



MAN EARNS AVIATION HONOR, INSPIRES SON TO FOLLOW THE SAME INTEREST

News / Personalities



Darrel R. Gibson follows in the footsteps of his father, Darrel W. Gibson.

The son is Menomonie Municipal Airport manager and owns Gibson **Aviation** Services in Menomonie. His father was Eau Claire Municipal Airport manager and owned Gibson Aviation

Service in Eau Claire.

“He has big shoes to fill,” Darrel R. Gibson said.

Indeed. The senior Gibson, who lives near Chippewa Valley Regional Airport in Eau Claire, will be inducted into the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame in Oshkosh on Oct. 24.

Plaques honoring inductees hang in the EAA AirVenture Museum in Oshkosh, where thousands attend the annual fly-in of the Experimental Aircraft Association.

“He had a great career in aviation,” Rose Dorsey, president of the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame, said of Gibson. The nonprofit is dedicated to preserving Wisconsin aviation history, recognizing those who made that history and promoting aviation education.

Darrel W. Gibson, a Durand native, founded Gibson Aviation in 1961 and served as Eau Claire Municipal Airport manager from 1961 to 1976.

As a youngster, Darrel W. Gibson built airplane models. He took flying lessons about the time he graduated from high school in 1951.

“It kind of gets in your blood. After you get started, it’s pretty hard to quit,” said Gibson, 82, who still flies his 1946 two-seat Ercoupe airplane.

“It’s really a privilege to look at all the terrain in the country and be able to see it all from the air.”

Gibson got his start in aviation as an aircraft mechanic. He attended an A & E (Airframe and Engine) school in Chicago where he worked for United Airlines at Midway Airport.

In Chicago, Gibson earned his private pilot license after he and his wife, Cleo, bought a 1948 Taylorcraft BC-12D and rebuilt it in their landlord’s garage. The restoration included installing a new fabric covering of Irish linen, he said.

They moved to Eau Claire in 1959, and he worked at Badger Aviation at the airport before starting his business.

Under Gibson’s watch, the airport made many improvements, including a runway expansion to accommodate large DC-9 jet airliners, North Central Airlines’ move into the terminal building and the purchase of military surplus equipment for airport maintenance.

“DC-9s do not even like an inch of snow on the ground,” Gibson said, so snow had to be removed almost as soon as it began falling.

Gibson Aviation provided seven-day-a-week terminal and airport maintenance service, including the snow plowing and mowing. Gibson’s six children — Patricia, Janet, Judy, Donna, Darrel and Darren — assisted with chores.

“Our business was kind of like a farm where you could use a lot of help,” Gibson said, describing his wife and children as a “godsend.”

“It was really a booming time at the airport in the ’70s. ... We really had excellent service for the city,” Gibson said, adding at least four airlines served Eau Claire.

However, the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act allowed airlines to determine which markets to serve domestically. That reduced airline services for smaller cities, he said.

At the same time Gibson oversaw the airport, he owned a “very successful fixed base operation,” which he sold in 1989, Dorsey said.

A fixed base operation serves as a service gas station for planes instead of cars. It provides services such as fueling and aircraft maintenance.

Gibson Aviation offered flight training, charter flights, aircraft rentals and maintenance services. Many of the employees became airline, corporate or military pilots.

One of those former employees is Air National Guard Brig. Gen. Jon Kelk, who is credited with the first Iraqi MiG-29 aerial “kill,” or victory, of Operation Desert Storm in Iraq in 1991, Gibson said.

Gibson, who was a dealer for both Cessna and Piper aircraft, counts 10,000 flying hours, mostly charters.

His son Darrel is the only one of his children who stayed with aviation. Darrel R. Gibson’s son, Corbin, just earned his private pilot license in only 28 days, continuing the legacy.

Darrel R. Gibson described his father as a “good, honest businessman,” a hard worker and an excellent pilot and mechanic.

“I’m sure going to miss calling him one day and asking him different aviation questions,” he said. “He’s always got a good answer for me.”

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