



# Biography of William E. Boeing

**Company Founder and Owner, President, Chairman of the Board  
Boeing, 1916-1934**

William E. Boeing left Yale University in 1903 to take advantage of opportunities in the risky and cyclical, but financially rewarding, Northwest timber industry. That experience would serve him well in aviation.

Under his guidance, a tiny airplane manufacturing company grew into a huge corporation of related industries. When post-Depression legislation in 1934 mandated the dispersion of the corporation, Boeing sold his interests in the Boeing Airplane Co., but continued to work on other business ventures.

He became one of America's most successful breeders of thoroughbred horses. He never lost his interest in aviation, and during World War II he volunteered as a consultant to the company. He lived until 1956, long enough to see the company he started enter the jet age.

William E. Boeing was a private person, a visionary, a perfectionist, and a stickler for the facts. The wall of his outer office bore a placard that read: "Years ago Hippocrates said: 1. There is no authority except facts. 2. Facts are obtained by accurate observation. 3. Deductions are to be made only from facts. 4. Experience has proved the truth of these rules."

According to his son, William Boeing, Jr., Boeing was a fast and avid reader and remembered everything he read. He was also a perfectionist. While visiting his airplane building shop at the Duwamish shipyard in 1916, Boeing saw a set of improperly sawed spruce ribs. He brushed them to the floor and walked all over

them until they were broken. A frayed aileron cable caused him to remark, "I, for one, will close up shop rather than send out work of this kind."

## **Fortuitous Beginnings:**

### **Finding the "Good Luck" Ore**

William E. Boeing was born in Detroit to Wilhelm and Marie Boeing in 1881. His father, who arrived in the United States in 1868, had come from an old and well-to-do family in Hohenlimburg, Germany, and had served a year in the German army. He had a lust for adventure, however, and left his family, emigrating to the United States when he was 20 years old.

Wilhelm started work as a farm laborer but soon joined forces with Karl Ortmann, a lumberman and, ultimately, his father-in-law. Young Wilhelm bought timberland, with its mineral rights, in the Mesabi Range, built a large home, and became the director of Peoples Savings Bank, president of the Galvin Brass and Iron Works, and a shareholder in the Standard Life Insurance Company. He also bought land in Washington State in the area now known as Ocean Shores and timberland in the redwood forest in California.

When Wilhelm was logging in Minnesota he had difficulty running compass lines on his property. He was logging over the iron-ore range. Fortunately, when he purchased timberlands he kept the mineral rights also. There was low-grade iron ore known as taconite near the surface, and below that lay veins of high-quality ore. Though



Young Boeing left Vevey after a year and continued his schooling in public and private schools in the United States. Between 1899 and 1902, he studied at the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale but did not graduate. Instead, in 1903 at age 22, William E. Boeing left college, went west, and started his new life in Grays Harbor, Washington, where he learned the logging business on his own, starting with lands he had inherited. Boeing bought more timberland, began to add to the wealth he had inherited from his family, and started to explore new frontiers by outfitting expeditions to Alaska.

Wilhelm did not live to see the development of those mining rights, his widow received the benefits of the mineral rights, and upon her death she left an estate of approximately \$1 million to her son, William E. Boeing.

### **Exploring New Frontiers**

Wilhelm Boeing died of influenza in 1890 when he was only 42 years old. He left behind his wife, Marie; 3-year-old Gretchen; 5-year-old Caroline; and 8-year-old William Edward. Marie eventually remarried and became Marie M. Owsley. Young William, who biographers of the time say did not get along with his stepfather, was sent to school in Vevey, Switzerland, where he established an outward correctness that remained with him for the rest of his life. According to a note in the Boeing Historical Archives, William visited his father's ancestral home in Hohenlimburg some years before World War I.

### **Building a Better Airplane**

He moved to Seattle in 1908 to establish the Greenwood Timber Co. His first home in that city was a genteel apartment-hotel on First Hill, but in 1909, he was elected a member of The Highlands, a brand-new, exclusive residential suburb in the Shoreline area north of town. In 1910, he bought the Heath Shipyard on the Duwamish River to build a yacht, named the Taconite — after the "good luck". Three years later Boeing asked the architecture firm of Bebb and Mendel to design his white-stucco, red-roofed mansion in The Highlands.

By then, he was already enthralled with airplanes. He attended an aviation meet in 1910 in Los Angeles, where he tried to get a ride on one of the boxy biplanes but had no success. In 1915, Thomas Hamilton, later founder of Hamilton Metalplane Co. (acquired by Boeing in 1929), introduced Boeing to U.S. Navy Lieutenant G. Conrad Westervelt. Boeing and Westervelt became close friends and when flier Terah

Maroney brought a Curtiss-type hydroplane to Seattle later that year, the pair took turns riding above Lake Washington.

Boeing told writer Harold Mansfield that he sat beside Maroney on the front edge of the lower muslin-covered wing and as the biplane banked away from the lake, he saw the whole landscape tilting up beside him like a flat picture plate. After a few more sessions with Maroney, Boeing and Westervelt decided they could build a better airplane.

### **The Largest Aerospace Company in the World is Born**

By 1915, Westervelt was exchanging information with Jerome Hunsaker, who had established a wind tunnel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the same time, Boeing visited Herb Munter, an exhibition flier who was preparing a plane for flights over Seattle's Harbor Island, and asked him if the public was interested in aviation. "Mostly they come out to see you crash, Munter told him.

"At that time I was merely desirous of learning to fly," Boeing later told writer Harold Crary. "After making inquiries of various sources, I applied to the Glenn L. Martin School in Los Angeles for instruction," Boeing continued. "In August of that year, I started a course under the tutelage of Floyd Smith. On completing the course, I ordered for my personal use a plane known as Model TA from the Martin factory.

"The machine was delivered to me in October of 1915, and, being convinced that there was a definite future in aviation, I became interested in the construction as well as the flying of aircraft. Enlisting a group of technical assistants, less than a dozen men in all, work was begun in designing the first Boeing plane.

"At that time, our combined factory and seaplane hangar were housed in a small building on the shores of Lake Union, and it was from there that I made the initial test flight of the first Boeing plane." That was June 15, 1916. The seaplane/biplane was the Bluebill, B&W Model 1 — the initials stood for Boeing and Westervelt. It was

25.5 feet long and flew 900 feet. Thus, the largest aerospace company in the world was born.

### **From War to Peace: The Commercial Flying Boat**

On July 15, 1916, Boeing incorporated Pacific Aero Products and consolidated most of the fledgling company's work at the Heath shipyard. Boeing needed somewhere in Seattle to test his airplanes, so he paid for the construction of a wind tunnel at the University of Washington in exchange for the university's establishment of a curriculum in the new science of aeronautics.

On April 8, 1917, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany and on May 17, 1917, the company was renamed the Boeing Airplane Company. William Boeing enrolled in the U.S. Navy Reserve in July of that year. His company began to build Navy trainers, the Boeing Model C. Pontoons for the first two were built in the University of Washington's shell house.

Boeing kept his office in the Hoge building in downtown Seattle, while his plant managers were on site at the shipyard. "It now behooves us to devote our energies toward the development of machines which will be used in peacetimes," he wrote to his cousin, Edward C. Gott, who was running the factory when the war ended November 11, 1918, while Boeing was in Chicago. "In this connection the first logical opening will be the development of a commercial flying boat."

### **Diversifying to Make Ends Meet**

Meanwhile his company struggled to make ends meet. It made furniture, phonograph cases, and fixtures for a corset company. To promote the idea of commercial aviation, Boeing and pilot Eddie Hubbard used Boeing's personal C-700 (a civilian version of the Model C) to deliver 60 letters from Vancouver to Seattle as part of the Canadian Exposition. This was the first international airmail to reach the United States.

The company then started to show a profit from repairing military aircraft and building biplane fighters designed by other companies. By 1921,

the company had reestablished itself and Boeing had found himself a bride. That year, Boeing brought his new wife, Bertha Potter Paschall, and her two young sons from a previous marriage, to his estate in Highland Hills. Later, another son, William Boeing, Jr., was born to the couple.

Boeing continued to run his timber business and was able to absorb details of both lumber and airplane enterprises. Years later, he could recall the description and topography of a parcel of land and the species and quality of timber that it would yield. He believed in details and told his managers that many a wrong decision stemmed from a detail overlooked or incorrectly interpreted.

### Air-cooled engine wins the bid

Nonetheless, he demonstrated an unerring ability to look at the big picture. He knew the trees, but could grasp the importance of the forest. His decision to use air-cooled engines rather than the traditional water-cooled engines on the Model 40A mailplane, which was competing for the Chicago to San Francisco airmail route, allowed him to win the bid. The contract required that Boeing have 26 airplanes in operation by July 1, 1927.

Boeing had to underwrite a \$500,000 bond with his own money to secure the company's performance on the airmail contract. Bertha Boeing was asked to launch the first Model 40A mailplane but was told that, because of Prohibition, no champagne was allowed on Crissy Field in San Francisco. She objected and a legend was born. In one version, she christened the plane with orange juice and soda but never knew the difference. In another, she was given special permission to use real champagne. In either case, this started the company in the business of air transportation and the mass production of commercial air transports.

In 1928, Boeing told an interviewer: "It is a matter of great pride and satisfaction to me to realize that within the short space of 12 years, an infant company with a personnel of less than a dozen men, has grown to be the largest plant in America, devoted solely to the manufacture

of aircraft, and at the present time employing approximately 1,000 men."

On February 1, 1929, Boeing Airplane and Transport Corporation became United Aircraft and Transport Corp. and included several airlines, aircraft manufacturers, engine and propeller manufacturers, and a school for pilots and maintenance personnel in California.

### The Taconite

Boeing was a member of a yacht club in Vancouver, B.C., and in 1929 bought Vancouver boatbuilders Hoffar-Beeching Co., intending to build flying boats there. When the Great Depression hit later that year, Boeing kept the company alive by paying \$421,000 for the construction of the second Taconite — an extremely luxurious 125-foot Burmese teak yacht — as a gift for Bertha.

In 1934, the Government enacted antitrust laws and United Aircraft and Transport Corp. was split into different enterprises. Boeing resigned as chairman and sold his stock. On June 20, 1934, he was awarded the Daniel Guggenheim Medal for aeronautical achievement.

At the award ceremony in San Francisco, Boeing remarked: "Now that I am retiring from active service in aircraft manufacturing and air transportation, to be so greatly honored as to be recipient of the Daniel Guggenheim Medal is a real climax of my life. As the past years devoted to aircraft activities have been filled with real romance, the many forward projects now in the making will continue to keep me on the sidelines as a keen and interested observer."

### A legacy of perfectionism and high standards

Boeing continued in the timber business until about 1954 and made a variety of investments. Around 1937, he began to breed racehorses and by March 1938 had accumulated a stable of 40 thoroughbred horses in Walnut Creek, California, and had purchased the contract of famous jockey Basil James. That year the Boeing stable was fifth

in the United States for purses won.

In the real estate business, Boeing's interests included the development of the Blue Ridge subdivision north of Seattle that in 1936 included a clubhouse, tennis courts, an archery range, and a playfield. Every summer, Boeing and family cruised aboard the Taconite, often as far north as Alaska. Boeing, who always loved new machinery, made sure that the Taconite had the most modern equipment as it became available. She was the first civilian vessel to have two-way radio — developed by Boeing's brother-in-law, Thorpe Hiscock, for use on Boeing mailplanes. After World War II, she was the first civilian vessel to have radar. The Taconite was still taking notables on cruises in 1999, and wherever she went she symbolized the Boeing legacy of perfectionism, attention to detail, and high standards.

Boeing bought a Douglas-built Dolphin amphibian aircraft and hired a pilot to use the Dolphin to fly him from Taconite landings on the Alaskan coast for fishing trips on remote lakes inland. Boeing took delivery of the Dolphin off the coast of Canada and timed its climb with a stopwatch to make sure it met performance specifications. During the late 1930s, Boeing became an expert on fishing and helped originate the polar-bear fly used for salmon fishing.

### The Airplane of Tomorrow is Christened

Boeing kept his promise to stay in touch with friends and colleagues at his old company. He returned to work as an advisor during World War II when the Boeing Airplane Company began to build warplanes, and the enterprises that had been split following the Depression joined forces to defend the country.

In 1942, Boeing donated his Highland Hills mansion to Children's Orthopedic Hospital and moved to the 500-acre Aldarra Farm near Fall City. The mansion was subsequently sold to raise funds for the hospital, and in 1988 was placed on both

the National and Washington State Registers of Historic Places.

Boeing then added animal husbandry to his activities. At first, Boeing raised purebred Herefords on Aldarra, but later switched to Black Angus cattle and sheep. He is credited with having done much to improve the standards of registered beef stock throughout the Northwest. Aldarra became completely mechanized. During the 1950s Boeing built the state's only noncommercial grass dehydrating plant so the cattle had prime pasture all year round.

Boeing personally inspected every acre of his land, striding briskly and swinging a cane he did not need, and followed by a Pekingese named General Motors. When his health began to fail in 1954, he began to tour by jeep. On May 15, 1954, he and Bertha returned to The Boeing Company again for the Dash-80 rollout and the birth of the jet era. This time Bertha was able to use real champagne. "I christen thee the airplane of tomorrow, the Boeing Jet Stratoliner and Stratotanker," she proclaimed. She was right; this was the jet that would change the face of aviation worldwide. It would emerge as the 707, the first of the famous Boeing family of jetliners.

William E. Boeing died September 28, 1956, aboard the Taconite. He remained until the end an active and interested participant in the world around him. He did not have a formal funeral, and his family scattered his ashes into the sea off the coast of British Columbia where he had spent so many months aboard the Taconite.

On December 15, 1966, Bill Boeing was memorialized in the Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio, "for outstanding contributions to aviation by his successful organization of a network of airline routes and the production of vitally important military and commercial aircraft."

Bertha Boeing died on June 27, 1977, at home at the Aldarra Farm. In May 2001, half the estate was designated as the Aldarra Golf Course. The remainder of the land had been previously sold for residential development.