HIGH FLYERS: Aviation Runs In This Family

By Gina Howard

Lafayette businessman and pilot Waldemar "Wally" Toce said aviation just runs in his family.

His father Victor and uncle Charles were pilots, in fact, they invented and released in 1929 what was considered a revolutionary airplane engine, the Hurricane Motor. It was the first fuel-injected airplane engine ever built and Toce said several countries and American manufacturers were interested in the machine, including the Japanese embassy and Ford Motor Company.

According to newspaper clippings from the 1930s, the Hurricane Motor had no valves, used no carburetor and operated with two cycles, instead of four. It was considered revolutionary because it was simpler and had much greater power for its weight than any other engine before it.

The reason the engine never caught on was economic. The Great Depression of the 30s. "About this time the big Depression came and you couldn't sell a watermelon on the street," Toce said. Plans for the engine were laid aside, he said.

Even though the Depression hampered the success of the Hurricane, he said it was still an amazing invention. "It was way ahead of its time. A lot of people wouldn't believe it before they saw it," Toce said.

Charles (left) and Victor Toce, Wally Toce's uncle and father, pose with their new invention the Hurricane motor. The photo was taken in the late 1920s.

Depression, Toce said he and his father began to work on another engine together, but World War II stopped that. Just before Toce began serving with the U.S. Coast Guard, the government confiscated their work.

Toce's father died in 1948 and Toce continued mechanical work by earning two engineering degrees, but land-work was his chosen career.

"I sold my airplane about three years ago, but I haven't given up flying," Toce said. "Flying was always secondary to my oil business."

Since 1972, Toce has been the owner and president of Acadiana Resources, Inc., a company that deals with oil and gas leases. He said he is now working on retiring.

Toce is chairman of the Southwest Louisiana Landmen's Certification Committee, a past chairman of the Lafayette Regional Airport Commission, a member of the executive board of the Evangeline Area Council of the Boys Scouts of America and a charter member of the American Association of Petroleum Landmen.

He was also honored with the Landman of the Year Award from the American Association of Petroleum Landmen.

Toce has bachelor's degrees in geological engineering and industrial education from LSU. He is also a graduate of Lafayette High School.

He is married to Jeris Blanchard, a native of Breaux Bridge, and they have four children.

Wally Toce, at about four years of age, in the airplane that was used to test his father and uncle's invention.

The Hurricane was not his father's only invention. Toce said his father had been inventing things since he was a kid.

"If he decided he wanted to make something, he would just sit down and build it. He invented the first parking meter," Toce said.

After recovering from the Great Depression, Toce said he bought the memorabilia in the mid-70s with the intention of donating it to the airport, but there was nowhere to display it safely until the Lagniappe Club Room opened in July.

Toce said he paid about $3,000 for the pieces in 1977, but he does not know how much more they might be worth now.

"There is a very limited number of these because there is only so much of the fabric that could be cut up," he said.

Five of the seven pieces are on display in the Lagniappe Club Room. The last two will most likely be hung in the airport administrative offices, said Bill Lowry, a member of the airport commission.

The club room was designed for people who frequently fly out of the Lafayette Regional Airport, Lowry said.

For $12 a year, the room gives them a place to watch television, use the telephone, get some work done, or just sit quietly, he said.

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Staff Writer

The Lafayette Regional Airport has acquired several pieces of aviation history memorabilia, thanks to Wally Toce.

Toce, a past chairman of the Lafayette Airport Commission, purchased seven historical art pieces from the Smithsonian Institute's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

Each one is a sketch of an early 20th Century aircraft and a small piece of the plane's original fabric. At the bottom is information about that plane's history.

For example, one is of the 1917 Albatross, which was used in combat during World War I and another is the Wright Ex "Vix Piz" which was first flown in 1911.

Toce said he bought the memorabilia in the mid-70s with the intention of donating it to the airport, but there was nowhere to display it safely until the Lagniappe Club Room opened in July.

All of the original planes depicted in the pictures are restored and on display at the Smithsonian, Toce said.

"They used the money from the sales of the pictures to rebuild the airplanes and hang them in the museum," he said.

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Wally Toce (left), Bill Lowry (center) and Wally Toce show off five of the seven aviation historical pieces donated to the Lafayette Regional Airport by the Toces. The works are displayed in the Lagniappe Club Room at the airport.

Photo by P.C. Piazza

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