Harold Henderson just couldn’t wait for his chance to take off into the wild blue yonder. He dreamt of becoming a pilot even as he grew up on his parents’ horse farm north of Dallas in the 1950s.

A friend at Baylor University happened to mention to Harold that he was taking private flying lessons. That opened up a world of possibilities! He asked his parents to sell his horses and send him the proceeds to pay for “lessons.” Little did they know they were funding lessons to fly airplanes.

On his first flight, the instructor let Harold take the controls while he executed a loop at speed. “I thought that was the best thing since sliced bread!” Harold exclaimed. He eventually accumulated 14,000 instructor flight hours over the course of his decades-long career.

Harold continued to teach flight lessons and began accumulating planes, starting his own flight school in Addison just seven miles from the family farm. After his parents recovered from their shock, they were very proud of Harold’s ingenuity and accomplishment, he remembers.

Oil started booming, and Harold saw a place for himself in corporate aviation. He answered an advertisement for the ARCO oil company – as a chef in the aviation department - to get his foot in the door. The chairman of the company wanted his meals prepared in flight, so he sent Harold to the Culinary Institute of America in New York to learn the techniques of the trade. Harold prepared gourmet meals for everyone from the ambassador of Japan to the Chairman of Pepsi Co., using only a microwave or a hot cup! They had no idea their chef could actually fly an airplane, he said.

Finally, Harold revealed his expertise and was promoted to flying Gulfstream jets all around the world for ARCO.

Another experience Harold will never forget – the feeling of piloting a plane on Sept. 12, 1999 – the day after the 9/11 tragedy. One of the ARCO executives needed him to fly from Burbank, Calif., to St. Louis to retrieve his wife due to her medical emergency. All planes needed a special permit to fly.

“As far as I know, I was the only one flying that day. The whole air was on lockdown,” he said.

Harold married and raised a family in California. He continued flying until just 18 months ago, when he moved to Independence Hill Retirement Community to be close to his daughter, who lives in Stone Oak. His son is also in Texas.

Harold enjoys the camaraderie he’s found at Independence Hill among others with similar interests. He attends the excursions - whether a concert or a bus trip to Wildseed Farms in Fredericksburg to see the Bluebonnets in bloom. He’s also found a special lady friend among the residents. Ironically both of them share their apartment homes with dogs named Millie – his is a sheltie, while hers is a black lab. They are known around the community as the couple that is always laughing together.