

By KENT DINNEBIER

Over the past century aviation has played a key role in the development of Clarinda and those historic milestones will be celebrated when the community hosts Fly Iowa on Sept. 10-11.

The focal figure in the early development of aviation in Clarinda was Ray Schenck, for whom the Clarinda Municipal Airport – Schenck Field is named.

“There is no way to do an overview of the development of aviation in Clarinda without having an understanding of Ray Schenck and the significant role he played,” Lois Braymen of the Nodaway Valley Historical Society said.

Born in 1899, Schenck first fell in love with flying at the age of 14 when he attended an exhibition presented by Lincoln Beachey at the city fairgrounds in 1914.

“The exhibition in 1914 sparked his interest in flying. He had a chance to talk to Beachey about his plane and flying. He was impressed with Beachey and that image stuck with him,” Ron Schenck, Ray’s son, explained.

In 1927 Ray Schenck embarked on his journey as a pilot by taking flying lessons with Burnham and Miller Flight Service in Council Bluffs.

“It cost him \$20 an hour to take the flight lessons and he had to drive his Model T to Council Bluffs and at that time it was all dirt roads. The instructor flew with you until he felt you were safe to go it alone. Then he got out of the plane and let you do two or three solo landings in front of him,” Ron Schenck said.

At the time Ray Schenck started flying pilots licenses were not being issued. Instead, a pilot only had to complete a solo flight witnessed by an instructor to be allowed to fly.

However, at about the same time as Schenck made his first solo flight, the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA), the forerunner to the current Federal Aeronautics Administration (FAA), was being organized and started licensing pilots. Therefore, Ray Schenck received a pilot license shortly after his solo flight in 1927.

Ray Schenck then purchased his first airplane, an OXX-6 American Eagle, in 1928 at a cost of \$2,800 according to information compiled by the Nodaway Valley Historical Society.

“That was the first time it came to his mind that he would like to be a pilot. In those days there were very few,” Ron Schenck said.

Since airports were few and far between at time, Schenck set about converting a farm field into his first airport in Clarinda.

“He started his airport on the grounds of the current airport. At that time the piece of ground belonged to Essie Davison. He rented that ground from her and built a hangar to house his airplane. He got that going around 1930 and operated that airport until the late 1930s when he sold his airplane,” Ron Schenck said.

Barnstorming was a very popular attraction at that time and Ray Schenck routinely participated in area races and flight shows providing rides to local spectators.

Ray Schenck was also a member of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale for three years and had his membership certificate in the organization signed by its president, Orville Wright.

After selling his American Eagle, Ray Schenck used his farm for a private landing strip until the start of World War II.

“When World War II started in 1942 the government made all airplanes go to an airport designated by the CAA. Red Oak was the only one in this area at that time. That immediately started my dad on a hunt to buy the farm we have now, put an air strip on it and get it designated as an airport to bring the planes back to Clarinda,” Ron Schenck explained.

Ray Schenck purchased 200 acres of land on the southeast edge of Clarinda for his airport and developed a grass landing strip for the airport. Schenck Field was federally approved as an airport in 1942.

However, as the war continued, 25 acres of the farm was taken for part of the development of a Prisoner of War Camp in Clarinda.

On Sept. 12, 1944, a vote was held in Clarinda and citizens nearly unanimously supported the idea of developing a municipal airport, according to a newspaper article provided by the Nodaway Valley Historical Society.

In March of 1947, the city of Clarinda received a quitclaim deed for the land at the POW Camp for the purpose of building the municipal airport.

The Clarinda City Council awarded the contracts for the construction of the municipal airport on May 19, 1948. The total cost of the bid was \$90,259.57 of which \$54,130 was funded through a grant from the CAA, according to records provided by the Nodaway Valley Historical Society.

Also in 1948, Earl Silver was appointed by the CAA as the official inspector for airplanes in Southwest Iowa.

Work on the Clarinda Municipal Airport and its runway was completed in 1949. Although the new Clarinda Municipal Airport was located beside Schenck Field, the two airports operated independently until 1978.

“We operated separately from the Clarinda Municipal Airport and remained active with our airport until 1978 when an agreement was made to close our field,” Ron Schenck said.

Willard Andrew, who was elected president of the Clarinda Flying Club in 1957, served as the Fixed Base Operator for the Clarinda Municipal Airport from 1958 until 1978.

During his service with the municipal airport, Andrew saw the design and use of the facility continue to grow.

“The runways used to be north and south. Now they are more of southwest to northeast. They were repositioned when they lengthened the runway in the 1970s,” Andrew explained.

In 1977, over 1,000 people attended a celebration held in Clarinda honoring Ray Schenck and his 50-year career in aviation.

Ray Schenck passed away on March 19, 1981, but before his death in 1980 the city of Clarinda officially recognized his contributions of local aviation by naming the city airport Clarinda Municipal Airport – Schenck Field.

Ron Schenck and Andrew both said they were pleased that Clarinda would be able to continue to build on its fine history in aviation by hosting an estimated 15,000 visitors during Fly Iowa 2005 on Sept. 10-11.

“I think it’s a fine idea. My dad use to host events like this and we thought we really had a big event if 1,000 people would attend,” Ron Schenck said.

“I think the Fly Iowa event will be a great thing for the city and the community. The airport is a great asset to the community and should be actively promoted with events like this,” Andrew concluded.