

Leo, the crash-landing lion, comes back to life at museum

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The saga of Leo the MGM Lion's unexpected landing in the Rim country has become lore around these parts, nearly as much a part of Payson's history as Zane Grey himself.

The tale, being retold in photographs and paraphernalia from Leo's ill-fated flight back in the late 1920s, makes up about one-quarter of the Rim Country Museum's newest exhibit, "Aviation in Payson."

History reveals that the movie moguls operating Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in the 1920s were looking for a way to boost the studio's image. Their idea: fly their mascot, Leo the Lion, around the country, making stops along the way to entertain audiences.

To that end, studio execs contracted a plane to be specially outfitted to carry the lion by BF Mahoney Aircraft — the same company that built Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis.

Pilot Martin Jensen left a California airstrip with Leo on board the MGM Special Sept. 16, 1927, flying the 350-pound African lion and a full tank of fuel. Flying east, Jensen approached the Mogollon Rim, and realized all too late that he was not high enough to clear the rim. Jensen cir-

led and circled, looking for a place to land, and finally crashed at Hell's Gate, a rugged area about 14 miles due east of Payson. The pilot and his feline passenger miraculously escaped injury.

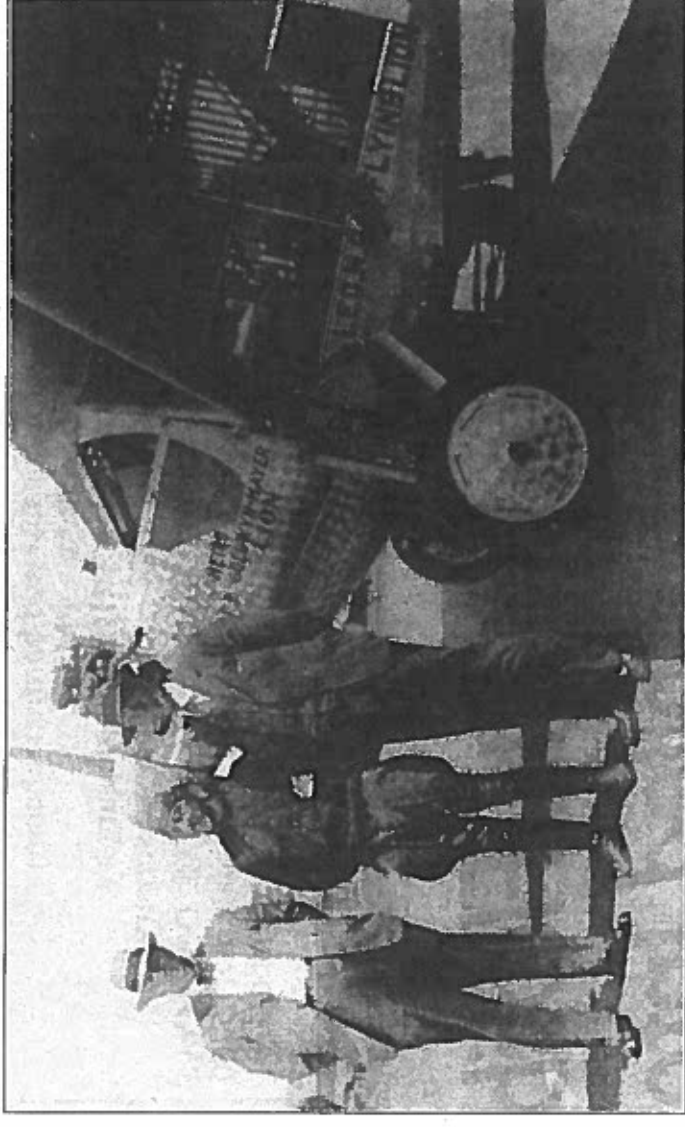
Once pilot and lion were rescued from Hell's Gate, crews salvaged all they could from the rugged terrain. What was too bulky or deemed not worthy of salvaging remained at the crashed site for the next 60 years.

That's when Prescott entrepreneur and aviation buff Scott Gifford became intrigued by the story.

While attending college in Douglas, author Ruth Reinhold gave a presentation on her book, Sky Pioneering: Arizona in Aviation History. One chapter in particular, "The Day The Lion Fell," captured Gifford's attention. A photo in the book contained a single line that sparked Gifford's obsession. It said, "Wreckage of the plane still lies in Hell's Canyon."

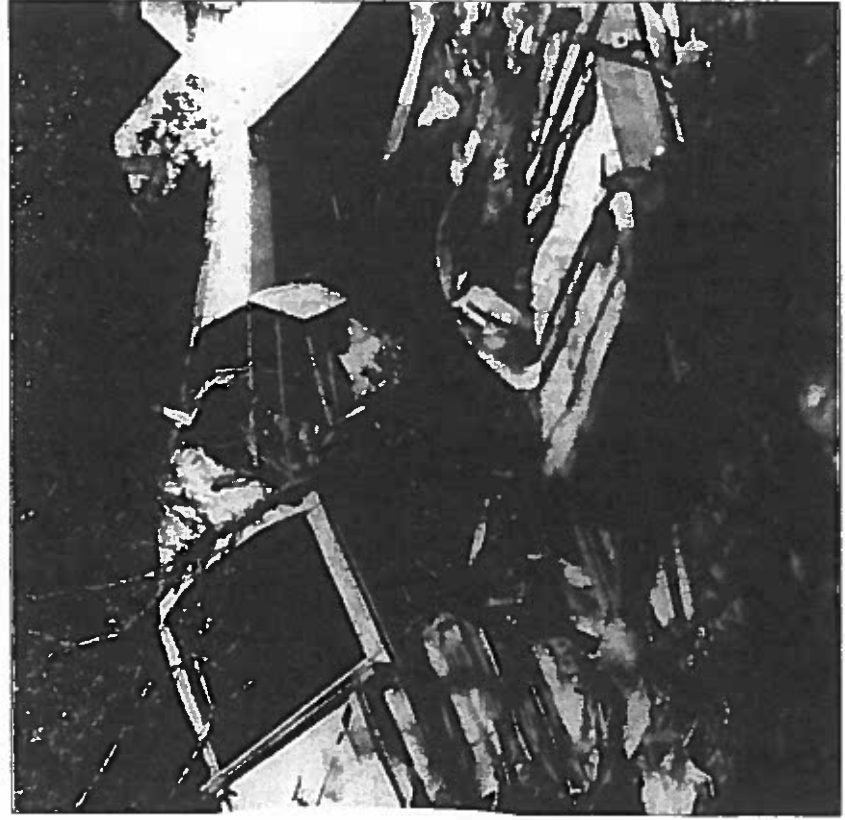
"It was about 1991 when I was able to finally find it and remove the wreckage," Gifford said. "I was able to use a helicopter to carry out the big chunks." The "big chunks," he elaborated, were primarily what remained of the rusted steel framework of the fuselage and part of the landing

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MGM Studios photo
Pilot Martin Jensen (center) with MGM executives and the plane specially built to carry the studio's mascot, Leo the Lion. A cage is visible inside the plane. The aircraft, with Leo aboard, crashed near Payson in 1927.

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Contributed photo
Despite considerable damage to the aircraft, the pilot and Leo the Lion were not injured in the 1927 crash near Payson.

Man rebuilding Leo the Lion's plane

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ing gear.

"The airplane was mostly wood and fabric, so there was not much else left of it," he said.

What he was able to salvage he has since gathered at his Prescott business, where he is piecing together the story of Leo, the crash-landing lion.

Since his discovery of the plane, Gifford has assembled an impressive collection of photographs and documentation on the MGM publicity stunt, and has studied all he could get his hands on about aircraft of that era.

"I started work on reconstructing the airplane about two years ago," Gifford said. "Right now, the steel tube framework is just about complete."

While work on the MGM Special is slow-going — Gifford has since started a new business, Nostalgaire, reconstructing historic aircraft — the history buff does have big plans for it once completed.

"Once it's flight ready, I plan to fly it to airports around the country," he said. "I'll definitely plan a return trip to Payson, this time with the plane landing at the airport."

Gifford has an ultimate goal: "The plane was



Contributed photo
Scott Gifford with a rebuilt engine from the aircraft that carried Leo the Lion.

supposed to land at New York City Sept. 17, 1927," he said. "Once it's off the ground, I'll land the MGM Special at New York City on Sept. 17 — kind of completing the original flight what year." "I'll be