

'VARI'EZE' FINALLY OFF GROUND



Staff Photo by Benjamin Sharp

20th Century Technology Museum creator Art Schulze, right, poses in front of the VariEze aircraft displayed on the lawn with plane owner Bill Wood, center, and builder Frank Smith.

Pioneering plane becomes 'sign' for tech museum

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Constructing a homebuilt airplane was a joy to Bellville resident Frank Smith — even if he never got to fly it.

“She wouldn’t let me,” Smith laughs, referring to his wife, Katherine.

With such an ultimatum, Smith had little choice but to sell the VariEze airplane. The buyer was Lago Vista resident Jim Wood.

But Wood didn’t fly it, either. Instead, he donated it to his former NASA work mate, Art Schulze. Schulze wanted to feature the plane at the 20th Century Technology Museum that he’s created in Wharton.

On Friday, all three men gathered to celebrate the

official ribbon cutting and dedication of the VariEze — now permanently frozen in flight atop a metal pole on the museum’s front lawn.

“We think it kind of sets the mood and helps the recognition of the museum,” Schulze said.

“He’s done something fantastic with it,” Wood said, nodding toward Schulze.

Some of that credit goes toward the Wharton High School Industrial Arts Class, under the tutelage of instructor Charles Crowe.

The class spent the last year restoring the experimental aircraft, which had fallen into disrepair over the years.

Smith built it in 1976. It was designed by aviation pioneer Burt Rutan.

“They did a beautiful job on it,” Smith said of the high school students’ work.

Nearly 50 folks showed up Friday to view the plane and behold the other curiosities at the Fulton Street museum.

Among the guests was Henry Grawunder Jr., whose father built an unusual airplane that had “flapping” wings.

Called the “Ornithopter,” the craft is another of the museum’s unique exhibits.

Ironically, Grawunder lives just a few houses down from Smith (the VariEze builder) in Bellville.

“I’d like to have it someplace where somebody would really get to see it,” Grawunder said of display-

ing his dad’s craft at the museum.

That the Wharton museum would end up meeting that bill shows how unique a collection Schulze and his wife, Sharon, have brought here, said Larry Jackson, a member of the museum’s board of directors.

“It’s exciting what’s being created here,” Jackson, acting as emcee, told Friday’s guests.

Bellville resident Smith said he tells everyone he meets to come and visit the museum. Recently turning 85, he said Friday’s gathering was like a special birthday party.

“I just think it’s great to have this museum here,” he said.