

By Kathy Jordan

Dr. Robert "Bob" Rigg, a Mesa County ophthalmologist, native and flying enthusiast, grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, along with Western Colorado's developing flight industry.

When I received an Email a few weeks ago from Bob, he shared some of his local memories including a short paragraph about Eddie Drapela, whom many long-time residents consider the "father" of Western Colorado aviation. Coincidentally, a couple of days before I received Bob's Email I had just finished the Drapela story that ran last week. I felt the information Bob shared with me needed to be shared with today's readers.

As Bob said, "There is much about Drapela that could be written and said".

Drapela gave Bob his first plane ride in 1938, when he was seven years old. He also taught Bob, his brother, Jim, and many other pilots of the 1930's and 1940's to fly. Ten years later, Drapela gave Bob his private pilot's check ride in August 1948.

As they became friends, Drapela shared much of his early flying history with Bob. According to Bob, Drapela was a "barnstorming" pilot in Nebraska in the 1920s and early 1930s--one of the last such pilots. Drapela told Bob about racing with cars along the Nebraska roads in the farm country. He could catch up on the corners as the cars turned on the section lines, but the cars were faster on the straightaways.

Bob and his brothers, Jim and Jack, were fanatical about airplanes and flying. Drapela had taken them for rides a couple of times as youngsters. They paid him with five pounds of rags for a 20-minute ride over Grand Junction.

Bob recalled that on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, the day of the Pearl Harbor attack by the Japanese, an Air Show was being held not too far from the present Grand Junction airport. Drapela's Beech Staggerwing was the best-performing aircraft at the show. There were also three or four J-3 Cubs with 40 and 65 horsepower and a few other "early vintage" planes. Some of the aircraft had tail skids and, and one—a Taylorcraft--may have had a tail wheel, in his recollection.

Bob said the show was in full swing in the afternoon when the public address announcer came on and asked all Daily Sentinel paperboys to report immediately to The Daily Sentinel building for an emergency publication. When the three Riggsses pedaled their bikes to their Wellington Avenue home after the show, they heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Bob said it was only a few days later that many young men, both in and out of high school, enlisted in the military.

Grand Junction lost a good young man at Pearl Harbor that day when his ship was hit, Bob recalled. Phillip Edgar Massey, from the Unaweep Canyon, died during the Dec. 7 attack.

In 1945 Bob flew to Chicago with Drapela in a Beech Staggerwing. He said that they barely got out of Chicago before V-E Day celebration started. Bob, just a 14-year-old kid at the time, was riding in the right front seat all the way to Chicago and back.

Bob said that on one of Drapela's charter trips to Denver, passengers were George Parsons, a local jeweler whose business was the forerunner of Page Parsons; Leo Prinster, one of the owners of City Market; and Dr. Jim Rigg, his father. They were flying back in the beginning darkness of a summer night with thunderstorms starting on the Western Slope, there was lightning and Grand Mesa, and the mountains east of town could only be seen when the

lightning bolts came crashing down. It was a wild trip, but they all landed safely, a bit sick and extremely relieved.

Bob's brother, Jim, bought the flying service from Drapela about 1947. Bob said the school was busy because all the former GIs wanted to learn to fly, especially since their instruction was paid through the GI bill. Bob had the pleasant job of driving around town to pick up the student pilots-- all World War II Veterans--taking them to the airport for their 5:30 a.m. flying lessons, and taking them home afterwards.

Bob summed it up nicely when he said "Eddie Drapela, Jim Rigg, Don Wegner, Rocky Warren, and many other early-day postwar pilots all helped make aviation what it is today in the Grand Valley. Great times! Great era!"