Olive Ann Beech

Olive Ann Beech was among the first women to lead the aviation industry. She and her husband, Walter Beech, each risk-takers in their own way, set a standard for airplane production that helped make Kansas the air capital of the world.

With a mind for numbers even at an early age, Olive Ann opened her first bank account in Waverly when she was seven and helped with family accounts at the age of 11. After graduating from business school, she became secretary for a new aviation company in Wichita. Clyde Cessna, Lloyd Stearman, and Walter Beech were skilled pilots and engineers when they formed Travel Air. They focused on designing and manufacturing a line of biplanes for training and racing. They turned to Olive Ann to make sense of the day-to-day business.

Clyde Cessna left to form his own company and Travel Air continued
to grow. By 1929 they employed 650 workers, but the Great Depression hit the industry and the partners merged with another aviation company. Stearman went his own way, Walter stayed with the reorganized company, and he married Olive Ann Mellor.

By 1932 the Beeches decided they were ready for their own company; he as president, she as secretary-treasurer. Following Olive Ann’s philosophy, “If you want something, you can do it,” they established Beech Aircraft in Wichita with the goal to build the finest airplanes in the world. Their five-seat single engine biplane featured fine interior, staggered wings for visibility and control, retractable landing gear, and speeds greater than the fastest military plane of the day.

Olive Ann made a direct appeal to female aviators Louise Thaden and her co-pilot Blanche Noyes to demonstrate the abilities of the Beechcraft Staggerwing in the 1936 Bendix Trophy race. For the first time women could compete. Engineers built fast, reliable, and
durable aircraft, that were tested long distance by the nation’s best pilots. In their flight from New York to Los Angeles, Thaden and her co-pilot were victorious and set a new world record. As the Staggerwing became popular with racers, the company claimed “It takes a Beechcraft to beat a Beechcraft!”

Beech introduced a twin-engine, twin-tale model in 1937 that was sold worldwide. The Twin Beech filled many needs during and after World War II including civilian travel, utility, cargo, trainers, and photo-reconnaissance.

As the company increased production, Walter became ill. Olive Ann stepped into his shoes, becoming the first female executive in the aircraft industry. During the war years they retooled for the military; nearly all bombardiers and navigators trained in a Beechcraft. After the war was over, production slowed, and they began to diversify the line beyond aviation to keep their trained employees at work. They made vending machines, pie plates, a corn harvester, and the
futuristic Dymaxion House that looked like a flying saucer. When Walter died in 1950, the Korean War had already begun. Olive Ann returned to lead the company through wartime production once again, increasing the staff from 2,500 to 13,000.

She negotiated a contract with NASA to produce cryogenic fuel storage systems to support the space race. Their cabin pressurizing system was used on the successful Gemini-4 mission. Olive Ann oversaw new models for civilian and military use and produced storage systems for six Apollo spacecraft landings and the Space Shuttle. Then in 1980 she merged Beech with Raytheon.

Olive Ann was a private person who gave infrequent interviews, but she did not hesitate in sharing her enthusiasm for the aircraft industry and its future.

“If you enjoy your work, all you have to do is be capable and take the pitfalls along with the good,” she said. “I was very fortunate
throughout my life that I didn’t have to do anything that I didn’t like. I enjoyed what I did.”