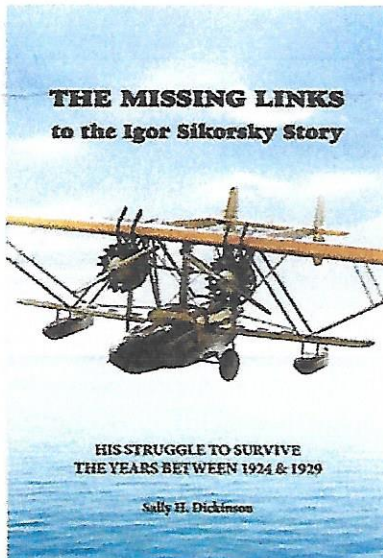




The Missing Links to the Igor Sikorsky Story

By Sally H. Dickinson

Reviewed by Tom Lawrence



"The Missing Links to the Igor Sikorsky Story" was published last year and sheds new light on events of nearly a century ago. Subtitled, "His Struggle to Survive the Years Between 1924 & 1929," this 107-page book reveals the previously-unknown financial activities that supported Igor I. Sikorsky's aviation efforts during his earliest days in America. Sikorsky never discussed the details of the company finances in his autobiography, nor did any of the other biographies that are

available. But in dusty boxes in an attic, the author, Sally Dickinson, discovered old files of the Dickinson companies, including scrapbooks and letters dealing with Igor Sikorsky.

This wonderful book starts with a brief discussion of Sikorsky's aviation activities in Russia and his arrival in the United States on March 30, 1919. He finally found a job working in a school for Russian immigrants. But many of his immigrant friends, knowing of his successful aircraft design in Russia urged him to start his own aircraft factory in the US. This he did in 1923, forming the Sikorsky Aero Engineering Company on a chicken farm on Long Island. The first product was the S-29-A, the "A" standing for "America." A large, twin-engine biplane, it made many successful flights, but did not bring in any orders.

At this point, Arnold C. Dickinson entered the picture. Elizabeth Shoumatoff and her husband had escaped Russia and ended up in New York in 1917. She was able to establish herself as an outstanding portrait artist. One weekend in 1925, she was doing a portrait of Arnold Dickinson when her husband Leo came by with Igor Sikorsky. Arnold had been following the story of the S-29-A and in talking with Igor, he immediately recognized his talent and vision. Arnold decided that he and his father should invest \$100,000 in the company. Dickinson also convinced many of his business friends to invest. This was a much-needed infusion of capital into the struggling firm. With this capital available, the

company was reorganized as the Sikorsky Manufacturing Company, with Arnold Dickinson as President and Igor Sikorsky as Vice President.

The next significant event covered in the book is the design and manufacture of the large S-35, a three-engine biplane for the New York to Paris flight to win the Orteig Prize. This was initiated by René Fonck, the famous French "Ace of Aces." The financial and political wrangling that went on is well covered, revealing the complex issue of ownership and the continual infusion of capital by Dickinson and friends. Two remarkable documents are illustrated in the book. One is the original entry form for the Orteig Prize and the other is a drawing of the S-37 path down the muddy runway at Roosevelt field. Both have never been published and the sketch was made by Edward Dickinson, Arnold's brother. It gives great insight into the cause of the accident that claimed two lives and left the smoldering wreckage of the S-35. Fonck came back to have another aircraft built for the Orteig Prize, but Lindbergh made his successful flight before it was finished.

The rest of the early life of Sikorsky Aircraft is covered, including the design of various flying boats, the purchase of Sikorsky by United Aircraft and the development of the helicopter.

The final part of the book covers the Dickinson family and their business activities in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and other New England towns. Igor was a friend of Arnold Dickinson into 1950s and also maintained a long friendship with Charles Lindbergh.

In the end, this is a fascinating story of the intricate network of Russian immigrants, the era when businessmen were not constrained by stock prices, and the early age of aviation in America. There are some technical errors, but they do not detract from the story. Highly recommended.

The book has a retail price of \$24.95, but VFS members can order them from the Vertical Flight Online Store at www.vtol.org/store for \$20.00.

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About the Author

Thomas Lawrence retired from Sikorsky Aircraft after 40 years. He is a member of the VFS History Committee and the Igor I. Sikorsky Historical Archives.