Aerial agriculture

JENNINGS, La. — Airplanes are becoming more and more a necessary factory in rice and area agriculture, according to views expressed at a meeting of the parish flying service.

Three flying services operate in the immediate area — Leonard's Flying Service in Jennings, and Lyon and Nick's flying services in Welsh.

Of the three, Lyon is the oldest in the area as a corporation, dating its operation as such from 1955. Leonard's Flying Service began operation as a corporation in 1957, according to Richard Vicknair, owner of the company.

Nick Notestine, owner of Nick's Flying Service, has the newest of the services in the area. He began on his own last fall.

The three services in the area agree that the use of the airplane is greatly expanding in the agricultural field, primarily because of the efficiency of the plane in many of the farm operations, such as planting, fertilizing and applying herbicides.

It's a challenging business according to Vicknair, "It's getting to where we can do just about everything, short of plowing and harvesting."

He pointed out that agricultural flying is growing yearly.

"There's something new in the business every day," he said. "And the boys in the rice country are probably more precise than any other operation, as far as the agricultural work is concerned."

Vicknair runs the flying end of the Leonard service while the co-owner A. B. Leonard handles the bookkeeping work. Both worked in the Ziegler service when it was in business.

Vicknair said he is in the business because he became interested in it during the war. He found there was a need for more and better agricultural flying services.

"No. 2, it's just about gotten to the point that agriculture can't do without planes," he said.

The Leonard operation has five planes. The plane which is becoming most popular in the agricultural flying business is one which the local services are converting to, the Grumman Ag Cat. It is replacing the old converted trainers in the field and is used extensively in this area, according to Vicknair.

The Leonard operation works within an approximate 25-mile radius of Jennings, Vicknair said. They cover the area from far north as Ville Platte, south to Lake Arthur, west to about Welsh to Reeves, the western end of the rice belt.

Heaviest months of the year for the flying services are during the rice season but they do work year round, doing their work in the winter and early spring.

Vicknair feels there is a good future for the agricultural flying business because the airplane is the most efficient means of handling many crop necessities. The development of the herbicides and the fertilizer industry is also aiding the further development of the services.

Emery Lyon, of the Lyon Flying Service of Welsh, agrees that rice has become almost 100 percent dependent on the services provided by the airplanes, but is not quite as certain of the future of the business.

He believes that there is at least the possibility of the flying services competing themselves out of business. There is a trend toward the expansion of the larger services and a decrease of the smaller ones, according to Lyon, "Volume," he said, "is the only way to make it because the percentage of profit is so small."

Lyon got into the business from the farmer's side. The Lyon family operates a rice farm. "We found that the companies operating at the time didn't offer sufficient service," Lyon and his brother had been interested in flying and were adept pilots by the time they graduated from high school.

"I worked one year for a company that had a dusting business here to see if I would like that type work. After I got into the business, I realized there wasn't that much money to be made in it," Emery said.

The Lyon company branched out into the service business in 1964 and became one of the major distributors of the Grumman Ag Cat. In the U. S. Lyon pointed out, 80 of them are from the Lyon outlet.

They also sell parts and maintenance. "We had at least as much effect in the Grumman developing it as we did in the building of the plane," Lyon said.

Vicknair feels that the flying service end of the business takes too much investment for the return on the money involved. "Such a business requires at least a $30,000 to $40,000 investment," he stated.

Vicknair feels that there's an awful lot of headaches to continue once you get it off the ground.

"Keen competition in the business keeps profits down," Lyon said, adding that the agricultural flying business could be getting itself into real trouble.

Nick's Flying Service is the newest in the area. Nick Notestine, owner of the service, began in the business as a pilot for Lyon Flying Service, working for the company for nine years.

"I've been flying all my life," he said. "I can't remember when I started." He took civilian pilot training prior to World War II and also flew during the war. He was in the service during the Korean conflict also and flew jets during that time.

"When agricultural flying first became prominent, I was one of the few available pilots in the area," he said, explaining how he got into the business. He enjoys the work very much and said that he knows of very few people in the business who don't.

"One thing I would like to point out is that, to many people, the word 'crop dusting' indicates a hazardous way of living. It isn't!" He said that he felt agricultural flying was safer than driving on many of the modern highways. He pointed out that the people who are in the business aren't after just the fast buck. He doesn't know of many people in this business who don't like it and who don't have the concern of the farmer at heart."

Notestine runs a two-plane operation. He flies one of the planes himself and has one pilot, Jack Robertson. Robertson is a graduate of the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He works the peak season with Notestine and during the rest of the year builds custom made farm equipment in connection with the Border Rouge. During the winter months, Notestine handles the flying himself.

An aspect new to the agricultural flying services in this area is night flying, which the Lyon service is planning on experimenting with in the near future in connection with the application of herbicides. The service is presently rigging a plane out for night flying.

One of the major herbicide manufacturers will be watching the experiment closely, Lyon said, to determine whether or not night application is beneficial.