Around-the-World Flight Aims to Preserve Wichita's Aviation History

By Emily Younger Barnwell

Wichita's distinction as the Air Capital of the World is a testament to the region's longstanding vibrant and growing hub for aviation manufacturing.

The Classic Lear Jet Foundation, a Wichita-based nonprofit, is on a mission to preserve the region's rich aviation history while connecting and educating future generations.

The 10-person Board of Directors and countless volunteers, many of whom are current, former or retired Learjet employees, are restoring the first Lear Jet plane delivered to a customer on October 13, 1964. The Learjet Model 23, serial number 23-003, was the third to be manufactured.

"This plane is one of the most important articles of aviation history ever," explained Rick Rowe, who is leading the public relations efforts for the foundation.

Rowe, a retired Learjet demo pilot, said the Lear Jet 23 propelled the business jet industry from the 1960s to the 21st century, paving the way for other manufacturers to design and build business jets.

"This created the need for peripheral businesses such as machine shops, interior shops, etc. to start up which in turn

created jobs and pumped a lot of money into Wichita's economy," he explained.

Today, the Wichita region is home to the largest aviation ecosystem in the world, boasting a network of more than 450 suppliers, the No. 1 skilled workforce in the United States and world-class research institutions.

"Aircraft manufacturing is the lifeblood of Wichita," Rowe emphasized. "Since 1920, the aircraft companies based in Wichita have produced approximately a quarter-million aircraft, more than any other city on earth."

Lear Jet 23-003 sits on the ramp at Lear Jet on Oct. 13, 1964, in Wichita, KS.

Lear Jet 23-003 sits on the ramp at Lear Jet on Feb. 28, 2023, in Wichita, KS.

Restoration Efforts

The Lear Jet 23 returned to Wichita, the place where it was built, in February of 2023. Before that, it was deteriorating on a ramp at Bartow Executive Airport in Florida.

Restoration work has been minimal up to this point, as the foundation finalizes a long-term hosting agreement. Once that is complete, Rowe promises work will begin in earnest.

"The first steps will be to strip all the paint from the fuselage and other parts, remove the interior and take out all the spray foam insulation. Next, several non-destructive inspections such as X-ray and eddy current testing will be done to determine the exact condition of the airplane," Rowe described.

Intending to restore the jet to flying condition, like Wichita's B-29 Doc, the foundation has launched a creative fundraising campaign – "The Century Mission – Around the World from the Air Capital."

Flight Details

Global Jetcare, an air ambulance company based in Florida and supporter of the Classic Lear Jet Foundation, will provide the Learjet 36 for the Century Mission. The flight is scheduled to depart Wichita's Bombardier Learjet facility in the early hours of April 4. They will make refueling stops in California, Hawaii, the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, Singapore, India, Dubai, Egypt, Italy, Portugal and Canada before returning to Wichita on April 6.

The mission, with an estimated total time of 61 hours and 42 minutes, will carry four pilots, Bart Gray, Joshua Podlich, Kirby Ezelle and Jone Bone. Joel Weber, a Classic Lear Jet Foundation board member, will serve as an observer.

When the flight returns to Wichita on April 6 it will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first circumnavigation of the globe by air. The Army Air Services departed Seattle on April 6, 1924, returning 175 days and 74 stops later.

Click here, to learn more about the Classic Lear Jet Foundation and the Century Mission.