



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of HAZEL SIG-HESTER



March 3, 1922 - October 10, 2025
Modeler starting in 1958 AMA #L57

Written by JG (08/2002), NMAM staff (03/2018), and EW (09/1995); Transcribed & Edited by SS (08/2002),
Updated by JS (10/2008, 06/2019, 01/2022, 10/2025), Reformatted by JS (02/2010)

Career:

- Started SIG Manufacturing Company with her husband, Glen, in 1951 to supply balsa and Radio Control parts to modelers
- Flew full-sized planes, including aerobatics
- Built and flew many full-sized and model airplanes

Honors:

- 1983: Legion of Honor award recipient [AMA]
 - 1988: Model Aviation Hall of Fame inductee
 - 2002: Howard McEntee Memorial Award recipient [Westchester Radio Aero Modelers (WRAM)]
 - 2020: VR/CS Hall of Fame inductee
 - 2022: Wesley L. McDonald Distinguished Statesman and Stateswoman of Aviation Award winner
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The following was written by Joe Godfrey and posted at AVweb.com. Red Scholfield submitted it to the AMA History Project in 2002 (at the time called the AMA History Program.)

Hazel Sig

By Joe Godfrey

Introduction

Did your interest in flying start with building model airplanes? Hazel Sig and her late husband Glen started Sig Manufacturing Company in 1951, and over 48 years shipped truckloads full of balsa and Radio Controlled (RC) parts all over the world. In March she turned 80 and still flies her signature blue-and-white clipped-wing Cub and the Spacewalker, which she co-built. In this month's Profile, AVweb's Joe Godfrey talks with Hazel about flying aerobatics, teaching in tail draggers and Radio Control models.

Background

Hazel Sig-Hester was born March 3, 1922, in Grinnell, Iowa. Her family lived on 3rd Street, Hazel was the third child, and Grinnell was the third town her parents had lived in, so it is easy to see what her lucky number is. Hazel's father took a ride with Charles Lindbergh when he passed through Iowa giving rides, and her father took Hazel for her first airplane ride when she was – you guessed it – three months old. Hazel's father was an auto mechanic who loved to race, and was killed racing when Hazel was 17. After Hazel graduated from high school, she worked as a

dental assistant. As she puts it, “Glen Sigafoose came roaring into town on his Indian motorcycle in 1942” and they began dating. Glen was a Linotype operator for the Montezuma (Iowa) Republican and Hazel learned the trade by watching Glen. They married in 1943 and planned to buy the Republican someday. Eventually Glen – whose nickname was Poncho – became the paper’s shop foreman and Hazel became the fastest Linotype operator in the state.

While they waited for the paper’s owner to sell, Glen and Hazel opened an Indian motorcycle dealership. Glen designed a set of custom aluminum wheel discs for Indians and a mold to spin them. They sold a lot of them until the Korean conflict cut their aluminum supply entirely. Hazel and Glen both built model airplanes and in 1951 started selling balsa to other model makers. Their little mom-and-pop business grew to become Sig Manufacturing Company, selling remote-controlled kits and supplies to model builders around the world. Hazel learned to fly in 1958, and flew aerobatic shows with Glen and their friend and fellow model builder Maxey Hester. Glen was killed during a performance in Centerville, Iowa, in 1980. Hazel stopped flying air shows but continued to fly, and continued to operate the RC business with Maxey. She married Maxey in 1981 and they sold the business in 1998. At 80 years young, she still flies her clipped-wing Cub and the single-place, tail-dragger Spacewalker, which she and Maxey built. And her Corvette will go at least 140 miles per hour when she can find the right road to let it go.

Questions and Answers

I don’t suppose you remember your first flight?

No I don’t, since I was only three months old. We moved to Montezuma (Iowa) when I was six, and I do remember the mail planes passing through. There was one beacon east of town and another west of town, and whenever one of the planes had something wrong with the engine my father would work on it, and sometimes the pilots would take us for a ride.

The first house we lived in Montezuma was across the street from a vacant lot. We played on that lot when we were kids, and in 1951, Glen and I built our building on that lot.

I was about 17 when I got my first chance to fly an airplane. It was the beginning of the war and three guys in my high school class were going to take flying lessons, and I tagged along. I got about half an hour of instruction. When I was about 30 or so a friend of mine – who had flown P-51s during the war – became a flight instructor in Sigourney, Iowa, and Poncho and I rode our Indian Motorcycles down there for flying lessons. The first time up, he taught me to fly by talking me around, and when I landed he said, “You’ll never make a better landing.” We started on the Fourth of July and I had my private in October.

Which airplane was that?

We bought a Champ and that’s what we learned in. About a year later, we bought a Cessna 140, and after I got my instructor’s rating, I instructed in it. I had a problem on takeoff when I was learning to fly because my instructor never made it clear what happened to the tail on takeoff. When I was instructing in the 140, I taught students that after an aileron or a rudder input, they couldn’t just leave it there; they had to neutralize again.

I noticed that students who learned in Cessna 150s soloed faster than my students in the 140, so I sold my 140 and taught in the 150. They may have soloed faster, but I think the pilots who could fly the 140 were more skillful pilots.

What attracted you to teaching?

We enjoyed flying ourselves, and Poncho said there weren't going to be any more pilots in the area until one of us got an instructor's rating, and I was elected. I got my commercial rating – and at that time, you weren't required to have an instrument rating to teach – but I did have some hood time. I instructed a group here in Montezuma, and did some instructing in Ottumwa and Fairfield, Iowa. I taught a lot of college kids.

I taught my students to hedgehop. We were careful and we knew the land, so it wasn't a daredevil attitude, but I wanted them to be able to fly low confidently in case they ever got caught in weather. One time Maxey was out flying low with his brother, and his brother said, "At least when you're down here you don't have much traffic to worry about," and Maxey said, "You just have to worry about Hazel coming up underneath you."

Recently – in the last few years – a tall, good-looking guy came to one of our model contests and said he was an airline pilot flying international routes and that I had taught him to fly. It was quite a thrill.

When did you start flying aerobatics?

Back then – in the late 1950s – there weren't a lot of aerobatic instructors around. I flew out to western Nebraska to take some lessons. We flew three hours in the morning, broke for lunch and three more hours in the afternoon. He said he'd never seen anybody who could take that much aerobatics in one day. He taught in a clipped-wing Cub, and when I got back home that's what I wanted. I found a regular Cub – the blue-and-white one that we still have – and converted it to a clipped-wing Cub.

I bought Duane Cole's book and taught myself aerobatics. I read it before I went up, took it with me, and read it while I was flying. I couldn't do any inverted flight because I didn't have the fuel system – and it's a good thing because I found out later Cubs only fly for a few seconds after they're inverted.

Maxey found a single-hole Pitts Special for sale in Council Bluffs, I sold my Cessna 150, and we got the Pitts. Maxey and I learned to fly the two-hole Pitts – and once you've flown the single-hole the two-hole is really easy – and I won the toss on flying it back to Montezuma. They had told me to stay off pavement for a while and I was kind of sweating the landing, but it was fine. It was just another tail dragger. We started using a slip maneuver for landing so we could see the runway, because the visibility is so bad in the single-hole Pitts.

I had a Smith Miniplane for a while. It had an interesting problem with the brakes. The heel brakes were too far from the rudder pedals, and you couldn't use them both at the same time. A couple of those landings were a wild ride, until we moved the brakes closer to the rudder pedals.

They tell me that after Pitts flew a Smith Miniplane he designed the double-aileron Pitts. It was quick – the first time I did a snap roll in the Smith, I got a snap and a half.

Let's go back to Cubs for a minute. Are all clipped-wing Cubs the same?

No. Ours was a Reed conversion. We began with a regular Cub and took out about 40 inches at the wing root. There's another conversion where they clip the outboard, and those are more rare. I flew it down to Ottumwa and took the wings off myself. When the mechanic uncovered the wing we discovered quite a bit of mouse damage – a large section of the spar was chewed away – on the main spar. It really was a wonder it didn't break when I was doing snap rolls. So we fixed that, and I brought the wings back to sew them in the basement of the plant. When I went to install the wings, I found that the mechanic had rigged the control cables backward, so I would've been getting right aileron when I wanted left aileron. He was convinced he was right but I had taken it apart so I knew how it should go back together. I finally convinced them I was right before we recovered it.

Since you flew it to Ottumwa, you had a chance to fly it before and after the clip. How did the clip change the performance?

I had done solo aerobatics before we clipped the wings, too. A regular Cub with big wings is pretty slow but it glides better. In a clipped-wing Cub, you had better turn a tight base, because it glided like a brick. All the maneuvers were cleaner in the clipped-wing Cub. Snap rolls were tighter.

I flew my clipped-wing Cub on at least two long trips. Once out to Doylestown, Pennsylvania, when the International Model Airplane Contest was held there. Poncho and Maxey flew my Cessna 150 and I trotted along behind them in the Cub. At one time on the way out the visibility got really hazy and I had to use the 150 for an artificial horizon.

The airplane was put in a big hangar out there and the model airplanes were impounded with it. Pictures of the Cub and the models were featured on a magazine from England merely saying the Cub belonged to Hazel Sig. There was a fellow pilot who looked in my cockpit, noting the lack of navigational instruments, turned to me and said, "You trucked it out." Hah!

The weather turned really bad and we had to ride back in the company van. Poncho and I took a commercial flight back out later to fly both planes back. We got as far as Hershey, Pennsylvania, and the weather put us down overnight. The next morning was supposed to be bad so we didn't get up early, then we discovered the weather was good all the way home. We refueled the last time at Davenport, Iowa, on the Mississippi River and I took off as soon as I got my gas – it was getting very late – and I was flying along Interstate 80 and the sun was going down and I called Poncho on the radio, "Take off your sunglasses." There was a little silence, and then a soft "Oh."

I reached our field and landed into the wind, to the north, and Poncho came in and landed south, just as I turned off the runway. I was wearing a pair of yellow glasses that my doctor had loaned me and as I was taxiing in, I pulled them off and discovered it was really dark! Made me a believer.

One other time I flew the Cub to Amarillo, Texas. Maxey was flying the Bonanza with me – gear down, flaps down. Sometimes he would get tired, pour on the power after cleaning her up, and fly circles around me for a while.

My Dutch grandfather – not to mention my German editor – would probably kick me if I didn't ask you about that last name – Sigafoose.

As near as we can tell, the Sigafoose name is German. The closest translation I've heard is "fleet of foot." When we started the business, we realized no one would be able to spell it or pronounce it if they saw it spelled, so we shortened it to Sig. I was the first "Sig" because the belt I wore when I rode a motorcycle – one of those fancy wide kidney ones – had a design on the back out of studs that spelled "SIG." I have been known as Hazel Sig so many years that when Maxey and I were married I found out I could have any name I wanted so I kept the "Sig" part and added "-Hester." Had I known how much trouble the hyphen would cause with computers, I would have left off the "-Hester" part and just kept the "Hazel Sig." The computer at the hospital where we go cannot handle the hyphen and I come out "Sighester" – and you can probably figure out how they pronounce that.

Did you and Glen and Maxey fly a three-airplane show?

Glen had smoke on his Pitts Special so he would lead and he would roll inverted with Maxey and me as wingmen, and we'd fly over the town that was having the air show to help attract a crowd. Other than that, we flew separately.

What happened on the day he crashed?

We had friends visiting from New Jersey, so he flew them over in his Bonanza, dropped them off, and came back to get his Pitts. He flew to Centerville and arrived in town in the Pitts with his smoke on to advertise the show. Maxey had traded his Pitts for a Super Decathlon, and he was the first of us to fly that day. He called back down and said, "Boy, this air is thin. We need to move everything up." It was hot so the density altitude was about 5,000 feet at a 1,000-foot [MSL] airport. We were also flying against the wind, which was pushing us back toward the crowd we weren't allowed to fly over. Maxey moved up, and when I flew, I moved up, too. Glen was so proud – that's the only word that describes it – of his flying and didn't move higher and didn't change his routine. He had recently added a double snap roll on top of a loop, and he fell out of it and went into a spin. He did everything right – kept the nose down and stopped the spin – and was turning back towards the field, but he was still coming down fast. He was headed for a row of airplanes so he pulled back on the stick, did a high-speed snap, went over the top, and spun into a cornfield.

He was alive when they got him out, but he died at the hospital. He had internal injuries, head injuries, both arms and both legs were broken. There was nothing they could do for him.

My friends wouldn't let me fly my airplane home, so someone gave me a ride home, and a friend flew my airplane home. My insurance company said they wouldn't cover me if I flew it, so that was that. I sold it.

I'll bet you had a tough time choosing between flying Cubs and riding Indians?

We had a lot of fun with both of them. Poncho had a solo-saddle Indian but he had a small seat that sat up on the tank. When we rode together, he sat in the tank seat and I sat in the back. Back then, we had footboards, not pegs. There was a straight stretch of road just out of town, and I'd step off on the left footboard and he'd step off on the right one, and I'd swing over him and get up on the tank seat and he'd slide under me and get on the back seat. I'm sure we scared a lot of people rolling down the road doing that little trick.

It was a very solid riding motorcycle and you could do things like that. Poncho could stand on the seat and ride down the highway.

What are you flying now?

I'm still flying my clipped-wing Cub and my single-place tail dragger Spacewalker, which Maxey and I built. And my Corvette will go at least 140 miles per hour when I can find the right road to let it go.

When did you start building model airplanes?

I started building them when I was a little girl, and Poncho had been building rubber-powered and gas-powered models all his life. He came to town in 1942, and with the war on there weren't a lot of young people left in town. So he moved from Linotype operator to foreman, and I took over the Linotype, which I had learned just by watching him do it. We were still building models and we thought you ought to be able to buy balsa wood through the mail, so we started our business. We figured out some sizes and printed up a sheet, which we offered for free in a tiny ad on one of the model magazines. Then we figured out that if we charged 10 cents for the sheet we actually sold more lists than we gave away for free.

What's the biggest market for RC airplanes?

We've always shipped all over the world. We probably shipped mostly to the eastern part of the U.S. and the Midwest – New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois – and have always shipped a lot to California, because the weather's better year-round. After Maxey started designing kits, we shipped a lot of those, and just before I sold the business ARFs (almost ready-to-fly kits) became popular with people who don't have the ability or the time to build a plane from scratch.

What's the most popular model?

The Kadet was a bestseller, and the Cub and the clipped-wing Cub were popular. So many people over the years have come up and said, "You got me started in aviation." For instance, one of our customers was Burt Rutan. People have come up at Sun 'n Fun or Oshkosh and said, "You're Hazel Sig. You and your models got me started flying."



Hazel Sig-Hester



Hazel Sig-Hester



Hazel and her signature blue-and-white clipped-wing Cubs



Hazel and Maxey built this Spacewalker. It's almost as fast as her Corvette!



Backyard fun with the Sig's 1/4-scale Cub

The following article about Hazel ran in the In the Air section of Model Aviation magazine, March 2018 issue, in the History Preserved column.

National Model Aviation Museum History Preserved: Hazel Sig-Hester

If you've been in the aeromodeling hobby for any amount of time, chances are that you've heard of Sig Manufacturing Company. However, you might not be familiar with its fearless daredevil of a cofounder, Hazel Sig-Hester.

Born the third child on Third Street in the third town that her parents had lived in on the third day of the third month of 1922, Hazel considered herself to have been born lucky. With a racecar-driving father whose favorite story to tell was the time he flew with Charles Lindbergh, Hazel was born with a need for speed.

A self-professed tomboy, Hazel grew up climbing trees, shooting BB guns, and loving motorcycles and model airplanes. Lucky for her, this tall, "outlandish" young dental assistant would soon find her match in the young man who "roared into town on his Indian Motorcycle in 1942."

Hazel's new boyfriend, Glen "Poncho" Sigafoose, took a job as a Linotype operator at the *Montezuma Republican* newspaper and opened an Indian Motorcycle dealership on the side with her. They were married in 1943. Together, they ran the dealership until the Korean War began, cutting off their aluminum supply.

The couple never intended to get into the model aviation business. Aeromodeling had been a lifelong interest for both Hazel and Poncho, but they were rapidly growing frustrated by the lack of availability of cut balsa wood for scratch-built models. So, in approximately 1951, they took matters into their own hands. Poncho bought 120 feet of balsa, which he cut into thin sheets.

The Sigafoses then took out an advertisement in a hobby magazine, offering free information regarding the precut balsa. To their surprise, they received no response from the community. They made another, more successful attempt - this time offering information about the balsa at the low cost of 10 cents. The couple was soon inundated with requests.

Five years after publishing its first advertisement, the Sig Manufacturing Company was able to purchase its first building. Sig quickly grew. The couple expanded their catalog to include not only balsa wood, but also engines, radios, and kits from other manufacturers. They began to manufacture their own kits under the Sig name, and even recruited well-known model designers and competitors to design an exclusive line of model airplanes.

But Hazel wasn't content to stick exclusively to model aviation. Her eye was still on full-scale airplanes. At roughly the same time that Sig Manufacturing was beginning to take off, she and Poncho rode their Indian Motorcycles from Montezuma, Iowa, to Sigourney, Iowa, to take full scale aircraft flying lessons.

Hazel initially learned how to fly an Aeronca Model 7 Champion - colloquially known simply as a "Champ" - but later transitioned to a Cessna 140 for teaching purposes. She also became an accomplished aerobatics pilot shortly thereafter.

According to Hazel, there were few aerobatics instructors in the mid-1950s, so she traveled to Nebraska to learn in a clipped-wing Cub. She furthered her studies through Duane Cole's technical manual, *Roll Around a Point*, which she read both on the ground and in the air for pointers. She would continue to fly both her clipped-wing Cub and a homebuilt Spacewalker for more than 30 years.

The clipped-wing Cub remained a popular airplane with Hazel, and eventually a model version was made available for purchase through Sig Manufacturing. It remains one of the most popular Sig kits, along with the Kadet and a non-clipped-wing version of the Cub.

It should come as no surprise that Sig Manufacturing remains a strong competitor in the aeromodeling market. Nearly everything available from Sig is manufactured from scratch - paint, glue, and airplane fuel included. Raw balsa is imported from Ecuador and plywood from Finland.

Many aeromodelers are familiar with the Sig catalog, which was frequently referred to as the "model builder's wish book." So next time you're flipping through the Sig website and considering a new Piper Cub kit, remember the airplane-loving, motorcycle-riding, spitfire of a cofounder who helped make it all possible: Hazel Sig-Hester.

-National Model Aviation Museum staff

The following article about Hazel ran in the September 1995 issue of Spotlight on Central Iowa.

The Real Life Adventures of Hazel Sig: The Story of SIG Manufacturing in Montezuma

By Elissa Westbrook

The day Glen Sigafoose rolled into Montezuma on his big red and yellow Indiana motorcycle was to greatly alter the future of the town and its newest dental assistant, Hazel Hicks. Forty-five years later, when Hazel selected the same paint scheme for her Spacewalker, a sporty 1930s retro, open cockpit airplane she flies quite often, the colors red and yellow came to mind. It wasn't until after the airplane was finished and painted that she realized the coincidence of her choice.

A small town girl riding on the back of a motorcycle in the 1940s would have been a rare sight. Ask Hazel about it, though, and she'll tell you it wasn't any more unusual than the sight of a lady in her 70s racing along country roads in her red 1994 Corvette. Recalling how much fun she had learning to ride that motorcycle, Hazel laughs over a story of Glen and her careening across an intersection and ramming into one of the Midwest's double-high curbs as she tried to control the heavy bike.

“My father would have enjoyed my life,” Hazel comments.

Having always considered herself to be a “tomboy,” Hazel wanted to wear pants, ride motorcycles, climb trees, shoot B.B. gun and fly airplanes. She laughs and says she was a bit “outlandish” as a young girl.

While her mother was appalled at Hazel’s plan to wear pants on her first date with Glen, making her change into a dress, Glen clearly did not agree. When she came out to join him on his motorcycle, he looked at her “...as if I were crazy,” she says, “and told me to wear pants the next time.”

If Hazel was “outlandish,” Glen didn’t mind too much. For the most part, he was only too happy to share his model airplane hobby with Hazel, teaching her to build balsa wood planes and other types of Radio Controlled (RC) crafts. It was from this interest that SIG Manufacturing developed.

It seems that not much has changed for Hazel’s average daily activities and interests are still what many would consider to be “outlandish” for someone her age and sex; however, as a thin, gangly teenager, with long legs, her father liked to refer to her as “Gallopin’ Hairpins” when she ran around in shorts.

“I adored my father,” Hazel states, recalling proudly how he had once flown with Charles Lindbergh.

At the age of 17, Hazel lost her father in an automobile crash. His sudden death in a racecar accident sent the whole family into shock.

“We all went to work then,” she recalls. “We girls had only one dress each, but we never went hungry because we raised our own food.”

Interestingly enough, driving an actual racecar is one of the only things Hazel has not yet tried, but she hopes to. She does drive a racecar, of sorts, to work and back everyday. The bright red 1994 Corvette is Hazel’s car of choice, but what she really wants is to drive it, all alone, on a track where she can go as fast as she wants. A very careful driver, Hazel smiles, and hesitates to admit that she has already had the car up over 100 mph, but she won’t say where this took place.

Seemingly fearless, Hazel can think of only one thing she shies away from and that’s water. She is afraid of water and is uncomfortable even flying over it, tending to take her plane to a higher elevation when she is over a body of water.

For years after they were married, motorcycles were the only mode of transportation for Hazel and Glen. In fact, Hazel received a pilot’s license before she was licensed to drive a car. Great fans of hobby and adventure, the young couple never imagined one of their recreational pastimes would turn into an internationally known manufacturing company.

Glen and Hazel loved to build model airplanes, but were frustrated by the inaccessibility of cut balsa wood, for their projects. Glen guessed that there must be many other builders in small towns without hobby shops facing the same problems. Glen purchased 120 board feet of balsa wood and cut it in his own basement into the thin sheets used by model builders.

In 1951, the Sigs took out an ad in a hobby magazine, offering free information about their cut balsa wood and were surprised when they got no response. A second ad was taken out offering the same information for the price of a dime and requests for the balsa began to come in. It wasn't long before Glen's mother was brought in to help with the shipping and packing department. After five years of working nights and weekends, Glen and Hazel were able to buy a building and quit their day jobs at the local newspaper.

The company grew rapidly, as more buildings were added and the company expanded its catalog. In response to requests from hobby dealers, they began to carry engines, radios, and kits from other manufacturers in order to be a more complete wholesale-type distributor. It wasn't long before they decided to start manufacturing kits themselves, rather than just selling specially cut balsa parts individually. Buying out the defunct Berkeley line, SIG re-introduced Berkeley kits. The level of response pushed SIG forward into hiring its own designers to create new model kits. Several nationally known model designers and competitors were hired to help create an excellent line of model airplanes. The company had nowhere to go but up and is now one of the top manufacturers and distributors of models kits in the world.

Hazel says quite candidly, "If I had known it was going to get this big, I never would have done it."

A walk through SIG Manufacturing of Montezuma is not like walking through any other manufacturing plant you could imagine. The obvious reason is that people are making and putting together miniature airplanes rather than autos or microchips, which is more likely to be what we think of when we envision a manufacturing plant. The thing that makes SIG employees seem different than anyone else is that they seem so happy. Currently employing 85 workers, SIG has almost no turnover. The company is proud of the fact it has several families who are starting their second generation of SIG employees and one family has reached its third.

Hazel can often be found in one of the company break rooms talking with an employee about a daughter away in the military or a son's little league game, or perhaps putting a puzzle together with the women who answer the phone and take orders. It's hard to imagine the C.E.O. of a multi-million dollar company doing a puzzle with the office workers or taking everyone in the company's blood pressure, for that matter, but that is the type of C.E.O. Hazel is. If a SIG employee has a headache, tendonitis or needs to have some stitches pulled out, they go see Hazel first. At 73, Hazel continues to be very much an integral part of SIG's every day work schedule.

SIG currently employees 85 people in its 85,000 square foot facility. Almost entirely self-sufficient, SIG now manufactures nearly every element of their product "in house." From a series of press systems that print everything from their glossy catalogs and plastic containers to an elaborate machine Glen designed for filling and crimping tubes of glue, SIG does it all. Glue, paint, packaging, metal and plastic molding and, of course, their world famous balsa wood, are

among products manufactured by SIG. All who knew him considered Glen to be a mechanical genius. Nearly every machine at SIG has been designed especially for that company, a good number of them designed and built by Glen himself. Jim Evans, current president of the company, fondly remembers seeing Glen working diligently “at a large table piled with little parts and gadgets” building some new piece of equipment “from a blueprint in his head.”

SIG’s paints, glues, and airplane fuel are all manufactured from scratch. They import raw balsa wood from Ecuador and plywood from Finland. Some of the best airplane motors, props, glow plugs (similar to spark plugs) and radios in the world can also be found in the huge SIG catalog, commonly known as the “model builder’s wish book.” A new laser system has recently been employed to better cut detailed parts, taking SIG into the next century.

The real story of SIG Manufacturing is more than just machines and balsa wood. It is a love story between three individuals and their love of flight. Hazel had wanted to fly for as long as she can remember. Her first flying lesson came when she was a teenager, but it wasn’t until 1957, when she was 53, that she became a private pilot. She and Glen took flying lessons together and eventually became involved in stunt flying, performing at various air shows along with their close friend, Maxey Hester.

Glen and Hazel had been friends with Maxey for years and brought him into the company in the mid-1960s. An excellent model builder, Maxey was hired to be the plant manager when SIG was branching into kit building. He developed many of the production and manufacturing methods used in producing the kits.

The trio did a great deal of flying together, both RC and full-scale aircraft. In 1966, Hazel flew in the All Woman’s Transcontinental Air Race, also known as the “Powder Puff Derby,” flying a Cessna 206 from Seattle, Washington, to Clearwater, Florida. Shortly after that, the trio became interested in stunt flying and began performing aerobatics at air shows. Hazel bought a small bi-plane known as a Pitts Special for in-air stunts and was soon followed by both Glen and Maxey. The three with their Pitts became known as “SIG’s mini air force,” performing aerobatics for seven years in flying air shows. This continued until July 20, 1980, when Glen was killed during a show in Centerville.

Obviously, the loss of Glen was devastating, but Hazel recalls fondly that her big family at SIG Manufacturing was there to support her 100%. Hazel was not one of those people who might look back feeling her own life was over or crawl into a corner and hide. Hazel worked to maintain her business as well as her flight hobby. While she did sell her Pitts, the type of plane Glen crashed in, and she stopped flying stunts, she got right back into the cockpit of an airplane and still logs in about 200 hours per year.

The handsome headstone that marks Glen’s final resting places tell the story of SIG on the front, while the back is etched with an airplane whose flight pattern has left a giant heart in its smoky trail. Hazel recalls that during air shows Glen would fly this pattern and the announcer would call out that Glen was tracing his heart for Hazel. After the accident, well-meaning people would say things like, “Well, at least he died happy.” Hazel says no way.

“I’ve looked that death in the face,” she said. It was clearly a terrifying end. “He didn’t want to die. Sometimes it’s like he’s still out there...fighting to get his plane under control.”

With sadness she recalls the accident, but she is quick, too, in recalling all the fun they had together, how they always held hands when they were out and the early years packaging balsa in their basement.

A few minutes with Hazel should be enough to convince anyone that she is not just the *wife* of the founder of SIG Manufacturing, Glen Sigafoose, but every bit a partner in the creation, development, and growth of the company. Even though she had worked side-by-side with her husband through the years, Hazel had to prove herself to others in the industry who predicted the company would quickly fall apart after the unfortunate death of her husband. While one company gave her six weeks, another proposed it would be a year. To the contrary, the company is as successful today as it has ever been.

Hazel now shares her life with Maxey. He had lost his wife a couple of years prior to Glen’s death. Spending most of their free time flying and traveling, they are very active in the Experimental Aircraft Association (E.A.A.) and its activities.

Hazel talks about marrying her lifelong friend, explaining that, “It is not exceptional for people who have been friends for so long to get married,” adding that she believes, “We [human being] are not meant to be alone.”

Because she and Glen had been friends with Maxey and his wife for so many decades, it was only natural that they marry after the loss of their respective spouses. Keeping part of Glen’s name and adding Maxey’s, Hazel Sig-Hester is what she formally calls herself.

The future of SIG will be in the hands of its new president, Jim Evans. A friend of the Sigs for over 25 years, Jim was thrilled when Hazel asked if he might like to slowly take over the company. While Hazel has retained her position as Chairwoman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, Jim has been named the company president. While several offers have been made by various model manufacturers, Hazel was hesitant to sell the company to an outsider, knowing well the buyer might just take the name and close the Montezuma plant. SIG is a family company and Jim follows in the footsteps of his predecessors by being there to greet guests and give tours rather than lock himself away in an office. As much time as the two of them spend on the manufacturing floor, it is hard to believe they even have formal offices.

Meeting Hazel is not like meeting anyone else. She has done and seen so many things that this writer has found it difficult to sum up her life and the life of SIG Manufacturing in less than a few million words. Hazel is confident and comfortable whether talking about her cats or flying any of her airplanes. Perhaps the best way to really get to know Hazel is to go flying with her. Hazel and Maxey both love to take inexperienced flyers up for a ride. Really lucky guests may get to experience Maxey’s open cockpit, two-seated Spacewalker, painted red and yellow like Hazel’s. There is nothing quite like the experience of an open cockpit plane. In the same vein, there is nothing quite like getting to know Hazel Sig-Hester.

The following text was posted on the Academy of Model Aeronautics blog on October 14, 2025, after Hazel's passing.

Remembering Hazel Sig-Hester: A Pioneer of Flight and Model Aviation

Hazel Sig-Hester, a true pioneer in both full-scale and model aviation, has passed away at the age of 103. Her lifelong love of flying, her trailblazing spirit, and her numerous contributions to the hobby have inspired generations of modelers around the world and will leave an indelible mark on the modeling community.

Hazel's story is one of passion and perseverance. In 1951, alongside her first husband, Glen Sigafoose, she co-founded Sig Manufacturing Company in Montezuma, Iowa. What began as a small business operation selling balsa wood to local modelers soon grew into a company known around the world and built up by Hazel's hard work, precision, and belief in the joy of flight.

A licensed pilot, flight instructor, and aerobatic performer, Hazel brought the same spirit of adventure to the air that she shared with the modeling community. Whether she was at the controls of her clipped-wing Cub or mentoring a new modeler, she brought boundless enthusiasm and an encouraging spirit to everything she did. Those who met her remember her energy, warmth, and fearless love of flying—qualities that helped define not only her life, but the heart of the hobby she helped shape.

Hazel's story is a testament to what can happen when a love of flight takes root and never lets go. Her legacy continues to soar in every model built, every pilot inspired, and every person who looks to the sky and dreams of flying.

Read the full tribute celebrating Hazel Sig-Hester's remarkable journey in an upcoming issue of Model Aviation magazine.

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