

In Olney, maker of planes for agriculture, firefighting is doing millions in business

Firm that builds aircraft for agriculture, firefighting is doing millions in business

BY JOHN AUSTIN
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"It's a hell of an airplane," Vaught said. "They're designed to crash and keep the pilot alive."

'Something better'

Snow, a trim, reserved, white-haired Brownsville native and father of two who wears jeans and a short-sleeved sport shirt to work, came of age idolizing barnstorming aviators when flying was still a glamour profession. He got his wings on a dirt strip where he worked to pay for flying lessons, was licensed at 16 and started crop-dusting shortly thereafter.

"The airplanes were awful," he said of the converted World War II Cub and Stearman trainers he started in. "They were underpowered. There was no protection. If I crashed I was kind of like the meat in the middle of a sandwich."

"It was clear that we needed something better," he said.

A born do-it-yourselfer, he began crafting his first airplane, in a dirt-floor garage with no electricity or heat that he rented for \$2 a week, after his junior year at Texas A&M. He taught himself to weld. He used his motorcycle to carry 20-foot pieces of steel tube from his dorm across town to the garage, working in his overcoat to cut the tubular airframe parts with a hacksaw.

"I had enough information to start the wings," said Snow, who brings his lunch to work and occupies an office in one of the company's four pale-yellow metal buildings at the local airport on fields outside town. "I had been a model-airplane builder."

The first Snow S-1 flew in 1953. Then 23 years old, he was an aeronautical engineering graduate student at the University of Texas when he finished building his airplane and began taking deposits for more aircraft from other pilots.

He financed the early airplanes by crop-dusting in Nicaragua. Then disaster struck.

A wing peeled off his radial-engine S-2A in 1957, forcing Snow to bail out.

"I was suddenly without a prototype and without means to finish my FAA certification," Snow said. "I was basically broke."

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"When I hear the word recession, I say, 'What recession?' " said Leland Snow, founder and head of Air Tractor. "What we build here are called utility aircraft. We sold about 101 last year." S-T/RODGER MALLISON



But a friend suggested he pitch his company, then in the Rio Grande Valley town of Harlingen, to small-town businessmen looking to diversify their economic base. He tried two Oklahoma towns and struck out.

Olney, however, said yes, and a few month later he flew into town in a plane with mismatched tires, "a ratty leather jacket" and loans of \$500 to \$2,000 from local bankers. The bankers also arranged to move his fledgling operation's two nearly finished airplanes to Olney — in five cattle trucks. That was January 1958.

'We have no turnover'

The business was originally called Snow Aeronautical but has gone through several names and incarnations. The boss picked the current name from a defunct manufacturer.

"I didn't like the airplane, but I thought the name was good, so I latched onto it," he said.

The original civic gesture appears to have paid off. While the population has dropped since he came to town, good jobs at the factory have helped slow the outflow of people that drains many small Texas towns.

Rick Turner, Air Tractor's operations vice president, said employees can make as much as \$24.50 an hour. There are regular bonuses, and the last layoffs were in 2002. A number of those laid off have been brought back.

When times get tough, Snow prefers to trim everybody's hours rather than lay off employees. He said there's never been a strike.

It's the kind of place where the receptionist addresses the founder by his first name, and the boss does likewise with most employees. There's no security desk or handlers to keep visiting reporters from poking around.

"Most people come here, and they don't leave," said Turner, who started in the wing shop 22 years ago. "Pay's good; you don't have to go to the Metroplex. Takes me four minutes to get to work."

Last year, Snow decided to make the company employee-owned to give workers an incentive to be more efficient.

"I wanted them to benefit," Snow said. "They've worked as hard as I have."

"Only two years . . . we did not make a profit," Snow said. "We've done well. I've done well on a personal basis. It wasn't necessary for me to become super-rich."

Mike Kimbro, who runs a riveting machine and has been with Air Tractor more than 30 years, likes it just fine.

"We have no turnover. The guys are happy," said Kimbro, who calls Snow "the smartest guy I've ever worked for."

'To survive forever'

Snow clearly knows as much about business as he does engineering.

"This year airplanes are scarce," he said. "The farming industry is doing better these days than it has in a long time," with the ethanol boom driving corn production.

And there's firefighting, which he believes is getting a boost from global warming.

"Fires are more frequent and take longer to bring under control," he said.

Air Tractor had 81 percent of last year's market for federal firefighting contracts, Snow said.

But the self-described workaholic, who leaves his desk clean and takes his work home in a box instead of briefcase, is still hungry for more. He, two mechanics and a consultant started a turbine engine project 16 years ago as a way to get a handle on his most expensive item, engines.

"From dead scratch, we built a turbine engine," Snow said of the ongoing project. There's also a new model that he'd like to build for use in the Alaskan bush.

"We used to have a lot of energy," said Snow, who wears hearing aids in both ears.

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Though "I'm good for another 10 or 20 years," he acknowledged that, like for even the best airplanes, fatigue will set in. So he's planned for the next generation of management.

"I just want this company to survive forever," he said.

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