

## The Iowa Bat Man—Roland Kumzak

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## THE IOWA BAT MAN— ROLAND KUMZAK

BY JANE RISDON

The Iowa state fair of 1935 featured a new thrill for many Iowans — a live Bat Man. This particular Bat Man was commonly known as Clem Sohn from Lansing, Michigan. Sohn made his first flight as Bat Man in February, 1935, in Miami, Florida, where he jumped from an airplane at the altitude of 12,000 feet wearing home-made wings across his shoulders and attached to his arms and wrists. The webbing attached to his legs gave Sohn the same effect as the plane surface of a bird's tail when he spread his legs. For 2,000 feet he dropped as dead weight, keeping his arms at his side to hold the wings in a folded position, and then according to the Des Moines *Tribune* of February 28, 1935:

He spread out his arms, checking his descent. For awhile he glided, testing the wings. Then he zoomed, first to the left, then to the right, levelling out, shooting upward and downward. He looped three times.

At 6,000 feet he pulled the rip cord of his parachute and settled to earth.

Aviation experts did not see much practical value in his achievement. His wings, they said, made him into a glider. They did not believe he could fly any great distance under his own power.

Aviation experts may not have seen the practical aspect of Sohn's achievement, but eventually Sohn hoped to build a set of collapsible wings which could soar all the way down to a successful landing without the use of a parachute. Sohn felt this would be a valuable asset in war times when a spy needed to be dropped behind enemy lines, but even James Bond hasn't tried it yet.

Clem Sohn was not just another crazy kid trying to thrill a crowd with a death-defying trick, he was an experienced parachute jumper who had discovered years before that he could move himself up to 300 feet in any direction by jerking the rip cord of his parachute and moving his body in a swim-

ming motion as he fell. Three years and \$600 were spent to make his wings out of airplane fabric and steel tubing—Sohn completed them on his mother's sewing machine. The wings weighed eight pounds with the steel tubing on the outer edge of the wings constructed so it would fold up easily.

Since many had trouble seeing Sohn glide and soar through the air, he attached a tracer device, similar to those used by sky-writers, to his legs. Following is an excerpt of Charles Gatschet's article in the *Des Moines Register*, May 3, 1935, which explains the principles of Sohn's flight:

As Sohn "bails out," he dives, as all parachute jumpers do, with arms and legs folded to avoid colliding with the ship. Once clear he carefully opens his arms and legs and begins his flight in a steep glide. When his wings are spread to full length, he can begin his maneuvers. His entire flight is purely a glide with considerable speed.

When Sohn wants to make a right turn he raises his left arm and leg slightly and lowers his right arm and leg at the same time, which puts him in a natural right turn. When he wishes to loop, he dives a bit to increase his speed and then bends his legs at the knees slightly by pulling them up. This makes a natural elevator of the web between his legs and he should go around in a normal loop with no difficulty.

Sohn's wings remain outstretched as long as he wants to hold them there. However, any time he is in difficulty or wants to halt his flight the pressure is so distributed that it will naturally fold the wings. He then pulls the rip cord of his parachute.

Other types of bat wings which have proved unsuccessful were of a semi-rigid type with hinges at the shoulders and were uncontrollable in the air.

Because of the small area of wing spread, the air pressure on the bat wing is many pounds per square foot, but due to the fact the pressure is generally well balanced, it can be controlled with little effort.

Sohn's first appearance in Iowa was on May 6, 1935, in Des Moines where he was sponsored by the Des Moines branch of Chevrolet Motor Company. Few saw the jump due to the dull slate-blue sky plus the fact that Sohn had not yet developed his smoke trailing device. This was Sohn's thirteenth jump, but he did not admit it, even to himself, until he was safely on the ground. Sohn stated that he traveled at a speed varying from 60 to 65 miles an hour, and if dropped straight without the use of a parachute, he would plunge down at a rate of 150 to 200 miles an hour.

In the *Des Moines Tribune* of August 27, 1935, Russ Wilson

gives an account of Sohn preparing for his first appearance at the Iowa state fair:

First he donned his flying suit, joined between the legs by a solid "V" of fabric. It is in this "V" that the smoke candle which traces the daredevil's progress is fixed.

The suit was followed by Sohn's main chute, one of the usual type, in which the pack rides below the wearer's hips. Then came the wings, made of fabric which is stretched on a folding steel framework.

Sohn appeared tense as he gave directions to Art Thomas, airport manager, about fastening the straps which pass around his chest, securing the wings to his body.

"Make sure those straps are turned the way I showed you," Sohn cautioned, as Thomas went ahead with the rigging. It required several minutes to adjust everything to the stunter's satisfaction.

Finally came his auxiliary parachute, which is fastened to his chest, and then helmet and goggles.

Aided with a boost or two, Sohn climbed into the waiting plane's front cockpit. Because of the ship's upper wing construction, the jumper found it necessary to ride on his knees, facing the tail of the plane.

"It's going to be a job getting out of here," he remarked.



*Register & Tribune Photo*

#### CLEM SOHN AND PLANE

Sohn received much attention at the Iowa state fair of 1935. A crowd of 35,000 were on hand to watch the 22-year-old Bat Man soar through the sky, and due to the wind, he landed on Grand Avenue in the midst of cars and trucks entering and leaving the fair grounds. The Des Moines *Register* of August 27, 1935, states, "'Bat Man' Sohn was the sensation of the day.

After he alighted, admiring crowds followed him and found him to be a shaggy-haired youth of medium build who wore dusty pants and shirt."



*Register & Tribune Photo*

CLEM SOHN

For three years Sohn traveled across the United States and Europe performing his bat man flights before his career and life tragically ended in Vincennes, France, at an airshow on April 26, 1937. As a crowd of 50,000 watched, Sohn was dropped from an airplane at the altitude of 9,800 feet. He soared, swerved and twisted through the air, and at 1,300 feet he folded his wings and pulled the release cord on the parachute attached to his back—it failed to open. Then he pulled the rip cord of the second parachute attached to his chest, and this also failed to open. Sohn fought to unfold his wings, but they had become entangled with his parachute cords, and he

fell rapidly to the ground where his body buried itself deep in the earth. His death was a great tragedy, but he did leave a legacy—a boy who had avidly watched Sohn perform at the Clay county fair in 1935 and who decided to establish himself as the "Hawk," but he was always referred to as the "Iowa Bat Man." His name is Roland Kumzak.

Kumzak was a 22-year-old youth from Milford, Iowa, who stood unchallenged as Iowa's only Bat Man after his first flight October 13, 1935. The Junior Chamber of Commerce in Spencer, Iowa, was celebrating the second year of its sponsorship of the Spencer municipal airport with an air show, and Kumzak signed a contract for \$50 to perform his first leap. The Milford Business Men's Association had objected to the idea of Kumzak's jump in a letter to the Spencer Junior Chamber of Commerce, so the Chamber considered cancelling Kumzak's contract, but Kumzak stated he would make the jump with or without contract.

To make this first leap, Kumzak faced a number of obstacles. First, there was the letter from the Milford Business Men's Association, then on the day of the air show, clouds hung heavily over the airport at noon. In the middle of the afternoon, the clouds finally broke up, but the airport officials kept Kumzak on the ground until the wind had died down. When he finally received word to go ahead with his jump, he faced still another problem when he discovered that due to the size of his wings he could not get in and out of the Lockheed Vega plane from which he was to jump. After an eight-place Travel-Aire owned by Iowa Airways of Fort Dodge was substituted, Kumzak finally jumped at 5:50 p.m. and floated down 5,000 feet before he opened his parachute and landed about one and one-half miles south of the airport.

According to Don Buchan of Spencer, Iowa, Kumzak gave the following account of his first bat man flight: "When I got out of the plane I was on my back momentarily. I quickly realized my error and rolled over and got my wings open to their full width. I started to turn over and then got on an even keel. I lay flattened as if lying on my stomach and went into a flat spin just swirling about in my downward fall. Gradually my feet got lower than my head and my spinning got

more serious.

"I realized I should have gotten out of the plane differently so that my head would be lower than my feet when I started to soar. Then I could have volplaned downward like a glider. That's when I learned my big lesson about this bat man business. I think the whole secret is in the beginning of the downward fall.

"I had no fear or qualms. I was in full possession of my senses at all times. As soon as the plane moved away there was a tremendous silence. I had a feeling of settling, rather than of falling. As I got closer to the ground, it seemed the earth was rushing up toward me and I was standing still in space. I knew that was the time to pull the rip cord and open the first 'chute. There wasn't too much of a jar as the 'chute filled. Then I opened the second 'chute and came down without incident."

On November 11, 1935, the Milford Business Men's Association, which had previously objected to Kumzak's stunt, asked him to demonstrate his bat man flight in connection with an Armistice day program. So Kumzak jumped from the altitude of 10,000 between halves of a football game between the high school teams from Milford and Terrill, Iowa.

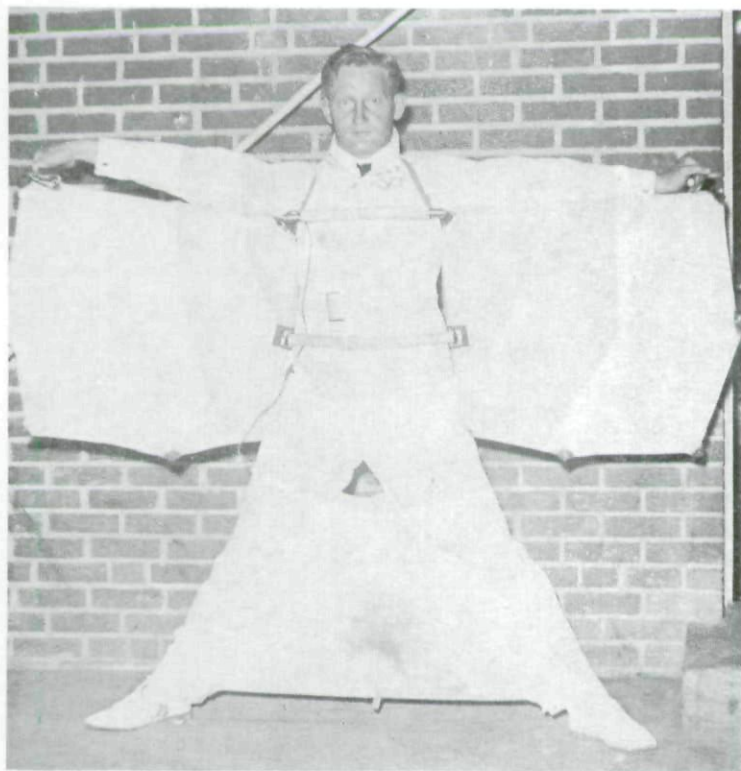
In 1936, Kumzak was contracted to perform at the Iowa state fair, and by this time he had made some 35 successful bat man flights. The *Des Moines Tribune* of August 28, 1936, quoted Kumzak: "I haven't ever had any serious accidents since I've been doing this stunt. The toughest thing about it all is landing with the 'chute. My wings come down below my knees, and that makes it harder, as ordinarily when you land with a 'chute you can use your knees as springs.

"I leave the plane at about 10,000 feet," Kumzak said while out looking the fairgrounds over, "and the entire flight after that, including the landing with the 'chute, takes only about three minutes. I can stand a wind of up to 15 miles an hour, but with a higher wind it's hard to handle the 'chute.

"Clouds are bad, too, if they hang too low and are thick. For one thing, the crowd can't follow the flight through the clouds, and for another thing, I can't tell how close I am to the ground. I usually open the 'chute between 2,000 and 1,500

feet from the ground.”

Kumzak was described as a red-haired, blue-eyed 160-pounder who was a high school basketball and football player. He has entertained crowds in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kansas and Iowa with his bat man flights. Kumzak was quoted as saying that he thinks its a great life, this bat man flying. For one thing, you get plenty of fresh air, and for another, the profession is not overcrowded.



*Register & Tribune Photo*

ROLAND KUMZAK

In his second jump at the Iowa state fair, Kumzak landed on the rooftop of an empty house at 2201 E. Grand Avenue and tore off a few shingles, but he did not injure himself. He climbed down without any assistance while excited neighbors



called a police ambulance which arrived after Kumzak had already left.

Another minor accident occurred when Kumzak was appearing at the 1936 fair, he lost his goggles which were ripped off by a jerk of one of the 'chute cords as it opened at 1,200 feet. The pilot 'chute, which is the small parachute which opens first and releases the parachute from the pack, also broke loose as the parachute snapped open. The small boy who found Kumzak's goggles and returned them to him was rewarded with a dollar.

Kumzak was in Milford when he heard of the accident which killed Clem Sohn. Kumzak said that he had always thought a lot of Sohn whom he considered to be a nice, quiet chap who knew what he was doing. He also stated that Sohn's death would not keep him from completing future bat man flights.

In total, Kumzak made approximately 100 jumps with his wings from an altitude of 10,000 feet with an overall total of approximately 480 regular parachute jumps. In 1940, Kumzak moved to the west coast and went to work for the Navy, overhauling and repairing survival equipment, including parachutes, and he has been doing this type of work for the past 25 years. He currently works for the United States Government as an expert on parachute inspection and packing at the Alameda Air Base. His family consists of his wife, four daughters and one grand-daughter.

The idea of the ZAP! BANG! POW! Batman of comic books and current television fame may have originated with the bat man flights of Sohn and Kumzak, for it was not until the December 20, 1939, issue of *Newsweek* that Batman was created by Bob Kane, and this was over four years after Kumzak's and Sohn's first flights.

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#### CORRECTION . . .

Page 320, Spring, 1966: Line 10, "from the De Witt jail . . ." should have been placed between lines 20 and 21.

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