Clyde Cessna

Just mention Cessna, and we immediately picture one of the popular small airplanes made in Kansas. Clyde Cessna left a lasting legacy in this state.

Clyde grew up in Rago, Kansas, southwest of Wichita. He was operating an automobile dealership in Enid, Oklahoma, when he witnessed a flight demonstration. In June 1911, after assembling his own airplane from a kit, he and his brother Roy headed to Oklahoma’s Salt Plains for a test.

Clyde called his plane *Silverwing*; she was made of spruce and linen. Sitting in the cockpit, Clyde donned his goggles, took a deep breath, and signaled to Roy to turn the propeller. The engine fired and he adjusted the throttle. When he’d built enough speed, he lifted it up off the ground. The plane quickly went into a spin and crashed in the
ditch. Clyde breathed a sigh of relief, having escaped injury. But Silverwing would require repairs. Again and again over the next few days he tried but failed to make a successful flight. Cessna was injured during one crash, but he didn’t give up. “I am going to make this thing fly,” he said. “Do you hear me? I am going to make this thing fly and then I am going to set it afire and I’ll never have another thing to do with aeroplanes.”

Fortunately, after his success on the 13th attempt, Clyde did not give up airplanes. He encouraged the reluctant plane to lift to 55 feet in the air despite wind gusts. After a brief flight, he brought her back down, ending in a bumpy landing and Clyde and Roy celebrated their victory. Struggling to finance his flights, he earned money presenting local flying demonstrations.

Clyde moved his family back to Kansas and was invited by the Jones Motor Company to build the first airplane in Wichita. Called the Comet, Cessna flew the plane in exhibition flights across the
Midwest, earning respect and setting speed records up to 125 miles per hour.

During World War I Clyde returned to farming. After the war he ready to apply some new ideas to the next generation of airplanes. Clyde joined forces with three other innovators: Walter Beech, an engineer, Lloyd Stearman, a mechanic, and Olive Ann Mellor, a business manager, to form Travel Air Company. In just a few short years these names also became part of Kansas aviation history and helped make Wichita the air capital of the world.