

Clyde Cessna

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

The world's most popular airplanes. That's one description of the planes built by the Cessna Aircraft Company, maker of more light aircraft than any company in the world. It was all started by a rural Kansas farmboy. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Clyde Cessna was born in Iowa. When he was one year old, his family moved to Kansas and lived on a farm near the rural community of Rago in Kingman County. Rago is unincorporated. It's located east of the town of Spivey, population 79 people. Now, that's rural.

As a farmboy, Clyde learned to be a good mechanic and handyman. He helped area farmers with their equipment and then branched out into working on automobiles. He became an auto mechanic and then a car salesman in Enid, Oklahoma.

One day in 1910, he went to Oklahoma City and saw what was called an "air circus": An exhibition by a group of touring stunt pilots. He was so intrigued by the airplanes that he quit his job and moved to New York to take a job in aircraft construction.

He learned the craft of airplane manufacturing and then moved back to Oklahoma to build his own planes. Cessna crashed on his first flight attempt but made his first successful flight in 1911, eight years after the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk. With that flight, he became the first person to build and fly a powered aircraft in the heartland of America, between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains.

Clyde Cessna tried to generate income by flying exhibitions, but money was scarce in those times. He finally moved his family back to the farm in Kansas, where the only building still standing was a barn. Believe it or not, the family moved into that barn temporarily. The family literally lived in the hayloft while Clyde worked on trying to build better airplanes. Each year he built a new and improved model.

In 1916, Cessna had a unique opportunity. A Wichita car-building company named "Jones Six" invited him to build an airplane in its auto factory to publicize the company. So, Cessna came to Wichita and built a new plane with the words "Jones Six" painted on the wings in giant letters which could be read from a thousand feet below.

It was the first airplane ever built in Wichita, Kansas – the first of more than a quarter million airplanes, which would help earn Wichita the name of Air Capital. Cessna continued to build and upgrade his planes. In 1917, his plane named Comet set the U.S.-national speed record of 124 miles per hour.

After World War I, Cessna joined with two legendary partners: Lloyd Stearman and Walter Beech, who was also a test pilot. In 1925, they formed a company called Travel Air Manufacturing.

This company became one of the nation's leading airplane manufacturers. Two years later, Clyde Cessna set out on his own to build a high-performance, single-wing plane that could outperform the biplanes of the time. His monoplane model would be able to reach speeds of 145 miles per hour and fly more than seven hours in length, a remarkable achievement for the time.

However, the Great Depression hit and the company put the business on hold. Clyde Cessna went back to the farm, but his nephew Dwayne Wallace was still working

in aviation. Dwayne encouraged Mr. Cessna to restart the business and together, they did so. Clyde retired in 1936 but his nephew would continue to build the company.

The company grew and changed through the years. For example, the 1956 Cessna Skyhawk would outsell every other light airplane in the world. Today, the Cessna Aircraft Company is considered one of the world's largest makers of small aircraft.

The world's most popular airplanes. That was one description of the planes built by the Cessna Aircraft Company. We salute its founder and namesake Clyde Cessna for making a difference with entrepreneurship in aviation.

And there's more. Before revitalizing Cessna, Dwayne Wallace had been working for none other than Clyde's former partner Walter Beech who founded his own airplane company. We'll learn about that next week.

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