

Tom Miller – Ag Pilot

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Have a SAFE flight!” That’s the type of sentiment which we might express to a loved one as they depart on an airplane. In this case, the term SAFE also applies to a program which encouraged safety and precision in the work of agricultural pilots. Today we’ll meet a farmer and ag pilot who has been a leader in this initiative in Kansas. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Tom Miller is a farmer and ag pilot in southwest Kansas. “I grew up on the farm where we live now,” Tom said. His father was also a farmer who flew as a hobby. “My dad was a weekend pilot,” Tom said. Tom caught the flying bug from his dad.

They bought an old airplane and rebuilt it, and Tom learned to fly. “My dad gave me three hours of flight instruction when I was 10 or 11, long before I could fly by myself,” Tom said. “My dad was going to sell the old plane but I talked him into keeping it if I would pay for the maintenance.”

In those days, the local school district had a policy (since discontinued) that students who turned 16 years old could get a job driving the school bus. “I was the one who lived the furthest out, so I would drive the bus home from school and drop off the other kids on the way. Then I picked `em up on the way back in in the morning.” He used his earnings to pay for the costs of the plane.

He wanted to get into the cropdusting business. After college, he did some charter flying, worked for a neighboring farmer, and ultimately went into farming himself. A classmate of his had a business called Ingalls Aerial Sprayers Inc. When the classmate died in an accident while spraying, Tom and a partner bought the business. It is based at the Ingalls airport.

Ingalls Aerial Spraying provides aerial seeding and spraying for weed and pest control in agricultural crops. It serves Gray County and the southwest Kansas region.

Tom got involved in his professional organization, the Kansas Agricultural Aviation Association. One of the organization’s projects was a program called Operation SAFE.

“This was a joint project with K-State and KAAA,” Tom said. “Dennis Kuhlman was an Extension specialist and he had an educational program for ag pilots.” Tom got involved in implementing the SAFE program.

SAFE was an acronym for Self-regulating Application and Flight Efficiency. It was a program used by ag pilots to avoid drift of aurally applied products.

“We did pattern testing,” Tom said. “We would put fluorescent dye into the spray equipment and fly into the wind.” A computer program would read the fluorescent effervescence and determine the variability of the spray pattern.

“We could see if a plane was putting out too much product or not enough,” Tom said. This enabled ag pilots to adjust their equipment to assure that they were applying just the right amount of product to the precise place that it was needed.

Tom served as SAFE chairman for the Kansas Agricultural Aviation Association for some 20 years. For many years, he hosted the annual testing at his home airport at Ingalls. Ingalls made an ideal location because it was in a rural area, far from any urban congestion. After all, Ingalls is a rural community of 331 people. Now, that’s rural.

Tom is farming full-time now. He still flies, although he leaves the day-to-day ag applications to another pilot. He and his wife Margaret have three children: Ryan, who attended K-State-Salina; Emily, who is studying to be a dental hygienist; and Kyle, who is a student at K-State-Manhattan.

For more information, go to www.ingallsaerialsprayers.com.

“Have a SAFE flight!” That expression isn’t just for loved ones who are catching a plane. It also applies to this program which helps to enhance and improve the work of agricultural pilots. We salute Tom Miller, Dennis Kuhlman, and all those involved in Operation SAFE and the Kansas Agricultural Aviation Association for making a difference through this initiative. Now it’s time for me to come in for a landing.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.