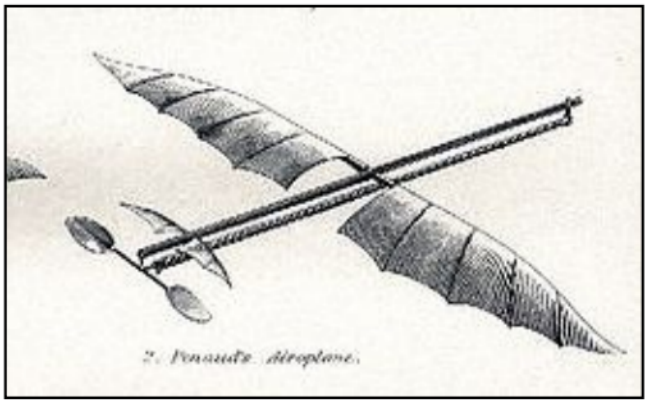
Name _____

The First Airplane Engine

Back in 1871, a French engineer built a flying machine that amazed the world. This flying machine was the size of a toy—just 20 inches long and 18 inches across. It looked like an airplane with bat wings.

What made this toy plane so amazing? It could fly under its own power! It was the very first airplane to do that.



A spinning propeller kept the plane in the air. A tiny engine made the propeller spin. That engine stored all the energy needed to keep the propeller spinning. The engine weighed very little and it was small enough to fit on the small plane. Do you have any idea what that engine was made of?

That airplane engine was made of a rubber band! A rubber band makes a great engine for a tiny airplane. When you twist it, it stores energy. When you let it go, the propeller spins.

After that successful flight in 1871, many would-be airplane inventors experimented with rubber band-powered toy airplanes. They learned about what made one toy plane soar and another toy plane crash.

Not all those experimenters were grown-ups. In 1878, Milton Wright gave a rubber band-powered toy helicopter to his young sons Orville and Wilbur. The brothers played with the helicopter until they broke it. Then they made another one.

It was that toy helicopter that started the Wright brothers thinking about flying machines. These two boys kept on thinking about flying machines when they grew up. In 1903, they built and flew the very first powered airplane that could carry a person.

The Wright brothers' flyer was powered by a small gasoline engine, not a rubber band. But it was a rubber band that got them thinking and a rubber band that led to their first experiments. Sometimes, simple things lead to big discoveries.