

**An Olive Beech:** She was a pioneer businesswoman, one of the very first females in American history to lead a major corporation. In the 1970s, Fortune magazine called her one of the ten highest-ranking women executives in major American corporations.

In a small Kansas city back in the 1920s, she received her education in home study and night school. After studying at the American Secretarial and Business College in Wichita, she spent four years working in an office as general manager/bookkeeper. She was a woman in business in a businessman's world. She was Olive Ann Mellor.

In 1924, she took a position as bookkeeper-secretary at Travel Air Manufacturing Company in Wichita owned by Walter H. Beech. She quickly advanced to officer manager, became the virtual finance department, and secretary to Mr. Beech. At Travel Air she learned aircraft manufacturing as well as the business of air-travel operations. In the those days, aircraft production was a new and a risky financial venture. Her business and financial acumen were a perfect compliment to Walter's talents for design and production.

By 1929 Travel Air was the world's largest commercial aircraft manufacturer. That same year the stock market crashed. Faced with dwindling sales, Walter merged Air Travel with Curtiss-Wright Corporation, a large aviation conglomerate. He served as president and ran the Wichita and St. Louis plants. When the Wichita plant had to be closed, he became vice-president of sales and needed to move to New York. The year was 1930. That same year Walter Beech and Olive Ann Mellor married and together moved to New York.

The new "Mrs." became a traditional stay-at-home wife. But after two years, during the darkest days of the Depression, Walter and Olive Ann dug deep into their savings, returned to Wichita and together founded the Beech Aircraft Company. With Walter as president, Olive Ann as secretary-treasurer, and a handful of employees, they went to work in a small abandoned Cessna factory they rented and set out to design and build the finest airplanes in the world.

The first Beechcraft was the classic Model 17 single-engine Staggerwing biplane that remained in continuous production through 1948. In 1934 in order to handle growing production, the company moved from the small factory to the former Travel Air facilities, Beechcraft's future permanent home.

In 1936 savvy Olive Ann suggested that winning the 1936 Bendix coast-to-coast speed dash would be even more impressive for the corporation if their aircraft, had a woman as its pilot. Her suggestion had wings. Louise Thaden and Blanche Noyes flashed across the Los Angeles finish line to win the Bendix trophy in a record 14 hours and 44 minutes after departing from New York.

That same year, the growing company incorporated with Olive Ann as a member of the

board of directors. As the company grew, so did the Beech family. Their daughters, Suzanne and Mary Lynn, were born in 1937 and 1940 respectively, and Olive Ann filled the dual role of businesswoman and mother. By 1938, the company had survived the lean years of the Depression and reached sales in excess of \$1 million dollars.

But in 1940, with the eruption of World War II in Europe, demands for warplanes were skyrocketing. Beechcraft suspended all commercial production and geared up for defense manufacturing. The Chinese were using Staggerwings as ambulances and Twin Beeches as bombers in their struggle against the invading Japanese, and the U.S. Army Air Corps converted the Staggerwing into a military transport.

Just as the company entered into unanticipated war time production, Walter became seriously ill and was admitted to long-term hospitalization. After fifteen years of working together with Walter, Olive Ann stepped into the leadership role without hesitation and steered the company through the turbulent war years.

One of her first fiscal actions was to arrange millions of dollars in loans to finance plant expansion for the changeover to military production. Employment reached 14,000 during the war years manufacturing more than 7,400 military Beechcrafts and thousands of assemblies for other major aircraft firms under subcontract.

As chief executive in charge during this period of expanded World War II production, she won the confidence and admiration of executives throughout the industry. In the course of her tenure as executive head the firm more than doubled its sales.



When Walter returned, the company was meeting and keeping pace with the flood of military orders. Almost all U.S. navigators and bombardiers learned their skills in Beechcraft planes during World War II. And the company received five Army-Navy “E” awards for efficiency.

As well, during her leadership in the 1941 rapid wartime expansion of the aviation industry Mrs. Beech was chosen by the Wichita Club of the American Federation of Soroptimists (international association of clubs for professional and business women founded in California in 1921) as the member whose activities had been most outstanding.

In April 1943, the *New York Times* named her as one of the twelve most distinguished women in America. In August that same year she was one of five women invited to the American Bankers Association forum to participate in a panel discussion of women's part in the war effort.

When the war ended Walter and Olive Ann were ready to go forward with post-war operations. Pent-up commercial demand during the war years resulted in hundreds of new orders for general aviation planes.

However, with the beginning of hostilities in Korea, there again was the emergency demand from the military forces for aviation support. Faced with a mountain of defense orders, Olive Ann arranged for a \$10 million loan to procure material, purchase parts and again meet a payroll that jumped from 2,500 employees to more than 13,000. The year was 1950.

But also in 1950, an unfortunate fatal heart attack ended the life and career of Walter Beech one of America's greatest aircraft designers and industrialists. Olive Ann was elected president and chairman of the board and took over the reins of the company, permanently. At the time she became head of Beech Aircraft Corporation, she also was serving a term as international president of the Women's International Association of Aeronautics, Inc.

In the mid-1950s, Olive Ann led Beechcraft's pioneering first steps into the Space Age by establishing a research and development facility to produce cryogenic systems for NASA's planned space missions. Under her guidance, Beechcraft continued its growth through deliberate, planned policies of expansion and diversification. She oversaw an early entry into the nation's space program, developed a line of missile targets for training, and acquired a wide variety of subcontracts from other major aerospace manufacturers.

Beechcraft continued its advances in missile targets by developing a high altitude supersonic target for the Department of Defense, a variable speed training target for the Army, a tactical expendable drone for the Air Force, and the low altitude Sea Skimmer for the Navy. The company also continued its role in exploration of space by producing storage systems for the six Apollo spacecraft landings on the moon, and later for the space shuttle Orbiter.

In 1951 she was selected "Woman of the Year in Aviation" by the Women's National Aeronautical Association, and the following year was awarded the Lady Hay Drummond

Hay Trophy. She was the first woman awarded the National Aeronautic Association's Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy. She was a member of the advisory council of the Kansas State Aviation Commission, and held offices in the Kansas Women's Aeronautical Association. In 1954, Southwestern College conferred on her the honorary degree of Doctor of Science in Business Administration.

Another milestone came in 1956 when the company introduced "Travel Air." This model possessed an unmatched ease of flying. In 1960, Beech introduced the majestic new twin-engine "Queen Air" series, as well as the competitively priced single-engine "Debonair" and the sleek, fast swept-tail "Baron" soon to become one of the most popular planes in its class.

Pursuing diversification of manufacturing, Olive Ann teamed Beechcraft with other major aircraft firms to produce assemblies for the jet fighters, transports, and helicopters of McDonnell, Lockheed, Convair, Republic, Martin, and Bell Helicopter. The company set an all time sales high in 1967.

By early 1968, she prepared for the future when she announced the election of Frank Hedrick to replace her as president while she remained as chair of the board. As an executive team, Olive Ann and Frank continued to utilize the policies which had guided the company for thirty-six years, while also investing heavily in product research and development.

In February 1980, the decision was made to merge Beech Aircraft Corporation with the Raytheon Company, with Olive Ann elected to the board of directors. Two years after the merger, Olive Ann retired and was elected Chairman Emeritus of the company she and Walter had co-founded fifty years prior.

Universally recognized as the First Lady of Aviation, Olive Ann received virtually every award the aviation industry could bestow, more than any woman in aviation history. Both Walter and Olive Ann were inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio, one of only two couples in aviation history to be accorded this honor.

As the first woman to head a major aircraft company, she established a businesswoman's company climate of accomplishment, achievement, and philanthropy. In addition to being known for guiding her company to success, Olive Ann was equally known for her enthusiastic support of cultural, religious, economic and educational programs in her community, state, and country.

She was a strong supporter of the Wichita Symphony, and she helped organize the Music Theatre of Wichita and the Wichita Center for the Arts. Throughout her life she supported education with scholarship programs for Wichita State University, Southwestern College and the Kansas Foundation for Private Colleges.

She was a director of the Sedgwick County Chapter of the American Red Cross, and a

member of its Blood Service Committee. She was on the board of directors of the Salvation Army and also served as vice-president-at-large and member of the general board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. She was active in the National Business and Professional Women's Club, served on its Vocational Advisory Committee; and belonged to the R.E.D. Club of Business and Professional Women.

On July 6, 1993 at age 89, Olive Ann Beech died at her home in Wichita, Kansas closing her life in which she extended so much of an Olive Beech.

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