

Wing walker looks back at aviation history

By Brian Boyce | Posted: Sunday, February 14, 2010 9:52 pm

It's been decades since the baby of her family became a grandmother.

But as Drina Welch Abel spoke of four grandsons now flying planes for a living, the 83-year-old former "wing walker's" memories drifted back to times only gray photos can reach.

"My first memory was being there. We lived on our airport in Anderson," she recalled.

Drina's family tree chronicles the history of aviation. Her brother, Orin Welch, older by 20 years, not only flew planes but designed and manufactured them at the family's airport in Anderson, part of Welch Aircraft Motors Inc. and an industry then in its infancy.

But he was flying long before he designed and manufactured planes, and it was on one of those earlier expeditions that Drina herself became a Hoosier. The family was living in West Virginia at the time of her birth, Dec. 6, 1926, and the entire state was under a polio quarantine, she explained.

But quarantine or not, the family had plans to move to Anderson, Ind. And so Orin, who was barnstorming professionally at the time, flew into West Virginia to scoop his mother and 9-month-old baby sister up and over the guarded state lines, and back to Indiana.

"So I was smuggled out of the state," she giggled inside her Anthony Square apartment on Sunday afternoon.

In a book she authored herself, Orin's federal aviation license is displayed, signed by Orville Wright himself, then chairman of the National Aeronautic Association. Something of an engineering prodigy, Orin discovered airplanes at the age of 10 and was flying solo on home-made models before he was 15.

Their father, John, was a carpenter and farmer by trade. But he and their mother, Lenna, jumped into their son's efforts with full force, helping him open an airport in Anderson and manufacture aircraft. John's carpentry skills came into play as he made many of the wooden wings by hand.

"My mother was a big part of it," Drina recalled of the business side. "She was very intelligent."

Her other brother and fellow pilot, Gomer, also helped in the budding manufacturing plant. Sister Violet, then 10 years old, was the company's first test pilot.

As documented in old fliers, texts and photos, the grand opening and dedication of Welch Field was a national affair. Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly the Atlantic; World War I ace Capt. Weir Cook, for whom the Indianapolis airport was named; World War I ace Maj. Reed Landis; aviation celebrity Eddie Rickenbacker; and Anthony Fokker, flying one of his own Fokker trimotors, all participated in the Friday-through-Sunday airshow that Memorial Day weekend in 1929. Aerial fireworks, parachutes and airplane races for \$3,000 in prize money were all part of the festivities.

"I was too little to remember her," Drina, who would have been about 19 months old then, said of Earhart. But amid fuzzy memories of large and confusing crowds, she remembers being very thirsty. And the penniless toddler was surrounded by grownups with eyes in the sky, so she didn't get one of the Coca-Colas being sold at her family's event. "And that's what I remember about Amelia Earhart being there," she laughed.

The Welch companies produced dozens of models of aircraft as well as patents for, among other products, one of the first tubeless airplane tires.

Tragically though, when Drina was 12, her mother died in a car wreck while riding with Orin. Orin, who flew DC-3s on "The Hump" through India and Burma during World War II, was reported missing in action March 13, 1943. The airport in Anderson closed after a fire.

But for Drina, the feel of the wind and the noise of those early planes is as much a family legacy as her own name. Moving to Terre Haute with her husband, Gene, in 1962, she raised seven children, including local attorney Eric and businessman David. After retiring from a career selling life insurance, Drina and her son, Alan, began a publishing company which produces, among other works, books about airplanes and aviation history. To date, the company has published 50 titles, 10 of which she authored herself. The company is currently producing a 10-book series on the Waco line of planes.

Drina and her son relocated the publishing business for a time to Destin, Fla., but Hurricane Ivan wiped out her home and she moved up to Chicago with her daughter and son-in-law, Cindy and John Ziegler, before eventually returning to Terre Haute. Her apartment in Anthony Square, full of aviation nostalgia and books waiting for publication, was ready for packing Sunday afternoon, as she plans to reunite with her daughter's family as they themselves are moving to Jacksonville, Fla.

Her son David, a carpenter like her own father, owns Top Drawer Cabinets in Terre Haute, and said

he enjoyed flying earlier in his own life. “But then I had kids and it became expensive, so I had to quit,” he said.

But his own sons caught the bug early on, and Capt. Brandon Abel, 30, currently serves in the U.S. Air Force as a test pilot, while Elliot Abel, 25, operates a charter service out of Terre Haute. Meanwhile, their cousin Matthew Ziegler is a missionary pilot in Alaska, and his brother, Benjamin, is a private pilot.

Flipping through old black-and-white photographs in his mother’s apartment, David noted the number of family-owned planes lined up alongside their airport’s runway, joking about what they’d be worth today.

“Back in the ’30s, aviation wasn’t very old,” he said, commenting on the attraction, as well as the innovation in engineering and production.

In 1977, at 50 years old, Drina got one more chance to walk on the wild side.

Having grown up and attended air shows all her life, Drina was well-acquainted with many of the performers. While visiting the air show at Terre Haute’s airport that summer, she ran into an old friend piloting a Stearman biplane for demonstration. And just for kicks and a little publicity, she got on board and performed a “wing walk.”

“Oh, I remember every minute of it. It was wonderful. You could fly without anything around you,” she said of standing on the wings for the 20-minute, 100 mile-per-hour ride at 1,000 feet. “It was chilly, even in the summertime. It was a little breezy,” she chuckled.

Today, her speech affected slightly by strokes, Drina still cherishes the memories, particularly of walking on the wings of that fast-moving airplane.

“I would have done it again had I had the opportunity,” she said.

Brian Boyce can be reached at 812-231-4253 or brian.boyce@tribstar.com.