



Clyde Cessna

Pioneer aviator whose name leads an industry

BY JEFF SKILES

AVIATION HAS A RICH HERITAGE for an industry still so young. The Wright brothers are generally credited with being the first in powered flight, but there were many others close on their heels. We celebrate the names of many of these men and women who were pioneers in flight: Wright, Curtiss, Blériot. Some of these individuals have become general aviation's version of household names and founded great companies, yet their lives remain relatively unknown. I would like to bring forth a few of their stories in this column, and to my mind there is no more enigmatic example than Clyde Cessna.

CESSNA'S ROOTS

Clyde Cessna was born in 1879 and grew up on the family farm in Kansas. He proved to be quite mechanically adept, and as a young man he left the farm and built a successful car dealership in Oklahoma. Clyde had been inspired by Blériot's famous flight in 1909 and eagerly attended an aerial exhibition in Oklahoma in 1911. The mechanically minded Clyde was intrigued by these new machines. Moreover, when he discovered the amount of money people were making flying early aircraft in these demonstration exhibitions, he promptly sold his car dealership and pursued aviation full time.

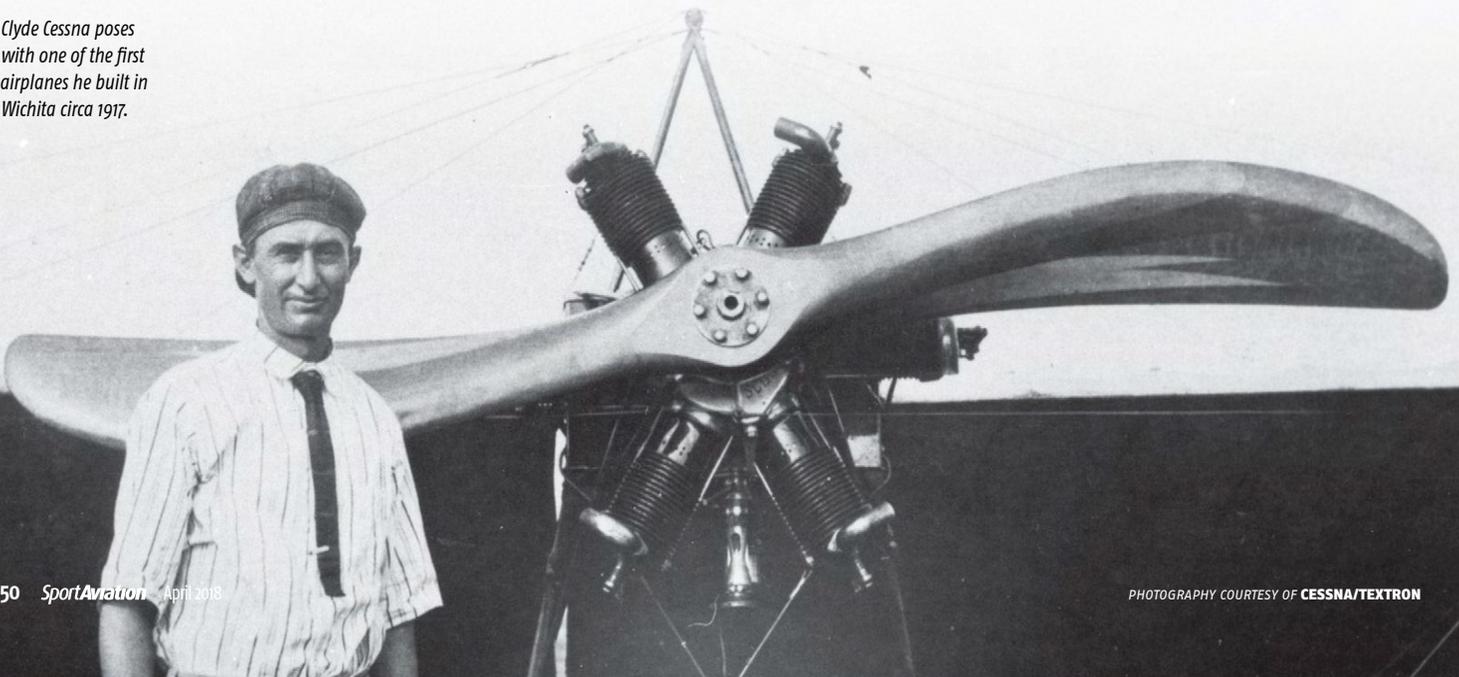
Clyde moved to New York and worked briefly for the Queen Aeroplane Company to learn the skills of aircraft construction. Queen built a Blériot knockoff, and this is where Clyde learned the trade. After some time, he arranged to buy one of the Queen

monoplanes that he dubbed "Silverwing." Clyde initially used a V-8 engine for his airplane rather than the Blériot's French-built Anzani powerplant. The V-8, however, gave him nothing but trouble, and it was replaced with an Aero Special, a four-cylinder two-stroke engine built by Elbridge, a company that specialized in marine engines. Upon completion, Clyde and his brother Roy took the Silverwing to the Great Salt Plains in Oklahoma for its first flight.

LEARNING TO FLY

Clyde made several flights in the summer of 1911, but his first public flight nosed over just after takeoff. Subsequent public attempts didn't go much better. The frustration of these first demonstrations reportedly led him to famously exclaim to his brother Roy, "I'm going to make this thing fly, and then I'm going to set it afire and I'll never have another thing to do with aeroplanes." Over the subsequent months Clyde slowly improved his skills and became a better pilot.

Clyde Cessna poses with one of the first airplanes he built in Wichita circa 1917.



With an aircraft and the skills to fly it in hand, Clyde entered the lucrative field of exhibition flying, fulfilling his original goals in aviation. He would ship his airplane from city to city by rail and then take it aloft, earning as much as \$200 for a five-minute flight — approximately \$5,000 in today's money! While he did turns and even figure eights, the conservative-minded Clyde was said to spurn the cheap thrills of aerobatic flying. Instead, he incorporated a unique brand of audience participation into his performances. Flying over the crowd at 1,000 feet he would drop a football from his plane. People in the crowd would rush to catch this ball plummeting earthward, and whoever did so would earn \$5. If no one caught it, the first person to retrieve it would earn \$2.50. Clyde, after all, wanted his ball back!

BUILDING AEROPLANES

Clyde built several airplanes for his exhibition business. Each was an improvement on the last, but all shared one notable characteristic — following the Blériot mold they were monoplanes. The more commonplace biplanes had no place in Cessna's mind.

BACK ON THE FARM

In the years before World War I, Clyde acquired a factory building to construct his aircraft in and even operated a flight school with a reported five students enrolled. However, in 1917 when the United States entered the war, the market for recreational activities like exhibition flying dried up. With no income, Clyde closed his business and returned to a life of farming, seemingly never to return to aviation.

THE FOUNDING OF TRAVEL AIR

After WWI, Clyde continued with his agrarian pursuits and built a successful grain threshing business providing him with some small level of wealth. But his early interest in aeroplanes was restored when Walter Beech and Lloyd Stearman approached the elder statesman of Plains aviation about pooling their money in a joint venture: the Travel Air Manufacturing Company. Clyde would become president in reflection of his comparatively lengthy tenure in aviation — and the fact that he contributed greater funds than his partners to the venture.

The Travel Air Manufacturing Company produced airplanes renowned even today, but the partners had different philosophies about aviation. Cessna was a monoplane man. Beech and Stearman were adherents of the more conventional — for the day — biplane configuration. In reflection of this and perhaps other differences, within a couple of years the founding partners had all moved on. Cessna sold his stock in Travel Air and founded his own airplane manufacturing business once again: the Cessna Aircraft Company.

MONOPLANES

Clyde's belief was that biplanes were the past. The future of aircraft design would be made of cantilever-winged (strutless) monoplanes. While this wasn't the sole driving force for the company over the years, the strutless, fully cantilevered wing was adopted in many of the early Cessnas through the Cessna 195 and even carried forward into the later 177 Cardinal and 210 Centurion.

Clyde's first production design, the Model A series, was an instant hit. The three-to-four seat aircraft reportedly could haul a nearly 1,000-pound payload at 100 mph on only 120 hp. Those are respectable numbers even today, 90 years into the future. The A series was offered with five different engine options, and eventually a little more than 70 aircraft were produced. The Cessna Aircraft Company gained national attention when a Model AW won the 1928 Transcontinental Air Derby between New York and Los Angeles with Cessna test pilot Earl Rowland at the controls.

BOOM AND BUST

Clyde continued to improve Cessna's aircraft offerings with the Model BW, CW-6, and the DC-6. By the end of 1928, interest in Cessna aircraft was booming, but Clyde needed to raise capital to produce his aircraft in numbers. To do so he sold controlling interest in his company to outside investors just as the stock market crash was beginning to be felt. The burgeoning aviation market began to collapse, and the success of Cessna's designs was lost in a continually spreading economic panic. The Cessna Aircraft Company limped along for a time building and selling gliders, but soon the board of directors shut down production in 1931. The Great Depression swallowed many other early aircraft manufacturers as well, but Clyde, together with

his son Eldon, continued through these dark years by building the C and CR series of custom raceplanes. These would be the last airplanes Clyde was directly involved with.

DWANE WALLACE

Dwane Wallace was born about the time his esteemed uncle Clyde Cessna was making his first flights. With such a pedigree, he was justifiably enamored with aviation. In 1933 he graduated from the Municipal University of Wichita with a newly minted degree in aeronautical engineering. Dwane's first job was ironically working for Clyde Cessna's old Travel Air partner Walter Beech on the design of the venerable Beech Model 17 Staggerwing. But, in 1934 he conceived the idea of reopening the shuttered Cessna Aircraft factory. Dwane, with the help of his attorney and brother, Dwight Wallace, traveled the country to convince the pre-depression investors in Cessna Aircraft Company to reopen with Clyde in place, once again, as its president. This was a largely symbolic move for Cessna, however. Dwane ran the fledgling company as plant manager while Dwight was the secretary/treasurer. Clyde himself retired from the venture only two years later, selling his interest to his nephews.

Dwane, then not even 25 years old, was now president of Cessna Aircraft Company. He used his business acumen and design skills to build Cessna into the most prolific aircraft manufacturer of our time.

A PIONEER AVIATOR'S LEGACY

While Clyde retired from aviation in the mid-1930s, he lived on for another 18 years farming his land. Clyde died in 1954 at the age of 74. By that point the company he had founded was building the first of the familiar Cessna designs we know today. All in Clyde's vision of the future of aviation — monoplanes.

Clyde got his start in aviation just a few years after the Wright brothers' first flight. He only had a fifth-grade education and never even held a pilot license. Yet, Clyde Cessna's life as a pilot and aircraft builder pioneered the general aviation design and manufacturing industry we know today. *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an airline pilot who also flies the B-29 *FIFI* for the Commemorative Air Force and owns a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.