

Fantasy of Flight History

Discovering ‘the Human Experience Through Entertainment’

POLK CITY, Fla. – Fantasy of Flight creator and owner Kermit Weeks had three wishes in mind when he first imagined his Central Florida aviation-themed attraction: tourist access, enough property for the longest of two runways and lake access for seaplane landings.

Weeks, a long-time aviator and former aerobatics champion, discovered his airplane mecca in 1985 just 15 minutes west of Disney’s thriving vacation kingdom. In 1987, his 300-acre Polk City purchase, complete with access to Lake Agnes and plenty of runway space, launched Fantasy of Flight from bold concept to dream-come-true.

Just as Weeks was completing the Fantasy of Flight tract, he also was opening the non-profit Weeks Air Museum in Miami – another dream realized after years of acquiring, restoring and preserving antique aircraft.

“I had collected more airplanes than I could fit in the Miami museum, and I realized I was in this for the long haul,” says Weeks. “My vision, too, had expanded. I wanted to deliver the human experience through entertainment in a way that people can discover themselves, with everything loosely wrapped around this metaphor of flight.”

Working with a Miami design firm, Weeks approved an Art-Deco theme for the facility and laid out his design mission: Anything created in the attraction must be thought-provoking and emotionally engaging.

His plans were taking wing when, in August 1992, the Weeks Air Museum was devastated by one of the most powerful storms in Florida history, Hurricane Andrew. In the midst of assessing the museum’s damage, rebuilding the facility and restoring his prized planes, Weeks kept the engines roaring on his larger Central Florida project.

By February 1993, workers broke ground on Fantasy of Flight and its two runways, the longest to stretch 5,000 feet to accommodate four-engine planes.

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The Weeks Air Museum reopened in 1994 as Fantasy of Flight was in full construction mode. One year later, on Nov. 11, 1995, the Fantasy of Flight grand opening party welcomed 1,000 guests to a World War II-themed affair to remember.

A Grand Opening to Remember

Dress was black tie or WWII formal, and guests arrived in full military regalia or as 1940s-style high-fashion plates. Champagne flowed, snow crab and oysters Rockefeller were devoured, and a '40s-era band played on. A laser show and fireworks painted the night sky. Dazzled guests were transfixed. At about 11 p.m., a “formation of bombers” roared through the sky to a soundtrack of whistling “bombs” and other sound effects. The Sheriff’s Office took calls from alarmed residents who were reassured their domestic tranquility would soon be restored.

2,000 Acres and Growing

When the party ended, Fantasy of Flight began to fulfill its founder’s mission to offer an entertaining and inspirational experience. Guests entered a world of aviation wonder, a place where history came alive through vintage and restored aircraft and the aviators who flew them. The attraction featured the world’s largest collection of vintage airplanes – some which had been fully restored after Hurricane Andrew, historical immersion experiences, interactive thrills and behind-the-scenes tours of aircraft restoration areas. It was the only aircraft attraction in the world showcasing daily aerial demonstrations for guests.

Through the years, new exhibits and interactive experiences have been added, including “The Tuskegee Airmen – *They Dared to Fly*” and the “Fun with Flight Center” hands-on experiences. In 2007, Fantasy of Flight launched its Audio Tour, which brings the planes on exhibit to life through special effects and compelling stories written and narrated by Weeks. In 2008, “WASP – *A Passionate Pursuit*” opened as a tribute to the Women Airforce Service Pilots who were the first women in history to fly U.S. military aircraft.

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As the attraction expanded, so did Weeks' vision. He began adding on to his Polk City tract, amassing more than 2,000 acres of property and developing a plan for the future.

Over the years, Weeks and his attraction have drawn interest from celebrities and renowned aviators. Before Fantasy of Flight opened, Weeks enjoyed a 1988 encounter in Tampa, Fla., with George Bush, Sr., who was running his successful campaign for the presidency.

“He flew a torpedo bomber in WWII. I had the same plane and painted it with his tri-colors and flew it to Tampa for a commercial he was filming,” Weeks recalls. “He told me, ‘You know, Kermit, if my life depended on it, I think I could start that plane and fly it out of here.’”

Once Fantasy of Flight was in full swing, Weeks gave a tour of the property to Oscar-winning “Lord of the Rings” director Peter Jackson, flying him around in his WWII Stearman trainer while Jackson shot video from the sky with a camcorder. Other celebrities who’ve visited the Central Florida attraction include WWII flying ace David Lee “Tex” Hill, “Jonathan Livingston Seagull” author and U.S. Air Force pilot Richard Bach and members of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Aiming for the Stars

Today, Fantasy of Flight is poised to expand to a full-blown theme park.

“I realized this creation is going to be much bigger than I had ever expected,” Weeks says. “In the end, what we’re doing is launching ourselves off the shoulders of the industry that Walt Disney created, and the difference is that what we’re based on is reality, not fantasy.”

The long-term plan for development at Fantasy of Flight includes period architecture to reflect different eras and the environments in which they were immersed. All airplanes in the Fantasy of Flight collection would be displayed in corresponding historic environments, from early flight to early jets, the Golden Age and World Wars I and II.

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Says Weeks: “We’re going to immerse our guests in these different periods of history and deliver the timeless concept of Fantasy of Flight – to show how mankind was always drawn beyond himself.”

Fantasy of Flight is an aviation-themed attraction showcasing vintage aircraft from the world’s largest private collection; themed immersion experiences; flight simulators; interactive exhibits; a tram tour of aircraft maintenance areas; Restoration and Backlot tours; and an Aerial Demonstration of the Day. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily, and general admission is \$28.95. Audio tours, hot air balloon rides and biplane rides are available at extra charge. The Art Deco-styled Compass Rose Diner serves lunch daily from 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

Recent additions to Fantasy of Flight attractions include the Fun with Flight Center for families; The Tuskegee Airmen – *They Dared to Fly* exhibit; and a multimedia tribute to the WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) – *A Passionate Pursuit*. For more information about Fantasy of Flight, call 1.863.984.3500 or visit www.fantasyofflight.com.
