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Aircraft Spruce & Specialty Purchases Wag-Aero's Assets... The Tradition, The Friendship, The Service Continues – MidwestFlyer.com

14–17 minutes

by Dave Weiman

If you have ever walked by their booth during EAA AirVenture Oshkosh, Mary Myers and her husband, Bill Read, of **Wag-Aero** of Lyons, Wisconsin, were busy waiting on customers and filling orders. I knew as the years went by, they would eventually have to sell the business or its assets to someone else, as did their predecessors and company founders, Dick and Bobbie Wagner. In June of this year, the assets of Wag-Aero were purchased by **Aircraft Spruce & Specialty Company**, which also has a long tradition of exhibiting at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh, and in the same building – Hangar A – known as the Aircraft Spruce & Specialty Company hangar.

Wag-Aero was founded in the early 1960s by the Wagners in the basement of their home in Lyons, Wisconsin. Dick was flying for Republic Airlines out of Minneapolis at the time and building the business on the side with Bobbie. As the business grew, Dick did what few airline pilots do midway through their career and quit flying for the airlines.

By 1965, Wag-Aero published its first catalog, and in 1971, the company

moved from the Wagners' basement to its offices in Lyons, Wisconsin. Over the years, additions to the original warehouse and manufacturing facility were built, as was an airstrip with two grass runways for customers who preferred to fly in.



Bill Read and Mary Myers of The Wag-Aero Group working the booth at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh

File photo by Dave Weiman

The Wagners built a wonderful business, but after 34 years, they wanted to devote the rest of their lives to missionary work and on September 1, 1995, they sold the company to Bill Read and Mary Myers of Milwaukee.

Like the Wagners, Bill and Mary came from a general aviation background. Bill is a third-generation pilot and once owned a Piper Saratoga. They attended EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh, Wis., and Sun 'n Fun in Lakeland, Florida, each year.

Before purchasing Wag-Aero, Bill and Mary were bankers in Chicago, then later moved to Wisconsin where Mary was president of Bank One in Mequon, and Bill was the chief executive officer of all Bank One locations in Wisconsin with headquarters in Milwaukee. When the banking

industry began to consolidate, Bill and Mary began looking for a business to buy.

After they bought Wag-Aero, they looked for additional businesses to buy which would complement the existing line of Wag-Aero products and services.

In April 1997, Wag-Aero acquired the assets of Viking Aero Manufacturing, which expanded Wag-Aero's product and manufacturing lines to include 23 different types of handheld tow bars.

In October 2002, Wag-Aero acquired the assets of Ground Support Manufacturing, Inc., which further expanded Wag-Aero's product and manufacturing lines in aircraft and airport-related equipment. These products included a full line of aircraft handheld and tug-type tow bars, jacks, oil and fluid drain pans, engine stands, wheel chocks, work platforms, aircraft winches, and a new electric-powered tow bar called the *"Tow Buddy."*

Wag-Aero had more than 95,000 customers in 47 countries, including the United States, Canada, Western Europe, South Africa, Japan, Korea and Australia. Sales were 67% internet and mail orders, 24% phone orders, and 9% over the counter. Wag-Aero published and distributed 600,000 copies of their catalog twice each year, as well as four flyers. The entire catalog was also available digitally on their website.

Wag-Aero, operating as **"Aero Fabricators"** and **"Leading Edge Air Foils,"** manufactured and distributed more than 10,000 items, from complete aircraft kits to seatbelts, engine mounts and bushings; airframe tubing, exhaust systems, gas caps and fuel testers; air filters and replacement elements; oil and oil filters; spark plugs, starters and alternators; brake linings and shock struts; radio antennas, data placards, decals and stencils for lettering and numbering; metal and

wood propellers and spinners; a complete selection of aircraft panel instruments, landing lights and bulbs; batteries, battery chargers and jumper cables; wheels and tires; and wheel pants for practically every model of Champ, Grumman, Luscombe, Stearman, Waco, Fairchild, Stinson, Cessna, and Piper aircraft. If you needed a wingtip, chances are Wag-Aero had what you were looking for, and if by chance they didn't, they would direct you to where you could find one.

The Wagners established "Aero Fabricators" in the mid-1970s. There were three departments within Aero Fabricators: seatbelt manufacturing and repair, welding, and sheet metal fabrication.

The *seatbelt* division manufactured and repaired FAA-approved seatbelts and shoulder harnesses in many styles and colors and had been a leader in the industry in designing and manufacturing shoulder harness installation kits. Oftentimes, seatbelts were received on one day, repaired, and then shipped back to the customer the following business day. In all, Aero Fabricators produced approximately 850 various components.

The *welding* department remanufactured aircraft mufflers and engine mounts to FAA standards. They also produced many new manufactured aircraft exhaust systems, as well as structural components, such as pre-welded fuselages for Wag-Aero aircraft kits.

The *sheet metal* department manufactured gas tanks, leading edges, metal skins and cowlings for many different aircraft, including Wag-Aero aircraft kits, all to FAA standards.

Wag-Aero's first kit aircraft, the "Sport Trainer," is a replica of the Piper J-3 Cub. Later, the "Wag-A-Bond" and the "Sportsman 2+2" were added. The Sportsman 2+2 was one of the first four-place homebuilt aircraft ever created, which could be purchased in kit form.

Aero Fabricators expanded in 2005 with the acquisition of Safe Air Repair out of Albert Lea, Minnesota. Along with the Safe Air Repair acquisition came the FAA licenses to manufacture over 10,000 replacement parts for Aeronca and Taylorcraft aircraft.

Mary Myers not only has a background in finance and accounting, but when they bought Wag-Aero, she became an FAA-designated Manufacturer Inspection Representative (DMIR), so she could personally inspect parts manufactured by Aero Fabricators. Bill Read also became an expert at reading aircraft blueprints and knew every part Aero Fabricators manufactured.

If you own a light sport aircraft, an experimental aircraft, or an ultralight, it may have a ROTAX engine. If so, when it comes to new ROTAX engine sales, repairs, parts, and overhauls, "Leading Edge Air Foils, LLC" (LEAF) was at your service.

LEAF was one of the oldest and largest suppliers of ultralight parts and accessories. Bill Raisner of Peyton, Colo., who passed away in 1999, founded the company in 1975. The company was then sold to Bill Read in August 2000, and the business was moved to Wisconsin.

LEAF became the independent service centre for ROTAX aircraft engines for the central part of the U.S. covering 18 states, and there were 26 independent ROTAX Repair Centres within Leading Edge Air Foils, LLC.

In 2017, The Wag-Aero Group was named "Wisconsin Aviation Business of the Year" by the Wisconsin Aviation Trades Association (WATA) for providing more than 50 years of professional service to the aviation community worldwide!

A lot of very successful aviation business leaders today got their start at Wag-Aero. Among them is Larry Dawley of Dawley Aviation in

Burlington, Wis., who specialized in aircraft exhaust system repairs; Gino Santi of the aircraft parts and supply company Trimcraft Aviation in Genoa City, Wis.; and Carl Hartwig of Eagle Fuel Cells-Etc., Inc. in Eagle River, Wis.

Aircraft Spruce & Specialty Company

Aircraft Spruce & Specialty Company, headquartered in Corona, Calif., acquired the assets of Wag-Aero just prior to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2024. Both companies have been leading suppliers to the general aviation industry since the early 1960s, and the founders of Aircraft Spruce & Specialty, Bob and Flo Irwin, worked closely with Dick and Bobbie Wagner over the years.

Aircraft Spruce & Specialty began as a small supplier of raw materials and hardware to aircraft homebuilders and has grown to become a leading distributor for most major aircraft product manufacturers today, shipping thousands of orders each day to customers worldwide. The company has grown from 30 employees at one location in Fullerton, Calif. in 1980, to over 350 employees at 10 regional distribution centers in the U.S., Canada, and Australia.

The foundation of the company dates back to the summer of 1956 when Flo and Bob Irwin founded "Fullerton Air Parts" at Fullerton Municipal Airport in southern California. Bob, born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, a pilot since the 1940s and active in the Civil Air Patrol and other aviation groups, knew airplanes and the parts needed to keep them flying. Flo, a native of Rochester, New York, did not have an aviation background, but learned the business quickly and knew what it would take to keep customers coming back... fair prices and good service. Fullerton Air Parts grew into one of the largest retail aircraft parts suppliers in the western states during the following nine years.





Bob and Flo Irwin
Irwin family photo

In 1965, Bob and Flo sold Fullerton Air Parts and founded “Aircraft Spruce Co.,” which sold only one product, aircraft grade spruce lumber for aircraft construction and restoration. Aircraft Spruce Co. quickly added more products to its then small catalog and adopted the name “Aircraft Spruce & Specialty Co.,” with the goal of offering everything pilots and aircraft builders needed.

Aircraft Spruce was housed in downtown Fullerton, Calif. until late 1997. During the last 24 years in Fullerton, the company was operated in a historic former citrus packing house, which they eventually outgrew.

In the fall of 1997, Aircraft Spruce moved to a new, 62,000 sq. ft. facility in Corona, California. In the spring of 2004, “Aircraft Spruce East” moved into a new 52,000 sq. ft. facility in Peachtree City, Ga. from its old home in Griffin, Ga. “Aircraft Spruce Canada” opened in Toronto in December 2006 and moved to the Brantford, Ontario airport in October 2008. On October 3, 2016, the company moved into its current 20,000 sq. ft. distribution facility at the airport.

In 2019, Aircraft Spruce opened two new facilities to better serve the Midwest and Alaska markets. “Aircraft Spruce Midwest” operates in a 60,000 sq. ft. facility in West Chicago, Illinois, and “Aircraft Spruce Alaska” operates in a 24,000 sq. ft. building in Palmer, Alaska.

In 2023, Aircraft Spruce opened “Aircraft Spruce Northeast,” a 35,000

sq. ft. facility in Middletown, Pennsylvania.

Two 10,000 sq. ft. warehouses are also located in Texas and Arizona.



Nanci & Jim Irwin

Irwin family photo

Jim Irwin, Bob and Flo's older son, grew up in the business, working in jobs such as cutting metal and spruce, pulling and shipping orders, and managing kit programs, such as the "Vari-Eze" beginning in 1975 while still in college. Graduating from California State University in Fullerton in 1978 with a degree in business administration (marketing), Jim acquired the company and became president in 1980. Jim's wife, Nanci, who graduated with an accounting degree from the University of Southern California in 1977, became vice president and works full-time managing the company's accounting and data processing departments.

Meanwhile, Flo and Bob Irwin, along with Jim's younger brother, John, moved to Lake Havasu City, Arizona in the fall of 1983 and founded ACS Products Co., which manufactures a line of products distributed by Aircraft Spruce & Specialty. John and his wife, Frances, now manage ACS Products Co. and own a Cessna 182 Skylane.

Bob Irwin was an instrument-rated pilot with more than 2,000 hours logged, and based his 1968 Navion Rangemaster at Lake Havasu City until May 2000 when he retired as a pilot, after 50 years of flying, and

moved the Navion to Chino Airport for his grandchildren to fly. Prior to acquiring the Navion in 1976, Bob owned a Vultee BT-13B and a 1949 Ryan Navion. Flo Irwin passed away on June 10, 1989. Bob Irwin passed away on June 26, 2015, at the age of 95.

Jim Irwin has logged over 5,000 hou



rs as a multi-engine, instrument-rated pilot since 1976. Nanci Irwin is a licensed private pilot as well. They fly the company Cessna Conquest extensively on business throughout the Southwest. The couple's three sons – Mike, Jeff and Rob – are all vice presidents within the company and also pilots. If you stopped by Exhibit Hangar A at Oshkosh this year, you would have seen the Irwin family busy serving customers.

“Now with the acquisition of the Wag-Aero Group, we can see nothing but continued growth and customer service for Aircraft Spruce & Specialty in the years to come,” says Jim Irwin.

I felt that it was a match made in heaven when I first received a call from Mary Myers of the Wag-Aero Group informing me that Aircraft Spruce & Specialty had purchased their assets.

Both Aircraft Spruce & Specialty and Wag-Aero have been suppliers and customers to one another, so in early 2024, Bill Read let Jim Irwin know that he and Mary wanted to retire, and an agreement was reached for Aircraft Spruce & Specialty to purchase the parts distribution side of Wag-Aero, but none of the manufacturing operations. Wag-Aero's inventory was then moved to Aircraft Spruce's branch in Georgia.

Today, Aircraft Spruce & Specialty publishes and distributes a 1000-page parts catalog, known as the "homebuilder's bible," which is distributed free of charge at AirVenture. While I was standing at the counter to meet the Irwins this year, one by one copies of the catalog disappeared and the orders poured in.

When we look around the EAA Convention grounds at Oshkosh, we no longer see the Poberezny family, but their memory lives on through the event itself, and the people who helped make EAA AirVenture Oshkosh what it is today. The Irwin family was close to Paul and Tom Poberenzy over the years and contributed greatly to the success of the event.

When Paul and Audrey Poberezny moved from their home on the southwest corner of Wittman Regional Airport, the Irwin family purchased it. Not only was buying the home good for historical and preservation reasons, considering how large the Irwin family is, and the number of people they employ during AirVenture, it was a wise business decision.

Best wishes to the Irwin family and Aircraft Spruce & Specialty for many more years of success, happiness and contributions to the aviation community. Likewise, best wishes to Bill Read and Mary Myers for a long and happy retirement.

For additional information, visit <https://www.aircraftspruce.com/>

