

Filmmakers seek information about aviator who lived here

Former Ratonian Jules “J.J.” VanDersarl will be one of the subjects of a documentary film about early American aviation. There’s one problem, though: The filmmakers can’t find much information about him.

Brian Beker, one of the Los Angeles filmmakers on the project, is hoping some current Raton residents might be able to help.

VanDersarl came to Raton in 1939 and died in the city in November 1977. It had been sometime around 1920 when he first moved to New Mexico to take a job with Phelps-Dodge in Dawson. VanDersarl’s wife’s name was Mollie.

Especially important to the filmmakers would be any personal reminiscences about VanDersarl and his aviation achievements. Locating his papers, photographs or any other documents or materials would also be extremely helpful.

Near the dawn of aviation, in Denver in 1911, Jules VanDersarl and his younger brother Frank built and flew their own airplane.

“It was a stunning accomplishment,” says Beker. “Somehow they managed to get a hold of the plans for what was at the time the highest-tech machine in the air, a Bleriot XI monoplane.”

Beker has spoken with the Raton Museum, but even there, information about VanDersarl is limited.

According to the filmmakers’ research, the brothers had barely made it through grade school. Their father passed away when they were little and their mother worked as a housekeeper. The brothers learned trades and became so proficient at machining, carpentry and other skills that they were able to accomplish what eluded even the wealthiest hobbyists of the day — they managed to get up in the air.

“In those days it was more common for builders to work for years on planes that could never fly,” according to Beker. “Painstaking work was involved in the construction of the wings, the fuselage and the control system. Astonishingly, the brothers also manufactured their own engine — at a time when one purchased from a factory could cost as much as a house. The VanDersarl brothers worked hard for every stick of wood and scrap of metal, and they relied on their skills and risked their lives, all in the service of the dream of flight.”

The as yet untitled documentary film about the VanDersarl brothers is in need of any contacts who might have known Jules. Frank's archives are in existence, but those of Jules seem to have been lost. The Museum of New Mexico solicited Jules's widow Mollie for any of his remaining photographs or documents, but there has been no response and there is nothing on record at the museum. The film will honor the achievement of these early American aviation pioneers. Anyone with any information is asked to contact Beker at brian@alittleacorn.com or call (310) 349-3573.

Source: Raton Range Newspaper, Raton, NM; October 4, 2010