

## ***CLYDE CESSNA - PIONEER AVIATOR***



*In 1917 Cessna occupied a small building north of downtown Wichita where he built the first airplane (center) manufactured in the city. A flight school also was located there. (Cessna Aircraft Company)*

Aviation owes much to a farm boy whose name became synonymous with monoplanes and played a major role in making Wichita the "Air Capital of the World."

Clyde Vernon Cessna had been a successful Overland automobile dealer in Enid, Oklahoma for several years until 1911 when he was struck with flying fever.

Fascinated by the frail but efficient Bleriot XI monoplane that traversed the English Channel in 1909, Cessna eventually left Oklahoma for New York City, where he worked briefly for the Queen Aeroplane Company and learned about airplanes and how they were constructed.

Cessna dubbed his first airplane the "Silverwing." It was an American-built copy of the Bleriot XI, and would eventually teach Cessna the art of aviating. Powered by a two-stroke, four-cylinder Elbridge "Aero Special" engine that developed 40 hp. at 1,050 RPM, the Elbridge was a marine powerplant that had been converted for aviation use. In Throughout 1911 Cessna made many flights in the airplane on the Great Salt Plains near Jet, Oklahoma in an effort to teach himself how to fly. He and Silverwing suffered numerous accidents, but in December 1911 Clyde made a highly successful, five-mile flight near Enid that included turns and ended with a safe landing at the departure point.

Flushed with success, Cessna severed his ties with the automobile business and devoted his time, energy, and money to exhibition flying. It was a lucrative endeavor for any pilot who could keep his airplane aloft for only a few minutes at holiday events and county fairs. During 1912-1915 he built several monoplanes, all of them powered by six-cylinder Anzani radial engines that developed 40-60 hp. Although successful, the Cessna Exhibition Company only whetted Clyde's appetite to become more involved in the fledgling aviation business. Flying was fun and profitable, but what he really wanted to do was manufacture and sell airplanes of his own design to the public.



*Cessna poses with the monoplane he built during the winter of 1914. It was powered by a 60-hp. Anzani radial engine. By 1915 it had been modified with an improved landing gear, shown here. (Wichita Chamber of Commerce)*

In 1916 he set up shop in a vacant building in Wichita, Kansas and built a new airplane for the 1917 exhibition season. Cessna also established a flight school at the "factory" and enrolled five young men as students. When the United States declared war on the Central Powers in April 1917, Cessna's exhibition flying ground to halt. Instead, he returned to farming at his home near Rago, Kansas and harvested wheat to help feed the "doughboys" fighting in France.



*Clyde Cessna's "Silverwing" monoplane undergoes repairs at an exhibition event in 1911. Note that the elevator panels have been removed from the empennage. (Kansas State Historical Society)*

Clyde's interest in aeronautics never faded during the war, and he dreamed of returning to Wichita and resuming the manufacture of airplanes. Cessna continued flying, however, and bought a new Laird "Swallow" biplane that he flew during

the early 1920s. He used the OX-5-powered Swallow to give his favorite nephew, Dwane Wallace, an introduction to the world of aviation.

Late in 1924, Cessna was visited by Lloyd Stearman and Walter Beech, who had been key employees of the Swallow Company under leadership of the cantankerous Jacob M. "Jake" Moellendick. The two young men, in concert with a few other people, had split from Swallow and planned to form a new business to be known as the Travel Air Manufacturing Company. Stearman urged Cessna to join them, chiefly because Lloyd knew he and Beech needed Cessna's expertise in aviation as well as his money and equipment. It was a hard sell, but Cessna agreed.

In return for his participation and investment, Clyde was named president. The infant company began life in a cramped, 30x30-ft. space in the rear of a planing mill in downtown Wichita. Travel Air's first product was an attractive, two-bay biplane designed by Stearman and was dubbed the "Model A." It made its first flight in March 1925. At a price of more than \$3,000, the OX-5-powered Model A was expensive compared with the plethora of war-surplus Curtiss JN-4 and Standard J-1 biplanes that still were available, but it outperformed them both and gradually sales increased to 19 airplanes the first year.



*The Cessna "Phantom" with its full cantilever wing was an advanced design for 1927. It was a prototype for the successful "A" series airplanes introduced in 1928. (Stephen J. Hudeck Aeronautical Archives)*

The company introduced the improved Model B biplane in 1926 that featured the new, 200-hp. Wright J4 air-cooled radial engine. That year Cessna convinced Walter Beech that the company should offer a monoplane with an enclosed cabin for use by small airlines. Beech agreed, and the Travel Air Type 5000 was based largely on a monoplane designed and custom-built by Cessna earlier in 1926. A slightly larger and more powerful version of the prototype airplane was ordered by National Air Transport, and 8 eventually were delivered to the airline.



*Aviator Cessna strikes a causal pose with the "Comet," a two-place monoplane powered by a 60-hp. Anzani engine. (Smithsonian Institution Neg. # 81-12610)*

Despite the success of the Type 5000, Cessna was restless. In January 1927 he sold his stock and resigned from Travel Air to build a full cantilever monoplane he named the "Phantom." It was a graceful, three-place machine powered by a 90-hp. Anzani radial engine and flew well. In 1927 Cessna and Victor Roos joined forces to found the Cessna Aircraft Company on the west side of Wichita. With help from his talented son Eldon and other company engineers, in 1927-1929 Clyde marketed a succession of 4- and 6-place monoplanes designated Model AA, Model BW, and the popular Model AW series.

With the advent of Wall Street's collapse in the autumn of 1929, Cessna and other manufacturers soon found themselves without customers for their products. To spur sales, Cessna slashed prices but to no avail. Faced with the prospect of bankruptcy, in 1931 the board of directors of the Cessna Aircraft Co. voted to oust Cessna and close the factory doors. It seemed as though Clyde's involvement in aviation was over, but he never gave up.

Undaunted, Cessna and Eldon rented vacant facilities in the abandoned Travel Air complex on East Central Ave. and created the C.V. Cessna Aircraft Co. that specialized in building diminutive, custom racing airplanes. The most successful of these was the CR-3 owned and flown by the great air-racing

pilot Johnny Livingston. In the wake of losing his company to the stockholders in 1931, Cessna was dealt another blow in 1933 when his close friend Roy Liggett died in the crash of the CR-2 racer built by Clyde and Eldon. Cessna's grief ran deep. He withdrew from aviation and retreated to his farm near Rago.

In 1934 his nephew Dwane Wallace, armed with a degree in aeronautical engineering and with help from his brother Dwight Wallace, wrested control of the defunct Cessna Aircraft Company from the stockholders and introduced the classic Cessna C-34 monoplane. Clyde agreed to participate in the new venture only in a ceremonial capacity, and was not involved directly in the day-to-day operations of the company. The C-34 was a success and was named the world's most efficient airplane. Dwane Wallace went on to guide the company through the turbulent 1930s, oversaw development of the twin-engine T-50 that became the famed Cessna "Bobcat" of World War Two fame, and introduced the Model 190/195, Model 120/140 into the post-war market. Later, these airplanes were followed by the ubiquitous Model 150 and 172 Skyhawk as well as the sleek Model 310 made famous by the Sky King television series.



*Pilot Roy Liggett rests against the Cessna CR-2 racer, in which he was killed in 1933. Liggett's death sapped Clyde Cessna of further interest in aviation. (Truman C. Weaver Collection)*

After more than 40 years in the aviation business and incalculable contributions to aeronautics, Clyde Cessna died in November 1954 age 74. He never held a pilot's license and had received only a rudimentary education, but his genius with airplanes coupled with an unshakable determination to succeed has made his name and legacy an icon in the history of flying.

*By Edward H. Phillips, Cessna and Travel Air historian*