Aviation exhibit at public library

LAFAYETTE — “Early Aviation in Louisiana: 1910-1936,” a traveling exhibit about the state’s fascinating flying heritage, will be on view at the second floor of the Lafayette Public Library throughout January, during regular library hours.

Consisting of more than 30 reproductions of historic images, air show posters and other memorabilia, the exhibit traces the state’s flying history through three periods: Early Aviation, Jazz Age and the Golden Age. From the heralded “birdmen” of the 1910 New Orleans Aviation tournament, to one of the first-ever air mail runs, to the establishment of a speed record Mecca in Patterson, the exhibit explores the mile-stones and legendary figure of Louisiana’s part in aviation history.

Stories, myths and dreams of flying have been a part of human history for thousands of years. But it was not until 1783, when the Montgolfier brothers of France sailed over Paris in their hot-air balloon, that people actually floated through the air. In the 1890s, Otto Lilienthal of Germany introduced the first heavier-than-air flying machine, the glider. These inventions and inventors inspired Wilbur and Orville Wright, who constructed and flew the first heavier-than-air motorized machine, an airplane, at Kitty Hawk, N.C., on Dec. 17, 1903.

The Roaring Twenties or Jazz Age was only seven years later that New Orleans hosted an aviation tournament, promising $10,000 in prizes. Thus began aviation in Louisiana as a tool for trade and commerce. During this time local business boosters such as the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce and the Young Men’s Business Club campaigned for federal airmail service and promoted aviation activities. New Orleans Air Line, formed in 1923, delivered mail via seaplanes to streamers bound for South America as well as picked up from incoming ships. The St. Tammany-Gulf Coast Airways provided mail delivery from New Orleans to other southern U.S. cities.

In the 1920s, while barnstorming across the Gulf coast, Wedell met Williams, a prominent businessman in Patterson. The two formed a company and eventually became involved in all aspects of the aviation industry. Their Wedell-Williams Air Service began with two routes to southern cities, established an aviation school with branches across the state and eventually began manufacturing planes at the Patterson facility. Jimmie Wedell designed and raced the new planes. His fastest design was nicknamed the “44” after his Colt .44 pistol. Wedell broke a speed record in this plane in 1933 when he averaged 305.33 miles per hour at a Chicago race.

Aviator James “Jimmie” Wedell with his racer Model ‘44. This image, along with 30 other reproductions of historic images, air show posters and other memorabilia, make up the exhibit, “Early Aviation in Louisiana”.

For more information on the exhibit call the library at 261-5783.