

Ken Hyde: Re-creating history

Ken Hyde, founder of The Wright Experience, is working hard to preserve the work of the Wright Brothers and Charles Taylor, the brilliant mechanic who helped make the first powered flight possible.

"It's the 100th anniversary that sparked this," Hyde said during a tour of The Wright Experience hangar complex on his farm and airfield in Virginia. "It's the last chance we have for public interest, and we have members of the Wright family who sat at the dinner table with Orville and Wilbur. It's the last chance to record this."

Hyde and his crew at The Wright Experience (<http://www.wrightexperience.com>) have made a full-time commitment to recreate what the Wright Brothers and Taylor did and show the genius that they applied to the problem of flight. Not only is The Wright Experience team building extremely accurate replicas of various Wright airplanes and engines; they are also gathering as much historical Wright information as possible and recording it for future use.

For Hyde, aviation is a passion, a way of life. Introduced to flying at an early age, Hyde earned his pilot and mechanic certificates while still in high school. Hyde flew for a living and retired from American Airlines as a captain, after 33 years in Douglas DC-6s, DC-7s, Lockheed Electras, and Boeing 727s. Now he lives at the airport, literally. On a grass strip nestled in the farmlands of northern Virginia is Hyde's home and The Wright Experience. The shop is not what you would expect for a backyard workshop. It is a well-kept, extraordinary facility where Hyde has built replicas of many famous old airplanes, including a Curtiss JN-4 Jenny. As you glance around his shop, you'll see several Wright airplanes under construction, including a 1902 glider, 1903 Flyer, and a Wright Model "B", not to mention miscellaneous Jenny parts.

The restoration business was a hobby, Hyde explained, a one-man shop. "It grew into building airplanes for people and museums." Hyde's interest in the Wright Brothers began in 1992, when he was asked by the Army Aviation Museum to build a replica of the 1911 Wright Model "B". "From all that was born The Wright Experience," he said.

Hyde soon discovered that researching information to build the Model "B" would become a full-time commitment. Wilbur and Orville were afraid of their ideas being copied or stolen, so they recorded little of their research work. As Hyde explained, "It took six months before we cut wood." The discovery of a new artifact can make the puzzle bigger. "For every question you answer, you get four or five more," he said. "We won't get all the answers, but we will leave a legacy." Now, he said, "it's starting to come together. We realized this is the world's greatest detective story that no one's ever told.

"They had good machinists and good tools," Hyde said. "They had the talent to do things we can't today." Hyde learned while trying to make parts the same as the originals that even with modern technology, we still can't make 'em like they used to. One example was some flattened tubing used to make part of the landing gear. "We'd call every tubing manufacturer trying to find somebody to make it," Hyde recalled. It turns out that the Wright brothers made it themselves, by inserting a piece of 3/4-inch flat bar stock inside the one-inch round tube and mashing the tube flat. "They didn't tell us the specifics of construction," he said.

Hyde and his team at The Wright Experience devote a large portion of their time to education, by working



with schools and individual students. One of the greatest lessons that Hyde tries to impart to interested young people who visit The Wright Experience, he said, is that "no matter what your education level, you can do anything."

Most of what the Wright Brothers learned about powered flight was self-taught. Only Wilbur completed high school. Orville dropped out to take up printing.

The other big lesson is the value of mistakes. "The 1901 glider is the most pivotal machine," Hyde said. "Mistakes taught the brothers a lot."

Hyde has also spend a lot of time on what might seem a perfunctory part of the Wright Brothers accomplishments, the propeller. "This is the thing they've been given the least credit for," he said. The propellers that helped make the first flights possible had an efficiency of 81 percent, which is amazingly close to the typical 84- to 85-percent efficiency of modern propellers.

This complicated project is to culminate in a 100-years-later flight in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina on December 17, 2003. It "is not a test of what we know, but of what they knew," Hyde said. "If Wilbur had been alive, we'd have been on the moon a lot sooner.

"The Wrights have endorsed what we're doing," he concluded. "It's very rewarding. I feel like it's a bit of pay-back time, for what I've got out of aviation."—By Harry Kraemer **AM**