Wedell and Williams dominated golden age of aviation racing

What were some of the fastest airplanes in the world and a lot of aviation history are housed in a little hangar-turned-museum on Hwy. 182 in St. Mary Parish near Patterson. It was once the base for JIMMIE WEDELL and HARRY WILLIAMS, who were among the biggest names in aviation in what may have been the golden age of flight.

They were unlikely partners. Jimmie was blind in one eye, timid, barely educated, and from a poor family. Harry was the son of one of the richest men in southeast Louisiana, educated, a playboy who married a movie star. But he had the financing and know-how and Jimmie—well, Jimmie was a natural-born engineer who loved to fly as fast as he could.

Jimmie was born in Texas City, Texas, in 1900. His mother died when he was an infant and he was reared by a bartender father who barely kept ends met. He quit school early, because he was busy putting together his first airplane from the scraps of two others that had crashed. It didn’t matter that he’d never flown and didn’t know how to fly. When the plane was finished, he took an hour-long course from a pilot who happened to be in town, took off in his own plane, and never looked back. Before long Jimmie was making a living barnstorming around Texas and Louisiana.

He wanted to fly for the Army in World War I, but the Army wanted pilots with two good eyes. So he found another way to use his talents, carrying guns and rum-runners across the U.S.-Mexican border. That avocation may have first stirred his interest in fast planes.

When the war ended, government planes began to patrol the border, and they were much faster than Jimmie’s homemade jobs. He figured he’d better get out of the gun-running business, or get a faster plane. In the end, he did both.

Jimmie and Harry met and formed the Wedell-Williams Aviation partnership in 1929, clearing a landing strip at the Williams family’s Calumet Plantation near Patterson. They taught flying, carried freight, and built up the business.

By the middle 1930s, their planes flew weekly from New Orleans to St. Louis via Jackson, Miss., and Memphis, Tenn., and made a daily run from Baton Rouge to Alexandria, Shreveport, and, later, Dallas-Fort Worth. In 1934, the company got the contract to carry the mail between New Orleans and Houston.

But while Wedell-Williams operated commercial flights from Baton Rouge and New Orleans, their mechanics at the Patterson air strip worked on racers. Part of the plan was to build faster planes that would help land bigger mail contracts, but part of it was just for the fun of flying fast.

They began racing regularly in 1930, with mixed results. But they kept designing and tinkering, and it paid off. By 1932, Wedell-Williams planes dominated racing.

In 1933, Wedell-Williams planes finished first and second in the New York to Los Angeles National Air Race, and they finished one-two-three in the prestigious Thompson Trophy Race that lured all of the fastest planes in the world. That same year, Jimmie became the first pilot ever to officially fly at more than 300 miles per hour, setting a new world speed record of 305.33 miles an hour.

Other fliers began to avoid races Jimmie was scheduled to fly, figuring they had no chance.

Indeed, Jimmie Wedell was on top of the aviation world on June 24, 1934. He was the speed king, aviation’s most successful designer of racing places, and the holder of more records than any other flier. But that day, something went wrong with his airplane as he flew near Patterson. He died in the crash.

His partner, Harry Williams, died two years later, on May 19, 1936, when his plane crashed while taking off from the Baton Rouge flying field.

About a year later, MAR- GUERITE WILLIAMS, Harry’s widow sold the company’s assets to another nationally known pilot, EDDIE RICKENBACKER. The Wedell-Williams fleet and its transport contracts helped him put together the company that became Eastern Air Lines.

AROUND AND ABOUT: When I listed Lafayette snowfalls several weeks ago, I left out Feb. 12, 1956, when 3 inches fell, about an inch of it staying on the ground for a day or so. Add it to your list.

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