobby as well as a vocation with Mike. During his teaching days and with the help of students, he built his first

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Michael F. Steffen models the accepted garb for fliers in the 1920s . . . cloth helmet, goggles, leather coat and parachute. Lighthouse in background is part of the Steffen home, "Towerwood," on Grand Island.

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racing car in 1923. During the late 1920s and early '30s he raced professionally on dirt tracks. To date he has owned 73 pleasure cars, several being antique classics which he restored to mint condition.

ALTHOUGH motorcycles might be considered a sideline with Mike, he's always had at least one for transportation and he still

enjoys riding a big one he keeps in his garage. Recently he disposed of the last of 59 antique cycles comprising what was believed to be the largest private collection in the United States.

In 1918 Mike married the former Orpha C. Chesbro and he has a son, Dr. Harold J. Steffen, a professor at State University College at

Buffalo; two granddaughters and a grandson. The first Mrs. Steffen died in 1942.

A lady who took flying lessons from Mike, Marion S. Arent, became Mrs. Steffen in 1945. Like Mike, she enjoys anything with an engine, and rode with him in boat races where rules required a riding mechanic. Marion is a licensed airplane pilot and can drive a car, motorcycle or boat with the best.

SINCE LEAVING the school department, Mike has found more than enough interests to keep him busy. A major project has been supervising the construction of homes on his Grand Island property. He and Mrs. Steffen have also toured the United States, Canada and Europe by automobile.

In recent months Mike and Marion have been planning a 'round-the-world auto tour that would follow the route of the famous New York-to-Paris race staged in 1908. The only American entry in that classic was a Thomas Flyer automobile, built in Buffalo. Two of Mike's uncles were test drivers for the company.

The Steffens are confident they can make the trip as far as roads and vehicle are concerned, and have been assured of cooperation from officials of every country they would visit except Russia. They hope eventually to obtain Soviet visas and make a "people to people" good-will tour.

MIKE DISLIKES the word "retirement" when it's used in connection with his activities. As he phrases it: "If you say you're going to retire, you're nailing down the lid. I like to think of a person's life as a "V" which fans upward and outward with the passage of years. There's no limit to the height and width of man's knowledge and experience that can be encompassed by that "V."

Mike is proving that theory.

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Mike Steffen's stack of log books show that from 1922 to 1959 he spent more than 11,000 hours piloting airplanes.



Busy as he has been with airplanes, automobiles, boats and motorcycles, Mike has always found (and still finds) time to hunt and fish.



Mike and Marion Steffen are shown in "The Egg and I," the boat that won more than 200 races and held the Canadian "D" service runabout championship for 5 years.

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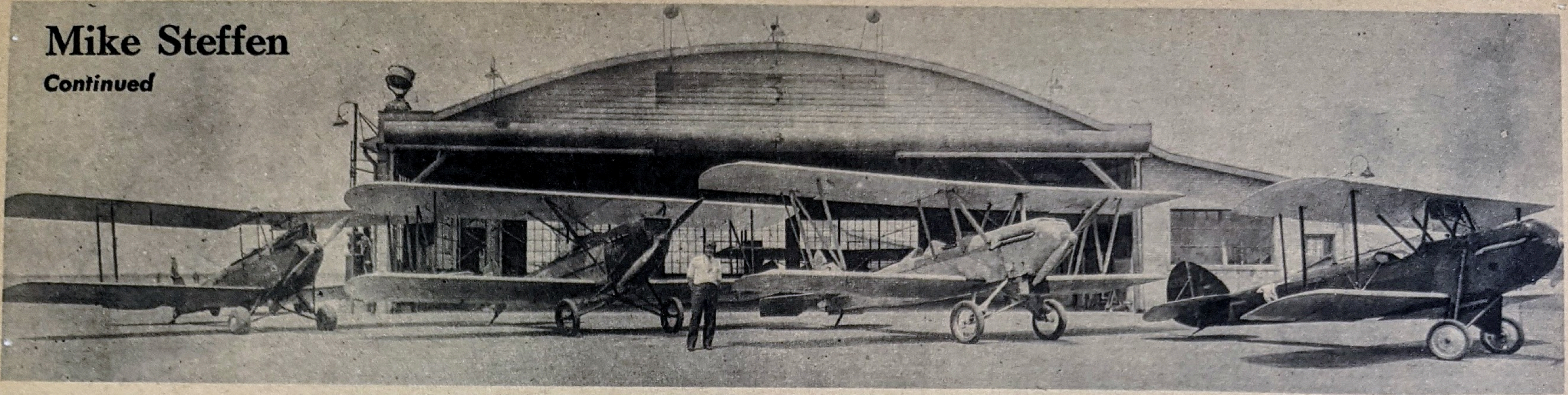
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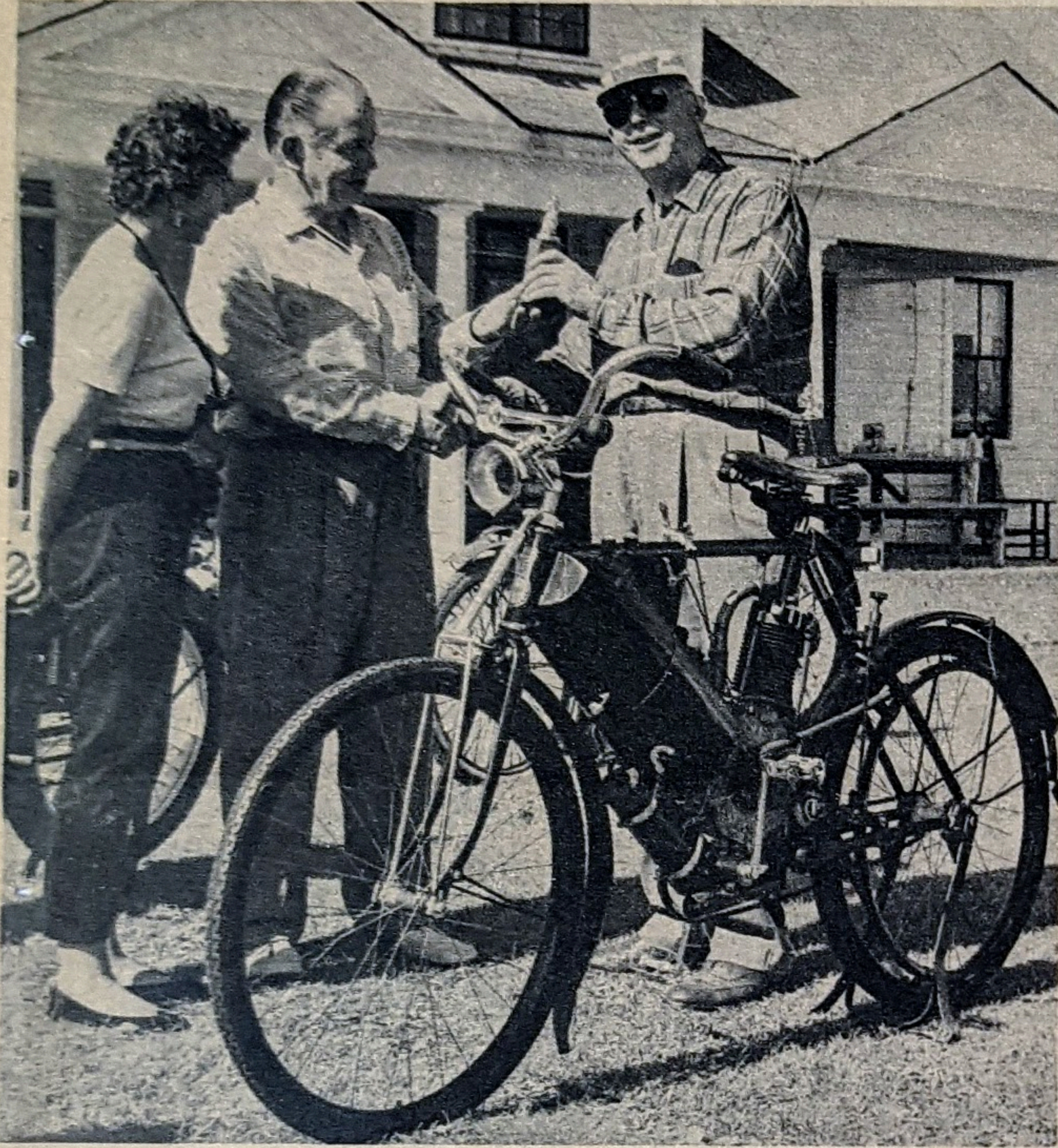
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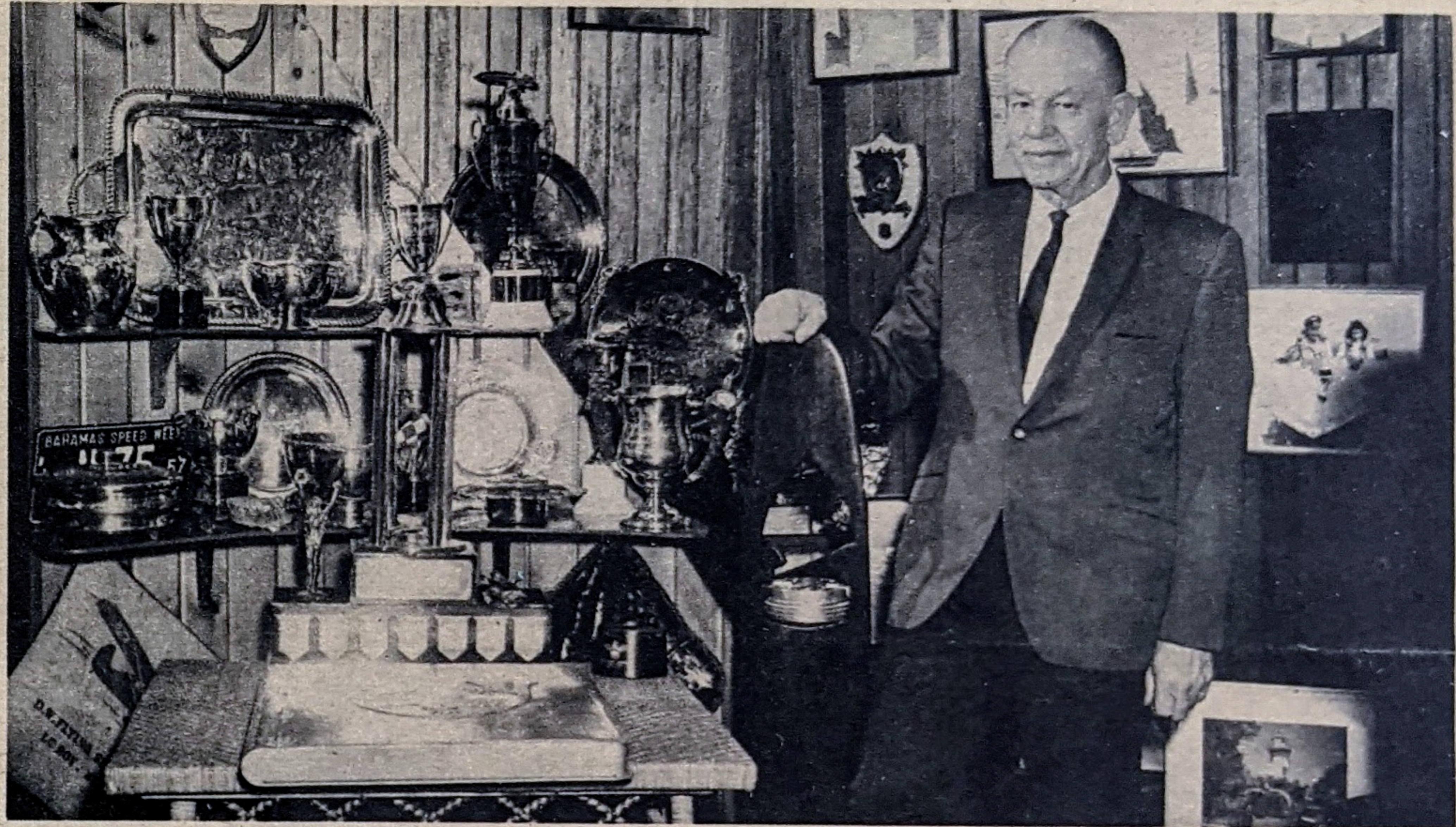
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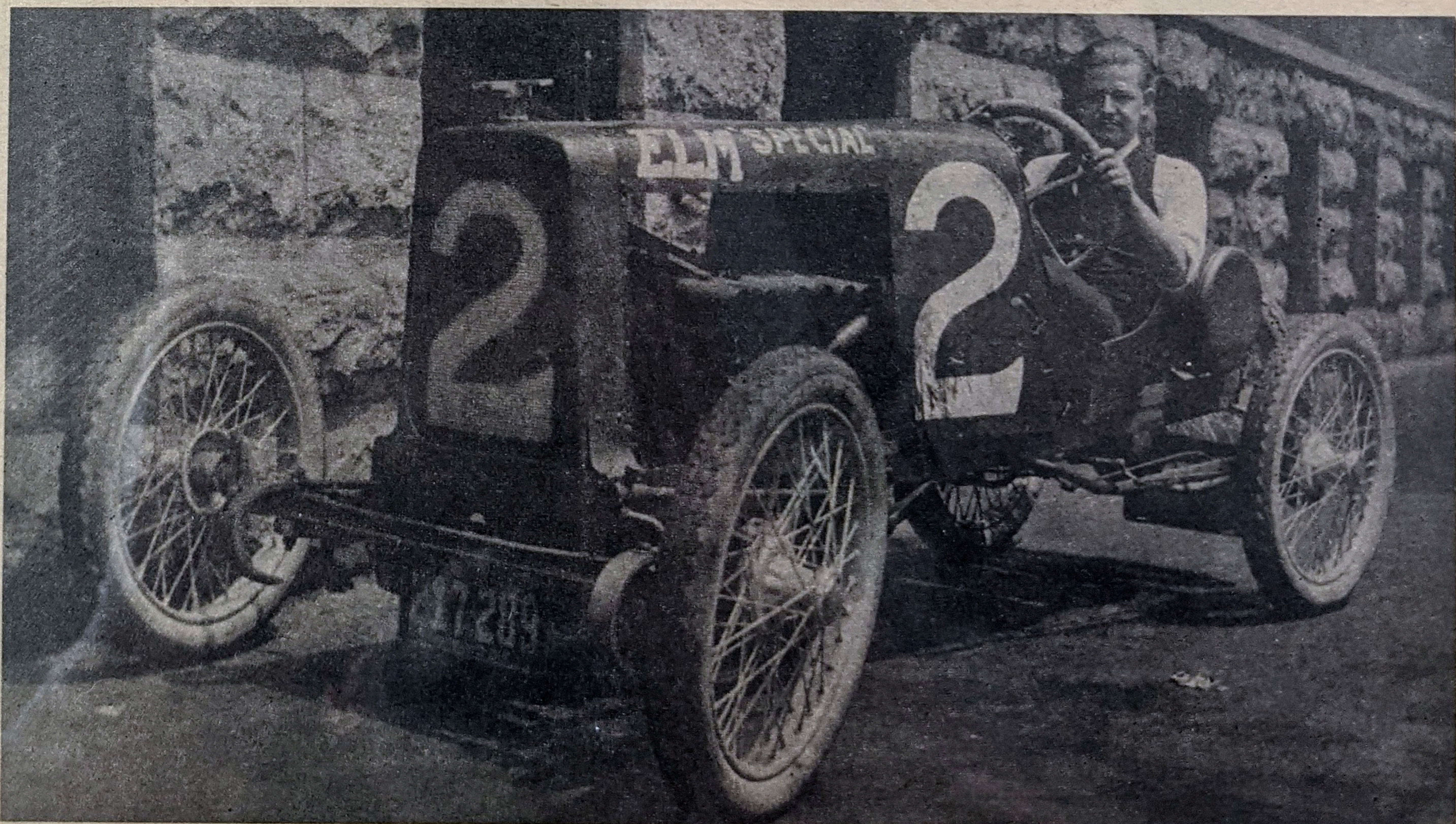
In 1928 Mike was one of the first tenants at Buffalo Airport, where he sold and serviced airplanes and conducted a flying school.



The Steffens receive a trophy from T. A. Hodgman for the oldest entry at an antique motorcycle rally. The machine, a 1902 Thomas Flyer, was built in Buffalo and was one of a collection of 59 cycles owned by the Steffens.



The bottom level of the lighthouse is a den where Mike displays some of the trophies and mementos he has acquired over the years.



Racing cars have changed considerably since 1923 when Mike Steffen sat at the wheel of this one built with the help of his students at Elm Vocational School.