

Drapela Flying School

By Kathy Jordan

A couple of Fridays ago, while driving “Miss Billie” Abell on our Friday morning rounds, she gave me another history lesson. This one was about Eddie and Fern Drapela and their flying school.

Because she is a Grand Junction native and graduate of Grand Junction High School, as well as a lifelong resident, Billie is uniquely equipped to remember Mesa County aviation history.

She remembers when the Drapelas’ flying school started in Grand Junction in the late 1930s. Airplanes were mostly tiny two-seaters, and there was no commercial aviation here. It wasn’t the first such school in Grand Junction. There were two earlier schools, one started in 1930 by T.H. Sackett, and Mesa Air Transport Inc, started by Roy “Shorty” Payne. These both lasted until about 1932.

Billie said the Drapelas arrived in Grand Junction around 1937 or 1938 when Eddie came to deliver a plane he was selling to Tom Clark, who owned Clark Music Co. Clark, and a group of businessmen who wanted to learn to fly managed to talk Eddie into staying here and setting up a flying school. They then hired Eddie to teach them to fly.

She remembers that the Drapelas limped along for the first year, living in a small wooden shack at the site of the present airport and giving flying lessons for \$5 each.

Dr. Robert “Bob” Rigg, a long time Grand Junction resident, said that Drapela gave him and his brothers a ride in his J-3 Cub circa 1938. For five pounds of rags Drapela would take people over Grand Junction for a 15 or so minute flight. Rigg also said that Drapela gave him his private pilot check ride on Aug. 11, 1948, just after Bob graduated from high school.

According to a Sentinel report, things started looking up for Drapela in 1939, when the Army hired Eddie to train pilots in connection with a program offered by Mesa College. Ground school instruction was offered at the college, and Drapela had charge of flight instruction.

The first thing Drapela did was train pilots who had been flying for five or six years to be instructors. Four of the pilots to become the first instructors were Tom Clark, Floyd Gregg, Leonard Anderegg and Jack Turner.

One of the students was the late Jim Dufford who joined the Army Air Force, flew over the “Hump” in World War II, and returned to Grand Junction to become a prominent lawyer. The “Hump” was the eastern end of the Himalayan Mountains over which military transport aircraft flew from India to China to re-supply the Chinese war effort and units of the United States Army Air Forces based in China.

Another pilot trained by Drapela was the late Frank Dunn Sr., who ran a salvage yard and automotive shop on South Fifth Street for many years and served as a Grand Junction city councilman.

In January 1943, the Grand Junction hangar was destroyed by fire, along with all but one aircraft. The government stepped up and brought in more training aircraft for the Naval Cadet program which was established at Walker Field that year. The government also made money available to build the first runway capable of handling large transport and commercial aircraft. The cadet classes ranged anywhere from 15 to 90 people during World War II.

According to the Sentinel report, at the peak of Drapela’s operation, he had about 40 people on the payroll, with 30 aircraft operating out of Walker Field and three auxiliary landing strips on Whitewater Hill.

Ron Tipping, who practiced landings and take-offs on the three Orchard Mesa landing strips, described them as an A shape with the bar of the A crossing the lower part of the legs of the A at the east end. The drag strip is now located there.

Billie remembers that in 1944, Joe, her husband, and several other Elks Lodge officers had won the state ritualistic contest and wanted to go to Chicago to the national contest. Because it was wartime, troops had first choice of train seats and getting to Chicago by train would have been difficult, so Eddie flew the six of them to Chicago in his Stinson.

After the war, the flight instruction business began falling off and Drapela sold his flying school to Jim Rigg Jr. He moved to Aspen in 1948, living there for about a year before going to Denver where he operated Eddie Drapela Flying Service. Drapela died March 22, 1967, in Denver.

