

Aviation family comes together to help one of its own

Staff Report

MT. VERNON — A former airport manager was helped by his friends in the aviation community in a move to Tennessee.

Max Firebaugh, who managed the airport from 1966 through 1989 during some of its busiest years, departed the city in a twin-engine airplane destined for Knoxville, Tenn., at 9:45 a.m. Dec. 23.

Firebaugh was born and raised in Mt. Vernon. He graduated from the University of Illinois, worked as a geologist/pilot for Collins Brothers Oil Company and went on to become the manager at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. He was the one overseeing millions of dollars in expansion projects, responsible for many area residents becoming pilots, and brought in Ozark Airlines.

He is also known for his work in World War II, flying 69 missions over Europe in B-26 Marauders. He earned an Air Medal with four Oak Leaf Clusters, the European/African Campaign Medal and three Battle

Stars, a Purple Heart and other medals and achievements for service to his country. Firebaugh retired as a Lt. Col. from the U.S. Air Force Reserves in the 1970s.

Firebaugh made his mark in Mt. Vernon before leaving for service in World War II. As the story is related, he and his crew took delivery of a new B-26 in spring 1943. The crew was asked to do a fuel consumption test, which was standard procedure before departing across the Atlantic for the European theater. Firebaugh decided a good cross country flight would be to depart Barksdale Field in Shreveport, La., fly to St. Louis, turn east to Evansville, Ind., turn southeast to Chattanooga, Tenn., then back to Barksdale Field. In addition, Firebaugh could say hello to his friends and family in Mt. Vernon. Windows were rattled in the Rogers Building downtown, and books flew off the shelves at the library as the B-26 rumbled overhead fast and low, west to east over downtown Mt.



Airport employees, board members and friends say what is hoped to be a temporary good-bye to former airport manager Max Firebaugh, who was flown to Knoxville, Tenn., to be closer to family during his recuperation from a stroke. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Vernon. Firebaugh's mother was so inspired by the act that she wrote a letter to her favorite poet, Edgar Guest, who then crafted the poem "Dusting off His Hometown" in tribute to Firebaugh's aerial antics over Mt. Vernon. The poem was published in syndicated newspapers including the Saturday Evening Post on July 27, 1943. Firebaugh said he spent the rest of his life fearful the

Civil Aeronautics Administration, and later the Federal Aviation Administration would render punishment.

Firebaugh remained active in Mt. Vernon after his retirement from Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, until he suffered a stroke in early November this year. After many weeks at Good Samaritan Regional Health Center, he was transferred to Countryside Manor.

While at Countryside, his sister, Cindy and her husband Jim, as well as several nieces and nephews now living in the Knoxville, Tenn., area began commuting to Mt. Vernon. Family members requested a transfer to Knoxville so he could be surrounded by the care and love family members could provide. Due to his condition, vehicle transport over roadways provided problems. His

family then reached out to Firebaugh's aviation family.

Airport management sought assistance from local pilots to help relocate Firebaugh. Within one hour of the request going out, Dr. Alan Froehling offered to fly Firebaugh in his Piper Navajo. A request to care for Firebaugh during the flight was answered by Mt. Vernon physician and long-time friend of Firebaugh's, Dr. Richard Garretson. "Nurse Millie" Zirkelbach of Garretson's office volunteered to help as well. Also assisting with the flight were aviation mechanics at SRT Aviation who readied the aircraft for flight, and Litton Ambulance Service, which provided the transportation from Countryside Manor to the airport.

Windy and cold conditions on Dec. 23 prompted the team to load Firebaugh inside the Heroes Memorial Hangar, where he was surrounded by friends, airport employees, airport board members and area aviation enthusiasts to say a temporary good-bye to a local aviation legend.