Hilda Destroys Last Of Possible U.S. Air

Hurricane Hilda's October gusts smashed a 30-year-old hangar at a small airport in St. Mary Parish, destroying the last evidences of what could have become the aviation center of the nation. A daring young pilot and his millionaire friend launched an air empire during the 1930's at the little town of Patterson. Among those who came to view the plane and meet the pilot was Harry Williams-a native of Patterson, and heir to a vast lumber fortune.

Williams was immediately attracted to the soft-spoken, shy young aviator from Texas. The meeting led to the formation of a company headed by the two men which promoted the sale of airplanes, the construction of airports and the use of planes for mail service.

It was a somewhat unlikely companionship, the partnership of Wedell and Williams, but it contained the chemistry which provided a great boost to the industry. The company was one of the major industries of its time.

Wedell-Williams air service was established in 1928. The date was Sunday, June 24, 1934, and he was piloting a small plane called a Gypsy Moth, constructed by another company.

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Vestige Center

The nation with the death of Williams on May 19, 1936, Wedell's brother, Walter, also a vital force in the company, was killed in a plane crash on Aug. 19, 1935 in the Mississippi Sound near the Gulf of Mexico.

A reported $175,000 was paid for the company's mail run between Houston and New Orleans, and for the company's other assets.

Memories, even of the great, fade fast, and the only visible evidence of the once-dynamic business is the small passenger waiting room of the Wedell-Williams air service at Patterson. The original hangar at the airport, which was destroyed in October by Hurricane Hilda, and little has come of a proposed plan to erect a permanent monument to the pair who were, three decades ago, as well-known as any within the state.

Pair Honored in 1959

In special ceremonies honoring Wedell and Williams at the airport in Patterson in May, 1959, many leaders in the field of modern aviation lauded the pair, saying that, had they lived, Louisiana today would probably count the production of planes as one of its major industries.

Welleron's old friend and former competitor, Turner, president of the Roscoe Turner Aeronautical Corp. of Indianapolis was one of the speakers for the event. He said there was an excellent chance that St. Mary Parish in Louisiana rather than the West Coast would have become the aviation production center of the country had the Wedell and Williams company survived.

Williams, who was married to the stage and screen star, Marguerite Clark, was considered one of the top magnates of the aviation industry in the early 1930's. His company, with headquarters in Patterson, operated the Southern Air Express, the best known of all the companies in Louisiana with the flight of Wedell's racing planes.

Others Sought Advice

The company had become so well known that aviation groups from various sections of the country frequently consulted the Louisiana firm when plans were being made for the construction of a new airport.

As bright as the future seemed for aviation in Louisiana, it lost out to other areas of the nation.