

JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

Beechcraft

Setting the bar

BY JEFF SKILES

WALTER BEECH WAS AN ACCOMPLISHED MAN who sprung from humble roots. With only modest education, he became the president of a major aircraft manufacturer and built the most iconic aircraft of his time. After his death, Walter's wife, Olive Ann, took over the presidency of Beechcraft and continued to manage it into the Space Age. Together they were aviation's first, and perhaps only, power couple.

Walter was born in 1891 at the close of the 19th century. He was raised in south-central Tennessee and only possessed a grade school education. Like most early pioneers in aviation, however, he was extraordinarily gifted in mechanical ability. About the time he entered his teenage years two gentleman from Dayton were making their first first powered flights at Kitty Hawk, but Walter's interests were centered around machinery — engines, farm equipment, and automobiles.

In 1911, Walter moved to Minneapolis for a job as an apprentice automobile mechanic and occasional driver. It was there that his interest turned to airplanes when he and a friend purchased a damaged Curtiss biplane. They repaired the Curtiss to flying form, and, in this, Walter learned to fly.

With the entry of the United States into World War I, Walter joined up and lent his mechanical aptitude by repairing aircraft engines in Texas. He earned a position as an enlisted airman after the war, but postwar budget cuts soon had him seeking civilian employment. Early aviation was a tumultuous industry with well-known names moving from company to company with unusual momentum. Walter was no exception. After leaving the Army, he worked as a pilot and manager at several companies before joining with Clyde Cessna and Lloyd Stearman to form the Travel Air Manufacturing Company in 1925.



TRAVEL AIR MANUFACTURING COMPANY

The Travel Air product line reflected the differing philosophies of the company's leaders. Travel Air produced open-cockpit biplanes along the more traditional thinking of Walter and Lloyd, and it also manufactured a line of larger, high-wing, single-engine transport aircraft probably reflecting Clyde's influence.

Travel Air was also active in the newfound sport of air racing. The 1920s and early 1930s were the golden age of air racing. Both race-course style pylon racing and long-distance endurance racing excited the nation's interest. Travel Air was active in both, with its Travel Air 5000 high-wing transport participating in long-distance flights and its line of Travel Air Type R Mystery Ships being perennial favorites on the pylon racing circuit.

The revolving wheel of aviation continued to turn, however, and within a few years both Clyde and Lloyd left the company. Travel Air merged into the burgeoning Curtiss-Wright Corporation in response to the economic crisis of the late 1920s. Walter stayed on as a vice president of Curtiss-Wright and in 1931 became president of the conglomerate.



OLIVE ANN

Around this time, Walter also married Olive Ann Mellor. Olive Ann had been the office manager at Travel Air and would prove to be far more than a life partner; she became an integral business partner to Walter as well.

As the Depression deepened in the early 1930s, the life of an executive was not to Walter's liking. He didn't enjoy working in New York where Curtiss-Wright was headquartered, and he yearned to be closer to production. In a move that seemed to challenge the convention of the times, he left his position atop the Curtiss-Wright organizational chart, and Walter and Olive Ann used their savings to form the Beech Aircraft Company. Walter was president. Olive Ann was secretary. Their goal was to build the finest aircraft of their time, and their products would be called Beechcrafts.

THE BEECHCRAFT STAGGERWING

Ted Wells joined Walter and Olive Ann's new company as the vice president of engineering, and the product of their dreams was the Model 17. The Model 17 was a luxurious, radial-engine biplane — sleek, streamlined, and fast, with a distinctive orientation of its upper and lower wings. Most biplane designs mount the upper wing leading edge ahead of the lower wing. This is done for reasons of aerodynamic efficiency. The 17 has a reversed, or “negative” stagger that sacrifices some efficiency but gains both visibility for the pilot and, in later models, the ability to retract the landing gear into the lower wing. The negative stagger Beech 17 became known commonly as the Beech Staggerwing.

The speed and cabin comforts of the 17 were well ahead of its time, and it truly was the best business aircraft available in its day. The cabin used the finest materials and could hold five people. Times were still difficult in America, however, as the Depression still held the country in its icy grip. Due to the Staggerwing's hefty price tag, sales were slow. Fewer than 20 of the new aircraft were sold its first year of production in 1933. As the country climbed out of the Depression, though, sales slowly increased. By the start of World War II, more than 400 Staggerwings had been produced, and eventually more than 700 Beech Model 17s would pass through the factory doors.

BEECH 18

The second production success of Beechcraft resembled a smaller version of the Lockheed Electra later made famous by Amelia Earhart. The Beech 18, colloquially known as the Twin Beech, first flew in 1937 and was designed to serve the corporate and small airline transport market. With its aluminum construction, powerful radial engines, and retractable gear, it was, like the Staggerwing, ahead of its time. Also, like the Staggerwing, demand was initially slow. Fewer than 50 aircraft were produced before the onset of WWII, but then an eventual run of 4,000 military model 18s began to leave Wichita. The Beech 18 was primarily used as a general transport aircraft and as a trainer for navigators and bombardiers.

Beech continued to produce civilian versions of the 18 for decades after the war until its final rendition in 1970. Its production run of nearly 33 years was the longest in aviation history until it was eclipsed by another Beechcraft product, the Bonanza.

THE BONANZA

There was a belief among aircraft manufacturers that returning WWII aviators would want airplanes of their own and would make America a bastion of personal air transportation. Beech Aircraft Company was no exception to this thinking and once again produced a clean sheet model that was years ahead of its time, aimed squarely at the personal and business transportation segment, the Beechcraft Bonanza.

Like the Beech models before it, the Model 35 Bonanza represented a step into the future. It featured aluminum construction, a 165-hp horizontally opposed engine, retractable landing gear, and a futuristic looking V-tail. The Bonanza was an instant hit, with 1,500 of the original model 35s being produced in the first couple of years.

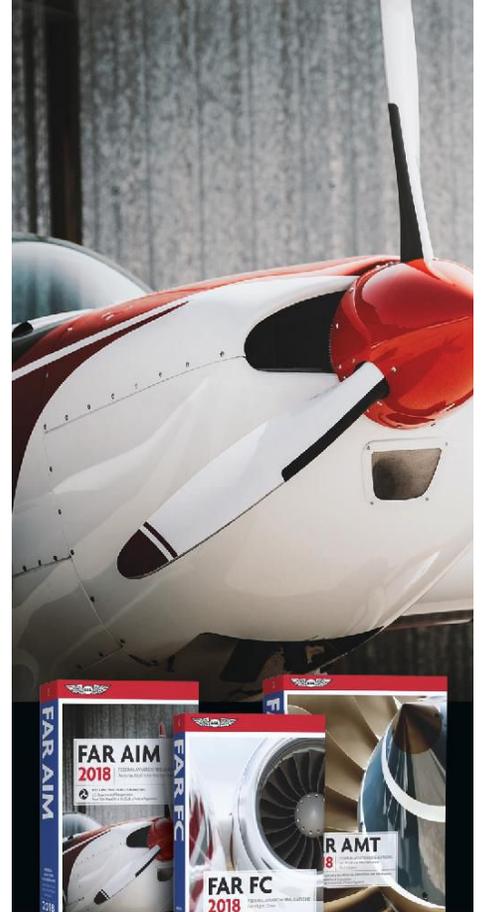
With more than 17,000 produced to date, the Bonanza is one of the most successful aircraft ever built. Last year marked the Bonanza's 70th year in production. The Bonanza even spawned a successful twin engine aircraft called the Beechcraft Travel Air. The Travel Air



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mated a Bonanza fuselage with the tail of the T-34 Mentor military trainer and a new wing boasting two 180-hp engines. Along with the upgraded version of the Travel Air, the Baron, more than 7,000 of these Bonanza-inspired twin-engine aircraft have been produced.

AN INDUSTRY LEADER

With every new aircraft, Beechcraft was known for pushing the limits of what's possible and building high-quality aircraft that set the standards for the industry. Tragically, Walter died of a heart attack in November of 1950. He had shepherded the Staggerwing, Twin Beech, and Bonanza into viable production aircraft, but his death left a void in the company and in aviation with so much still undone.

Throughout the growth of the company, Olive Ann had been at his side, and she assumed the positions of president and chairwoman of the board and became the first woman to lead a major aircraft

manufacturer. Under her guidance the company developed the successful Travel Air, Baron, Queen Air, and King Air. All are aircraft that set the standard in their class. Olive Ann served as president for 18 years before stepping down in 1968, but continued in her role as chairwoman until 1982. She lived until 1993, outlasting Walter by 43 years.

BEECHCRAFT

Walter and Olive Ann Beech spanned the breadth of aviation from the pioneer era to the Space Age, and their company reflected their determination to build the very best aircraft possible. Beech airplanes set the standard for quality and performance from their first Model 17 Staggerwing to today. *EAA*

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