Early Years of Aviation Remembered As A Colorful Experience on Gulf Coast

By Michael Comeaux

Some movies have a tendency to finish with the dashing young pilot, wearing leather helmet and goggles, flying his sputtering biplane into the sunset. His dewy-eyed girlfriend waves goodbye as the crowd cheers and young lads in knickers run alongside the rising plane.

While such romanticized movies are appealing, they don't always accurately reflect common attitudes toward early aviation. But although early aviators were “flying fools” to some observers, those who flew in the 1920's and 30's knew they had a good thing going: flying was great fun and increasingly useful.

It was aviation, for example, that finally made it possible for struggling cattlemen in the Gulf Coast marshes to afford decent health precautions for their herds.

The late Dr. Louis Leonpacher of Lafayette was a veterinarian whose practice centered on large animals - cattle, sugar cane mules, dairy cows - and innoculation of whole herds was a main part of his work.

Flying to Cameron, Bell City, Pecan Island, or Chenier Au Tigre, he utilized the versatility of airplanes. By swooping down into the marshes in an open-cockpit flying machine, Leonpacher converted a three-day boat journey into a one-day round trip.

Leo Gros was one of the fliers who piloted Dr. Leonpacher until the veterinarian learned to fly. Gros, who at 71 still puts in a 10-hour day in his Lafayette business, describes early navigation techniques as “approximate, at best.”

Airspeed, for example, was indicated by a small metal paddle mounted on a spring resembling a large safety pin. As the wind pushed against the paddle, the spring would give a little; the faster the air-speed, the farther the paddle would be pushed along a scale. Calibrating the airspeed indicator was an interesting procedure. The pilot would take off with an accomplice and fly low over a railroad track.

As the plane passed a railroad milepost, the cohort would hit a stopwatch and time the interval until they reached the next milepost. After calculating their actual airspeed, they’d adjust the indicator and check it with the stop watch again.

Mrs. Leonpacher (who after her husband's death became Mrs. John S. Doba) says unequivocally that the pilot's main concern was fuel. When Mrs. Doba completed her first solo flight in 1932, she said, “there wasn't anything more important than the gas gauge.” It is interesting that Dr. Leonpacher did not learn to fly until after he had urged his wife to take up the sport.

In addition to a fuel indicator, most planes were limited to indicators of oil pressure and temperature, and a tachometer. (They also had no brakes.)

Detriot's 1971 cars tell a driver more than early pilots knew about their planes. But of course American ingenuity triumphed, and without sophisticated navigation equipment pilots found a handy tool. It was the “iron compass,” more commonly known as “the railroad.”

“Railroad tracks were an exceptionally good navigational aid,” points out early aviator Randolph Briant of Lafayette. “If you got lost, all you had to do was follow railroad tracks and you'd eventually come upon something. Thank goodness,” he added, “not too many railroad tracks deadend.”

Briant took his first flying lesson about 1921. He remembers his instructor as “an old, gray-haired guy who had worked for the Wright brothers.”

Briant recalls that the twin steeples of the Church of the Assumption in Franklin were a particularly good landmark in this area: “You could see the twin steeples shining miles away in the sunlight.” Church-