

A Family Affair — Preserving Our Heritage of Grass Roots Flying

By Mike Jones



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The last weekend of October 2021 featured the bright blue skies for which North Carolina is justifiably famous. Peering at the sky through the gentle vapors of my morning coffee, I figured it was the perfect day to join a fly-in someplace. Scanning the sectional, it seemed the well-publicized event at Lake Ridge Aero Park (8NC8) would do nicely. This was Lake Ridge's second fly-in for 2021 but my first time there. Their premier event had been in July; you can read about my storm-plagued efforts to get there in the



September 2021 edition of this magazine. But practice does make perfect, and this time cheery skies and gentle winds made it an ideal flying weekend for me and about a hundred other aviators.

I departed my home-drome about 9:30 Saturday morning in my red-and-white light sport taildragger which, because of its bright red beak, my wife has christened

Puffin. The shortest route to Lake Ridge would take me smack into the fast-moving traffic at Raleigh Durham International (KRDU). Rather than give those amiable controllers a hard time, I simply avoided the hustle and bustle of their airspace. I motored due north for thirty minutes, peering down at the villages and never going over 1,000 feet AGL. I was particularly alert just west of Durham where a sharply-sloping ridge hosts an exuberant line of enormous radio towers, their red and white beacons ominously bright against the green hills.



Gradually *Puffin* and I turned eastward, her Rotax engine churning the sky at 4,800 rpm. The ADSB showed other Lake Ridge arrivals were buzzing the pattern like bees discovering a delectable salvia bush. I made the traditional radio calls, entered the downwind on a 45° and flopped

gracefully onto Runway 32 with my normal 500-foot landing roll.

Unexpectedly, that made for a very long taxi because of a drainage ditch parallel to the runway running the full length of the field; I'll know better next time. Meanwhile, a skinny kid in coveralls marshalled me to parking and, as always, a cluster of pilots gathered around *Puffin* to inspect her handsome lines.

At this point, drop a pin on this tale for a brief editorial comment.

As Cessna drivers, we have the privilege and the obligation to exercise our soft-field techniques. Pity those poor pilots who never get grass in their landing gear, like the techno-geeks who drive Cirrus products. All that shiny fiberglass, handsome leather and more electronics than the Starship *Enterprise* — but those elegant birds are ill-suited to landing off the beaten path. With tightly-fitted wheel pants, small tires, smaller flaps and a twitchy wing, the Cirrus forums are filled with warnings of unpaved airstrips. Grass is so dangerous. So primitive. Positively antediluvian.

Well, bless your heart, Mr. Snooty Plane-with-a-Parachute. Flying high and fast may be useful but hardly entertaining. Quick fact of the day: of the 19,000 airports in the US only about 4,000 of them have paved runways. With a decent plane and easy-to-master techniques, every pilot should be able to access thousands of fun, interesting and even exotic destinations. Which brings me back to Lake Ridge Aero Park.

Lake Ridge (8NC8) is a private strip just eleven miles from the aforementioned fast-moving aluminum at Raleigh-Durham. The field sports

3,200-feet of sod about 150 feet wide. The grass is deliberately deeper and shaggier than your typical backyard. This allows arriving tires to gradually mesh into the sward during the flare, decelerating slowly as lift dissipates. Grass landings can be gentle and easy.

The runway may be primitive but the facilities and the hospitality are not. There is a double line of 42 hangars protecting a motley assortment of

Photo 1: Lake Ridge Aero Park is set on a couple hundred acres of retired farmland along on the shores of Falls Lake just northeast of Durham, NC. With 3,200 feet of reasonably smooth grass, the runway is easy to find behind the trees.



Cessnas, Pipers and unfamiliar taildraggers, including three flying Stearman biplanes. Self-service fuel makes round-trip flying a snap. A cozy club house, flush toilets, a shady patio and a fire pit inspire evening sing-alongs. The whole shebang is run by two slightly-crazed brothers, Paul Rovegno II, 27, and Daniel Rovegno, 25, who do it purely for the fun of flying from grass.

Fly-in Fun

Paul and Danny are energetic and articulate millennials, sharp-eyed, lanky and quick. For this event they adopted retro-style denim coveralls which made them look more like railroad engineers than aviators; it was Danny who assisted *Puffin* to parking. The brothers never stopped moving. They marshalled planes, greeted new arrivals and operated the finicky new



avgas pump. I was able to chat with Paul for a moment, and I hereby formally apologize to Danny for not spending more time with him. But they were *sooooo* busy!

“You know the old saying, ‘the way to make a small fortune in aviation is to start with a large fortune? That’s kinda us,’” Paul explained to me in the few minutes we chatted. “We know there’s not going to be a

Photo 2: Romance is in the air at Lake Ridge. Danny Rovegno, one of the new owners of the airpark, is dating Alexis Halas who works for the Raymond James Company as a Retirement Plan Associate.



ton of money in it. But if we cover our costs while sharing our passion, it will all work out in the end. You just grin and bear it.”

Paul explained their passion for flying is the result of their grandfather’s passion; “Poppy Ed” was a 101st Airborne vet and loved anything with wings.

“We grew up in southwest Florida right under the pattern at Punta Gorda Airport, which had big airshows. Poppy Ed took us every year. We watched the Blue Angels shoot over our heads during their rehearsals,” he explained. Eventually, Paul completed his pilot’s license during his senior

year in high school before joining an apprenticeship to get his A&P ticket and then his I-A certification.

The response from the local flying community to their fly-in events has been electrifying. On Saturday thirty airplanes camped overnight. Overall, more than 100 planes visited, including your intrepid reporter. A biplane performed an impromptu airshow overhead. The handsome P-51 *Obsession* arrived, landing on grass for the first time in three decades. I gave a couple of interested pilots rides in the stubby, low-slung Bushcat. As the evening sky darkened, two pilot-guests who had arrived with their guitars joined the campfire and everybody sang old favorites until our eyes grew heavy.

Photo 3: The Rovegnos served six well-planned, piping hot, and very tasty meals to their guests over the weekend for FREE. (L-R) Woody Woodall (red baseball hat) Zack Wolf, Hannah Ferguson-Johns, Kaja Coraor, and James Jinnette enjoy their lunches.





Photo 4: The P-51 Obsession was flown by Jeff Michaels. He has a huge grin in the cockpit while the Rovegnos — Paul on the left with the beard, Danny on the right in red — helped marshal the plane to parking.

Unlike larger airshows, the brothers provided free food for all their guests, merely asking for donations to defer the costs. This was not a trivial gift: the food was top quality. They provided Friday night dinner, breakfast, lunch and dinner on Saturday; and then breakfast Sunday. Try getting five free meals at Oshkosh. You'll be hungry for a long time.

"There are worse ways to spend a weekend," Paul laughed, adding "This was just perfect." Well, not quite perfect: a drunk driver hit a power pole about a mile from the airport Sunday morning, causing a major electrical failure across the region and knocking out the self-serve avgas pump. This meant a number of pilots were unable to depart as they had hoped. The

Rovegnos stood tall in the saddle and scrounged together another free dinner for those stranded aviators on Sunday night.

The runway truly is in their backyard. Amber Rovegno, mother of Paul and Danny and far too pretty to be a grandmother, reported “her boys” purchased their airport in December 2020. Now she and her husband have just bought a house on the runway, moving all the way from central Florida to the Tar Heel State.

“My husband asked me what I wanted [for retirement]. I said, I wanted to watch my grandbabies run around on their daddy’s runway,” she said. “We closed on [the house] this past Friday, sight unseen. This is the first time we’ve been here, and we’re going to be here all the time now.”



Amber said she never expected a fly-in community to be so much fun, so inclusive, so welcoming, especially at an airport most pilots had never seen before.

“We knew it would be something; we hoped it would be amazing,” she said. “But we are just blown away, insanely blown away. I’m so very proud of my boys.”

Lake Ridge History

Lake Ridge has enjoyed a long career as an airport. Every decade or two it changes hands as the current owner “ages out” and heads west. The field first opened after World War II when an ex-military pilot named Dan Bryan had his own “Field of Dreams” moment — you know, “build it and they will come.” He plopped a runway in the middle of his farm, no doubt to the consternation and amusement of his tobacco-growing neighbors. In the mid-1950s Odell Wilkins offered flight instruction and aircraft maintenance services. In the 1960s, at the ripe old age of 22, a chap named Woody Woodall leased the airport for \$100 month to deliver multi-engine training, using giant candles to illuminate the runway for night landings. Sterling Gann bought the airport in the 1970s with the dream of building a community where every house could have a plane and taxi directly to the runway. The next owners were the trio of Bobby Fuller, his brother Rick, and US Airways captain Randy Smith. Now Paul and Daniel have grabbed the



Photo 5: Paul Rovegno's fiancé Claire Blackwell is expecting their son in March 2022. Sung Kang (with the beard) enjoyed the chili Claire prepared and served.

baton, with the aim of keeping the art and the science of flying from grass alive for the next generation.

Both Paul and Danny work full-time at their own careers; the airport is a hobby. Paul is a licensed A&P with his I/A certificate, keeping a fleet of Pilatus turboprops in the sky. Previously, Paul worked for Bully Aero where he restored antiques and worked on air show airplanes, serving super-stars like Rob Holland, Mike Goulian and Gene Soucy. Eventually he joined the Red Bull Air race team, before finding his “forever home” with Labcorp at the Burlington, NC airport (KBUY).

Meanwhile, Danny had moved up from Florida to become a realtor serving the prosperous communities around Raleigh, Durham and the Research Triangle. His real estate expertise was crucial in the acquisition of the airport. Together, it all is a dream come true and the two brothers plan to keep airplanes buzzing around it for many more years.

“I was working in Burlington when I heard this airport might be for sale. We did everything we could to put it all together,” Paul said. “Working with my brother, we actually closed on the deal on his 25th birthday; he was 25 and I was 27 when we bought it.” In terms of generating revenue, nothing is out of the question. A formal aircraft maintenance operation or a flight school may be a possibility in the future. Paul currently does some



maintenance on the side but is very selective in his choice of customers, including the P-51 *Obsession*.

“An A-Z flight school is unlikely,” Danny responded to me in an email. “But we’ve had conversations about giving tailwheel instruction. Both are likely in the future, but mainly our goal is to keep grass roots aviation alive.”

“Too Much Fun”

The real estate market in the Raleigh area is smoking-hot right now; houses sell in a day and subdivisions pop up like April thunderstorms. A couple hundred acres of flat, dry land right off the interstate would be extraordinarily valuable. How did two brothers ever manage to out-bid the entire real estate community of central North Carolina?

“Well, they would have out-bid us, but they never got the chance. It wasn’t ever listed for sale,” Paul answered. He and his brother have a strong relationship with the previous owners including retired U.S. Airways Captain Randy Smith, who lives on the field. Smith has two 70 foot by 70 foot hangars hosting a miniature aviation museum with some “pretty special” airplanes. If the airport disappeared, those planes would never fly again. Additionally, there are eight other homes directly on the runway and three of those have hangars; most have several airplanes under their roofs. Overall, about fifty homes comprise the Lake Ridge community.

“Not everyone living in the community are pilots, but they all love airplanes,” Danny said. “Several families bring their kids on walks along the

runway. Many neighbors jog and walk along the airport. Plus, we see a lot of our non-flying neighbors at our fly-in events.”

“Randy was looking for a buyer who wanted to keep it an airport,” Paul said. “He knew we were interested in the legacy, in keeping Lake Ridge alive. There’s just too much fun to be had here.”

Danny estimated that the whole deal took about nine months from concept to close. “There are many hurdles in buying an airport,” he said, “and those were even tougher than normal because it was around the time when COVID began.”

Nonetheless, it must be fun at Lake Ridge. It was excitedly announced at the fly-in that Paul and his fiancé Claire Blackwell are expecting their first



Photo 6: Paul Rovegno (on ladder) fuels Taz, a C-185 owned by Richard Landis who flies out of Landis Field (VG16). Helping is Bill Perera (black hat) while Landis and Kaja Coraor, of Hillsboro, NC kibitz.

son in March. Claire is a design consultant at Furnitureland South in Jamestown NC.

“I’m a second,” he laughed proudly, “and Paul Charles Rovegno the Third is on the way!”

At which Amber Rovegno could not be more pleased. “We bought the house just to be with the grandbaby that’s on the way. Lots of good things happening at Lake Ridge!”

Just don’t expect to see any Cirrus airplanes. They’re moodily sticking to their concrete, wondering if perhaps tundra tires and fat wings might not be a good thing once in a while.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who takes both his Cessna Centurion and his light sport taildragger to grass runways whenever he can find them.