

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR

The Watsons

A pioneering flying couple, **Edward Clement Watson, Jr.**, born on August 28, 1904 in Marquette, Michigan, and **Elsie Grace (nee Johnson) Watson**, born on March 6, 1910 in Yalmer (now Skandia), Michigan.

Ed was graduated from Northern State Normal on June 14, 1923. He learned to fly in 1928 in Escanaba. Elsie wanted no part of milking cows and farm life so boarded in town while attending Normal School. She attained a teaching credential and in 1931 to 1932 taught at Skandia Tower School for \$855 per year.

Ed, of course, buzzed the school to get her attention and HE DID! They were married in Sioux City, Iowa on August 21, 1933. They lived in Billings, Montana for a short time before heading for California. They settled in South San Francisco, while Ed worked at a variety of jobs in the aircraft

industry. In 1939, they moved to San Carlos to operate the airport there.

When a fire destroyed the hanger at San Carlos Airport, the Watsons took over the operation of the Bay Meadows Airport in San Mateo. It was a good arrangement for them. Elsie



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could keep the books and watch her daughters, while Ed was in his element repairing airplanes. They had a little gas cart that pumped one gallon at a time. Then they cranked the handle and pumped another gallon!

On December 7, 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and World War II was declared. Private flying was prohibited on the West Coast, so the Watsons were literally out of a job.

They moved to Bakersfield where Ed and Elsie worked at Minter Field, he as a ground school instructor and she as an aircraft inspector. Ed then served a stint as a civilian pilot with the ferry command. This lasted as long as he could put up with the "military mentality", which wasn't long.

The next move was to Winnemucca, Nevada for six weeks where Elsie learned to fly solo and got her pilot's license.

In August 1942, they were back at Bay Meadows. Elsie sewed fabric to recover airplanes and spent hours in the hanger rib stitching.

In 1946, when the Watsons and Bay Meadows had a parting of the ways, Ed got financial backing and the land for building the San Mateo Airport. It was a salt flat that had to be drained before construction began. Day and night, Ed opened gates at low tide and closed them when the tide turned. The airport was built, and Ed and Elsie ran it and a repair shop. It was long hours and hard work, but they loved it!

In the years after the war were the heydays of private aviation. Everyone was learning to fly. There were clubs, dances, BBQs, and fly-ins. But also there was controversy about traffic patterns, noisy airplanes, low flying, and arguing factions. Ed Watson was in the middle of it. Up to his old tricks, he buzzed the City Hall one night when a meeting on aircraft noise was in

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progress. His outspoken diatribes in defense of the “little guy” in aviation earned him the sobriquet “The Terrible Tempered Mr. Bang of California Aviation”.

The decision was made to sell San Mateo Airport so Ed and Elsie established a fixed base operation at San Carlos Airport. It was during these years that Ed met the new Piper Apache which became his favorite airplane for the rest of his life. He owned several and knew every bolt.

When Ed’s doctor suggested a drier climate for his asthma, they moved to San Diego, bought into Crownair and ran it until “retirement” in 1965.

But they didn’t really retire. Elsie kept books and did payroll for Spider’s Aircraft, and Ed kept busy during FAA inspections. In addition, Elsie continued in her support of flying for women and was a charter member of the International Organization of Women Pilots. She served on several race committees and actually participated in some of the so-called “Powder Puff Derbies”, one of which crossed the continent coast to coast.

Ed passed away in 1995, never losing his love of flying or his sense of humor. Elsie moved to Napa, California to be with her cousins and died there in 2000. She is buried at Haglund Cemetery in Skandia.

Jean Grinoldi, daughter, 2004

