

History of the International Flying Farmers

Of all private pilots, Flying Farmers are perhaps the only ones who will tell you their Cessnas and Beechcrafts and Pipers are no different from their combines, tractors, and pickup trucks. After all, airplanes are workhorses too, for hauling supplies, for checking irrigation systems, for compressing the time between the farm and parts store.

Currently based in Mansfield, Illinois, the IFF got its start in 1944 in Stillwater, Oklahoma, when two men decided to visit some flying farmers. H.A. "Herb" Graham, director of Agricultural Extension at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, and Ferdie Deering, farm editor of the Farmer-Stockman magazine, traveled across the state, meeting with different farmer-flyers. One stop was at Henry G. "Heinie" Bomhoff's wheat farm; thinking Bomhoff would be an ideal subject for a magazine feature, Graham wanted to interview the colorful character.

As Bomhoff talked, Graham and Deering learned there were many other farmers who owned and used airplanes in their farming and ranching operations. So they asked Bomhoff (as they had asked the other flying farmers they visited) if he would be interested in meeting with others like himself at the annual Farm and Home Week, hosted by Oklahoma A & M at Stillwater. Graham had an idea: he could bring these aviation-minded farmers together and form an organization. Returning to Stillwater, Graham took his idea to the college president, Dr. Henry G. Bennett. Not only did the president like the idea, he took it one step further—he imagined a national organization. Through the combined efforts of Bennett, Graham, Deering and Bomhoff, invitations to an organizational meeting at the college campus were sent to all known state farmer-pilots.

On Aug. 3, 1944, the meeting was held and the Oklahoma Flying Farmers Association was born. The following year, after the idea had spread to other states, Bennett's vision became reality. On Dec. 12, 1945, the National Flying Farmers Association was incorporated under Oklahoma law.

Airplane ownership then was not so very complicated. Farmers fixed their own tractors, and likewise, they fixed their own airplanes too. And, if they couldn't find a part, they made one. Farmers were very creative in their use of airplanes. During harvest time, they would land their airplanes in the fields to talk with the harvesters. One husband-wife team used its Piper to locate 200 prized Herefords scattered throughout a thousand-acre pasture. Sometimes the farmers-ranchers set their airplanes down in pastures during calving time to check on their livestock. As the first leader of the Oklahoma group, Heinie Bomhoff, had 4,000 hours to his credit, most of it flown at less than 100 feet while hunting coyotes. (Bomhoff, a self-taught flier, went on to teach some 200 of his neighbors to be pilots.)

Sometimes the airplane was used to deliver groceries and livestock feed, to deliver the mail, and at least once, to deliver a subpoena via air drop. As Texan Hiller L. Hess pointed out in 1948, the aircraft can serve many purposes for many people. "Like the other fellows, our planes help us find our cattle," said Hess. "But here's a new use for the plane that hasn't been mentioned there is a real-estate man over our way that got the idea of buying farms by picking them out from the air. He takes his customers up and shows them the condition of the land from the air." Today, the airplane continues to serve as a farm workhorse.

Members use their aircraft to monitor irrigation systems, check livestock and the development of crops, dust fields, and especially to deliver and pick up supplies and parts. Flying Farmers say that when the combine has broken down in mid-harvest and the nearest part is 100 miles away, that's when they truly appreciate "having wings." As a national organization (Dec. 12, 1945, through 1961) and an international organization (1961 and on), Flying Farmers has made a definite impact on general aviation.

Over the last 50 years, the influence of the association has positively affected members and non-members across North America. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the National Flying Farmers Association played an important role in the development of tax rulings on equipment deductions, renter's insurance for pilots (now a popular item), and the specific design of aircraft for aerial applications, as opposed to modifying existing war-surplus or passenger aircraft. In 1947, Luscombe Airplane Corp., realizing the true importance of the budding organization, surveyed Flying Farmers, and based on their comments, designed the Silvaire, a four-place, all-metal aircraft that promised to fulfill farmers and ranchers' needs and desires. During this same period, Stinson created its "Flying Station Wagon" and dealers offered members free flight instruction. The 1948 Ryan Navion, with its rugged exterior and removable seats that made more room for cargo, was advertised in the association magazine as "the plane you said you wanted." Cessna Aircraft courted the association too. Farming is big business... use business' newest tool!" read a 1948 ad explaining the benefits of owning a Cessna 190 or 195

The NFFA, and later the IFF, maintained close ties with many of the aircraft companies and aviation manufacturers. Companies that manufactured agricultural products also hopped on the Flying Farmer bandwagon. As the association grew businesses vied to fund scholarships, give away door prizes, and sponsor a variety of Flying Farmer events. Then in 1977, as the IFF's membership peaked at about 11,000, the farming economy began a downward spiral. Within a matter of years the general aviation economy was hit by increased fuel and operating costs, more restrictive federal regulations on maintenance and operation, and manufacturers' product liability litigation. Flying Farmers, individually and as an association, found themselves in the midst of an economic storm.

As the wind blew and clouds rolled in, companies dropped their sponsorships and Flying Farmers dropped their memberships. As the numbers of farmers and pilots--and particularly farmers who were also pilots--shrank, so did the IFF's potential membership base. In 2004, Flying Farmers proved they have the fortitude to weather all kinds of storms, whether natural or economic. As our membership ages, we are losing some. The current count is 275 families or 455 adult members.

But what has chased the storm clouds away are the dedication and commitment of so many Flying Farmers who take pride in the past but set their sights on the future.