

Retro Ramblings

by: Douglas Love, Gand 3rd Vice-president, Napa Parlor #62

There are several states which can claim a significant role in aviation history. Pennsylvania, where in Philadelphia, the first hot air balloon flight in the United States took place on January 9, 1793; to North Carolina, where the first heavier than air flight took place at Kitty Hawk, on December 17, 1903, built by Orville and Wilbur Wright, two bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio. There is New York's continuing history with aviation, from early pioneers like Glenn Curtiss, to legendary companies like Curtiss, Brewster, Republic, Sikorsky, Chance-Vought, and Grumman. There is Washington, where Seattle is home to Boeing, Texas, home of NASA, and Florida, from where man went into space.

While all of these places have a stake in the history of United States aviation, California has a large place in the history of "those magnificent men and their flying machines". From the first successful aircraft landing on a ship, the USS Pennsylvania, anchored in San Francisco Bay in 1911, the US Navy's first aircraft carrier, the USS Langley, constructed at Mare Island Naval Shipyard, to the airship hangars at Moffett Field, Amelia Earhart's final flight, the Doolittle Raid, Howard Hughes' pioneering work, Jack Northrup, and NASA Ames, the Lockheed "Skunk Works" and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and, of course, the place where man first broke the sound barrier. Companies such as North American Aviation, McDonnell-Douglas, and Hughes Aircraft made their mark upon aviation and became household names. There is a company that was not as well known to the general public, but was an innovative aviation company that left a legacy that is still important today. That company is Hiller Aircraft Corporation, founded as Hiller Industries in Berkeley in 1942 by a then 17 year old Stanley Hiller Jr.

Stanley Hiller Jr. was interested in mechanics and engineering at a young age. By the age of eight, built a racing car using a salvaged washing machine motor. By fifteen he had constructed his first working model helicopter and by seventeen his first prototype, the XH-44, which he demonstrated to the US Army Air Corps. During World War II Hiller Industries produced parts for aircraft. In 1945, Henry J. Kaiser partnered with the young Hiller to form United Helicopters. In 1947, the company introduced the Hiller 360, which later developed into the UH-12, one of the most produced light helicopters in the world and the military version the OH-23, widely used as a reconnaissance and medical evacuation helicopter during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The UH-12 is still used today for agricultural, forestry, construction, fire, law enforcement, and other purposes. The company also served as an advanced projects facility for Lockheed and aided in the production of the CORONA reconnaissance satellites.

Hiller sold the company to Fairchild Industries in 1964 and left the aviation industry and went on to a very successful career as a corporate turnaround expert; but there was a bit of aviation business left to do. During his time in the aviation industry, Stanley Hiller Jr. amassed a collection of his company's and other aircraft. In the 1970's this collection was held in a warehouse and only open by appointment. Hiller wanted to make his collection of experimental and historic aircraft to be accessible to the public. In 1998, the Hiller Aviation Museum was opened in a purpose built building, displaying many aircraft from Hiller's collection and housing a restoration facility and a research library. Included in the collection are: a replica of the Aviator, the first "airplane" to fly over San Francisco Bay in 1869, the Pepsi Travel Air, a Solo XVF, a Hiller Flying Platform, a replica of a Fokker DIII Triplane, a Boeing Condor, and many others. There are many displays centered on California's aviation history and interactive displays demonstrating aeronautical principles. The museum also hosts youth summer camps.

GETTING THERE: From 414 Mason St. Get on I-80 W from 5th St and Harrison St
9 min (1.4 mi)
Follow US-101 S to Holly St in San Carlos. Take exit 411 from US-101 S
23 min (22.6 mi)
Continue on Holly St to your destination
2 min (0.7 mi)

Hiller Aviation Museum
601 Skyway Rd, San Carlos, CA 94070

For further information about hours, admission and special events please visit: <https://www.hiller.org/>