

WARBIRDS RISING:

An update on the Lone Star Flight Museum *A Conversation with Larry Gregory and William H. Kellar*

In November, 2008, just two months after Hurricane Ike devastated Galveston, historian William H. Kellar drove to the island to interview Larry Gregory, president of the Lone Star Flight Museum (LSFM) and the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame, for a “Conversations with...” feature that appeared in the Spring 2009 issue of *Houston History* magazine. The museum, which first opened in 1990, and its priceless collection of mainly World War II aircraft, suffered terrible damage from the effects of the hurricane. At the time, Gregory talked about the storm, the cleanup, and his hopes for the future. In 2011, the museum announced it planned to move from Galveston’s Scholes International Airport to higher ground at Ellington International Airport, further inland and closer to Houston. Recently, Kellar wondered how the museum was fairing and made the trip to Galveston for a follow-up interview with Larry Gregory. The following “Conversation” is based on Kellar’s interview with Gregory, June 24, 2013.

William H. Kellar (WHK): The last time we visited here was in 2008, and you were just getting things cleaned up after the hurricane.

Larry Gregory (LG): After Ike, we opened on January 31, 2009, and it was pretty rough at the beginning. We still had a lot of parts and debris in the back of the second hangar and really only half of that hangar was open. We have since been able to reorganize and now almost all of hangar two is accessible. It looks a lot better now than it did after we first reopened. We were glad we had the doors open and the lights on to start getting back to a sense of normalcy. That helped the general psychology of the organization more than anything – just getting back to business. It is one of my proudest moments to be able to reopen and to somehow keep this thing going. It was only made possible by the hard work of our staff, volunteers and support we received from the community.

Now our facility is back to normal. The airplanes are on display and we are flying more now than before the storm. Occasionally, a visiting airplane from another collection will come in for a short time. Currently, we have a P-40 from the Cavanaugh Flight Museum, and that will be on display for a few weeks. The main thing that we are focused on is our historic flight experience program. We offer flights in several of our historic aircraft. We continue to fly the B-17 and the B-25 along with the PT-17 Stearman [Bi-plane] and

the T-6 Texan. These flights make great gifts, and I really encourage people to come out and have a great experience in one of these historic airplanes over Galveston Island. It is a beautiful flight.

WHK: Yes, it seems like it would be. Could you talk a little bit about some of the damaged airplanes that the museum salvaged and what it took to do that?

LG: Well, immediately after the storm, we were looking at the airplanes and what we needed to do to save them. The day we started down here, some volunteers from the Collings Foundation arrived wanting to help. They have great collection of Vietnam-era jets at Ellington Field – and we have worked together quite a bit. They brought some equipment and jumped in with both feet. They were able to disassemble a lot of airplanes that were damaged and start preservation efforts. All of the airplanes that were damaged were pulled apart and flushed out internally with fresh water. After they had dried out, we came back through with some Corrosion X that was donated to us and were able to arrest any corrosion that had begun. That was an extremely important first step. I recently crawled around in some of the airplanes and you cannot tell they have been underwater. Luckily they were in pretty good shape before the storm and we were on it very quickly to limit the damage.

Proposed front view of new museum at Ellington Airport by Verrét Group.

Rendering courtesy of Lone Star Flight Museum.





Larry Gregory, president of LSM, in front of the B-25, with Doolittle Raiders official emblem on the aircraft.

Photo courtesy of William H. Kellar.

I am very optimistic that sometime in the future, almost every one of those airplanes can be returned to the air if we have the financial wherewithal to do it. I do not think many of them have received a death sentence from it. We have taken our *Spitfire* to a shop in Breckenridge, Texas, where they disassembled everything—just pulled the whole thing apart. Other than the cad-plated hardware in it, you cannot tell it had been underwater. That is the good news and some day, that *Spitfire* will fly as well. We lost some [of] our small replicas that were on the ground-level when the storm came through, they were just destroyed. Some of the other smaller airplanes were severely damaged as well.

WHK: Would you talk about the decision to move the museum to Ellington?

LG: I was standing with the airport manager immediately after the storm, and his building looks like a bomb went off in it, ours looks like two bombs went off in it – where do you start? It was very overwhelming. About two weeks after the storm we had a board meeting, and I mentioned that we needed to investigate relocation off the Island.

When a hurricane is approaching, a fluke event like a flat tire or a failed engine starter on one of the aircraft could result in several of the airplanes being blocked in the hangar and unable to be evacuated, resulting in the catastrophic

loss of vintage airplanes worth millions of dollars. You can play those what ifs all you want but literally, you are on the razor's edge when it is time to get out of here. And if you miss your window, that's it. I cannot take that chance...the organization cannot take that chance. That was the driving factor. The board did not know if we could do it or where we could go. But, the discussion just continued to grow and gain some momentum. It is important for our future to have a facility that has a higher elevation to better protect our assets. That is why the board decided to move to Ellington. We negotiated a lease with the City of Houston for, in my opinion, the best location on the field for a museum, and we are moving forward towards that goal. We have enacted a campaign to raise funds for the new facility, and we are very optimistic that sometime in the fall of 2014, we will be able to break ground and hopefully move in by the end of 2015.

I know a lot of people are disappointed that we are leaving and I understand and appreciate that. I cannot say enough about Galveston—how great our run has been down here and how this community reacted after the storm. It is not Galveston's fault. There is nothing here that is driving us to move other than our elevation. Personally, I love it down here. I love the flying here and the people at the airport are great. The people within the city have been very receptive to us over the years, and I feel like we have been more closely knit into that fabric of the community since the storm. I want to somehow continue to be part of the community here after we move. We still have some charities and some of the other attractions that we support. We are very close with the *Elissa* and other historic attractions here. I want to continue those relationships after we move because I love what they do. I think it is important, not just to the Galveston community but for this region, to have some of these assets here such as the *Elissa*. It is important for people to climb aboard a ship that was sailing in the 1800s and have the opportunity to learn something. I just love that kind of stuff. Again, it's only available because there are so many dedicated people who do the grunt work to keep it going along with people who write checks to support it, just like at our museum.

I will be honest—I did not truly appreciate the ship until I was invited to sail on it. You can feel it creak and you can hear it come alive just like our airplanes do once you start them up and get rolling down the runway. They all have their own life story that comes alive and shows you what the airplane or the ship is about. And what is amazing is that it has the same smells, sounds and the same vibrations that people who flew these airplanes seventy years ago or the sailors who sailed that ship 100 years ago experienced. I believe these experiences are an amazing resource for our region.

WHK: Let's talk a little bit more about the move to Ellington.

LG: We were able to work with the Houston Airport System and their leadership to embrace our vision of what we want to develop, which flows into their vision of where they want to take Ellington Airport. We have a lot of common interests, even more than what I thought we had at the beginning, so I think it is going to be a great relationship for us. We will build, maintain, and operate a world-class facility. It is our goal to build a gem for the city of Houston and this

region. This is going to be a modern museum in a lot of different ways, especially on the technology front. We are looking to greatly expand and develop new educational opportunities and general community programming that will be second to none in the aviation museum circles. I am very excited about what lies ahead.

WHK: So, you are looking at building more of an interactive museum in addition to the hangars and the planes?

LG: Absolutely. Our facility here was built essentially as a hangar because the museum had a lot of airplanes that needed to be under a roof. We developed a nice museum out of it especially when we added the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame in the late 1990s. You also have to remember that this was designed in the late 1980s, so the internet and computer age was in its infancy. Cell phones were not commonplace then either, and that tells you where we were on the technology front when our facility was built. I think the way we are looking at it for this project is to build a museum that happens to have a hangar in it. We will have a lot of the modern accoutrements around the hangar to include a theater, a restaurant, educational areas, conference facilities, flexible classroom space, and other spaces for after-hours functions, meetings, or community events. It will also have a hangar where we can display our airplanes. I believe we are looking at it from a much better perspective since we have lived in our current facility for such a long time. We are looking forward to using technology to develop ways of communicating with our patrons on their terms to broaden the museum experience. We are very optimistic about the opportunities before us.

WHK: Have you consulted with any other museums?

LG: Yes, we looked at several other organizations and museums, not just aviation, in terms of what works for them and what doesn't. I am talking with some folks with regards to educational programming opportunities that will allow us to broaden our outreach to the community and to possibly reach kids all across the state. We want to be a driving force in STEM – science, technology, engineering, and math programs—but also aviation as well. I want to have a career center to show what jobs are available in aviation. It is not

just being a pilot or another position at an airline. There are many valuable services that the aviation industry needs here in Houston and across the state. I am hopeful that we will introduce aviation to kids and inspire them in a way that promotes their interest in learning about STEM related subjects. We have to place a value on learning. We want school children to know that real jobs and careers are waiting for them, and education is the key to access their future.

We also worked with other museums on the exhibit front as well. We have hired an exhibit company to develop our exhibits and creative content. In fact, it is the same company [that] developed the exhibits at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg. They did a phenomenal job and I am excited to work with them to develop quality exhibits that are accessible through modern communication techniques. That is going to be a lot of fun.

WHK: Let's talk a little bit about the Hall of Fame. What are your plans for it?

LG: The Hall of Fame was essentially destroyed during Hurricane Ike. We were able to salvage a few things but, by and large, it was wiped out. That was one of the most heartbreaking aspects of the storm. We had some very rare artifacts in the Hall of Fame and most of those are gone. In the wake of the storm, we made a decision not to rebuild it here once we determined we would relocate. Our worry is what if another storm hits us again? Plus, we are looking at elevating the quality of our exhibits throughout the facility and building it from the ground up. With everything else in the new museum it was the logical thing to do. When we open at Ellington, it will be fresh, modern, and accessible to everybody on their terms instead of the typical artifacts behind a piece of glass. We also want to showcase our inductees as the fabric for our education programs. In addition to honoring their achievements, we want to tell the story of how many of our inductees rose from challenging situations and had the determination and drive to become an industry leader. Hopefully, kids will pick up some inspiration from our inductees.

I believe relocating to Ellington is going to be a great move for us. Obviously being closer to the population



World War II era B-25, part of the LSFM's Warbirds Historic Flight Experience program, prepares for takeoff.

Photo courtesy of Lana Chow.



P-47 at Scholes International Airport, Galveston.

Photo courtesy of William H. Kellar.

center in Houston helps, but it also provides us more direct interaction with some of the other Warbird [or vintage military aircraft] groups at Ellington such as the Collings Foundation and the Texas Flying Legends. I know we will work with them to develop Ellington as a historic aviation attraction. We will have access to other private collections that will rotate planes through our facility on a regular basis. Every additional aircraft we display has a potential link to the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame and/or our educational programming. I am very pleased with the reception Houston has given us. It is still a couple of years out and

hopeful that we can be a good neighbor in the city, and add something that enhances the culture of the region.

WHK: We have talked a little bit about change over time, especially from the time the museum was first established and looking toward the new facilities. What else comes to mind here as we wrap up?

LG: I am proud of all the staff here who have stuck it out because once you go through a very dramatic event like Hurricane Ike, it gives you some perspective and makes what you are working toward much more meaningful. I

think all of the struggles that we have endured will help us make the new facility a wonderful venue. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears from a lot of people have gone into this, and I know the final result is going to be phenomenal. I'm really excited about what lies ahead. It is not going to happen overnight and that's okay. But, it is going to be an eye-opener. We have learned a lot here—you learn what limits you and everything else. Now we have an opportunity to address those limitations, add more programming to reach a greater population and become a jewel of the community. That is what we are hoping to do.

William H. Kellar, Ph.D., a professional historian and freelance writer, is affiliated with the University of Houston's Center for Public History. He has written or co-authored several books and articles on a variety of subjects related to Houston history, the Texas Medical Center, and Houston area businesses.

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