

Time-Traveling with
***“Sentimental
Journey”***



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By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, Originally published: July 2024

Last month’s edition of this newspaper featured an article about one airport’s efforts to support a massive golf tournament. That airport refurbished their terminal building, established a temporary air traffic control tower, solicited dozens of volunteers, rented a fire engine, and (literally) rolled out a red carpet for distinguished visitors. It was quite a party. But while the airport was an important contributor to the success of the tournament, it was not the *raison d’être*.

In contrast, smaller fly-ins feature the aerodrome itself. AirVenture, at Oshkosh, is the granddaddy of them all — part fly-in, part airshow, part flea-market, part circus — and attracts people who might otherwise never taste deep-fried cheese curds in the frozen northlands of Wisconsin. Similarly, there is little reason to go to Lakeland, Florida, except for the crazy adventures of Sun-n-Fun. These mega-events are popular and profitable.

But size does not matter when it comes to aviation fun; even miniscule fly-ins can be delightful, charming, profitable, and a boon to their host airport. Many of us have flown to pancake breakfasts, including the venerable Carolina Breakfast Club which has been sponsoring fly-in breakfasts twice a month since 1938. Colusa County, California, hosts the annual “Old Tyme Fly-in” which has

been greeting hundreds of pilots for 28 years. You should participate in all the fly-ins that meet your schedule and budget. But which fly-ins should you attend? How do you choose? My rule of thumb: look for events with longevity.

A Bit of Geography

Western Pennsylvania is unexpectedly beautiful and mountainous. The region is home to long, high ridges of ancient sandstones, shale, and coal, curving like giant granite parentheses from the northeast to the southwest. From the air, these ridges look like huge, long, green bananas, one gently spooning behind the next, with farm-filled valleys nestled between. These ridges are the remains of a vast crumpling of the earth's



surface 480 million years ago. As the Earth's surface buckled, folded, cracked, and faulted, for millions of years the Appalachians were the highest mountains in the world, even taller than Everest today.

These ridges remain an intimidating barrier to east-west travel, as proven by the zig-zag routing of the famous Pennsylvania Turnpike. But those eroded ridgelines are trivialities to those who travel on wings. In fact, Pennsylvania has a long and proud history in aviation, which is the reason one of the oldest and most interesting fly-ins is snuggled between those ridges. The event is called "Sentimental Journey" and is a family-oriented festival for both pilots and enthusiasts based at the Lock Haven, Pennsylvania airport (KLHV). Sentimental Journey has been thrilling pilots and kids for forty years.

If you were looking to remake the movie "Music Man" featuring 76 trombones marching down Main Street, Lock Haven could be your stage. The downtown is quaint but not foosty. The tree-shaded streets are busy with pedestrians. Smart restaurants and interesting stores line the streets, and the traffic reflects a modest but healthy economy. University students linger in the Starbucks and Chick-fil-A. Depending upon the season, you can hunt deer in the mountains or fly-fish in the sparkling Susquehanna River. Amazingly for such a small burg, Lock Haven has an airport, built by a little company named Piper. Yep; that Piper.

Lock Haven was the home of Piper Aircraft for nearly five decades.

Literally tens of thousands of Piper-branded aircraft came to life in this mountain town and first flew from this 3,800-foot runway, including all the tube-and-rag Pipers and



most of the older single-engine aluminum birds. The Dickensian brick factory still glowers at the western corner of the field. The old administration building is now the county seat. Almost everyone you meet in Lock Haven either worked in the factory or had a relative who did. Sentimental Journey honors those memories and builds new ones in the skies over Lock Haven.

Photo-Perfect Summer

This summer's edition of Sentimental Journey was picture-perfect. As I landed, Lock Haven was tidy and pristine in the clear mountain air, with the river demurely wrapping around the city. The airport is highly visible, the dark black tarmac sharply contrasting with the sky-blue river. The Appalachian

ridges hover so closely to the runway that non-standard right-hand patterns are *de rigueur*. The ramp is outlined with ancient oak trees, offering much-needed shade from the June sunshine. A beautifully restored Model A Ford ferried visitors from the campgrounds to the Piper Museum at the other end of the



field. Perhaps a 100 airplanes and tents were parked on the grass, and a rusty fuel truck trundled up and down the lines of planes looking for thirsty customers. While a majority of the visiting aircraft were Pipers, numerous makes and models, including Cessnas,

were on display. Vintage is everywhere.

Speaking of vintage, allow me to introduce 86-year old Cal Arter. Fifty years ago, Arter was a Piper company pilot and their sales manager for South America. Today he's a heavy-set avuncular fellow who has been working with Sentimental Journey since its first days in 1984.



"It was supposed to be a one-time event in 1985, just for the 50th anniversary of the Piper Cub," he recalled. "It was going to be a fly-in, a

carnival, all sorts of activity. But the more we talked the more it seemed like it should be an annual event."

They decided to build some more permanent infrastructure, so Arter rallied an army of volunteers. "We needed electrical service, for lights, and water, and phone wires throughout the grounds. We were all digging ditches to bury all the wiring and pipes they needed. Then we got a circus tent for the vendors. Lots of donations, of all sorts of products and services."

The first year went like clockwork, and since those early days the attendance, community support, and donations all have grown, even after Piper moved away.

"The demographics of Lock Haven have changed since we started. A lot of industry has left; the chemical industry, the paper mill; they're all gone. The City isn't in the position to give us financial support," Arter explained. Happily, new businesses have stepped in and offer impressive assistance. "First Quality [a local company which makes sanitary products] donates a lot. The Wayne Township Land Fill lets us use their bus. Alexander Motors donates cars. Even the garbage service is donated. It's not glamorous, but it's wonderful support, from the whole community."

The event has shrunk in recent years but retains a lively and amateur charm. The raspy, irritating commercialism of Sun-n-Fun or AirVenture is completely absent, refreshingly so. "I'm trying to see Sentimental Journey go on forever," Arter



announced, wistfully. "Our philosophy is to keep it family-oriented and affordable... we don't charge the vendors much, we practically just give the space to them. But we expect them to keep their prices down."

I spoke with dozens of campers, and people just keep coming back to this event. Unlike big airshows where pilots must leave their planes parked for the duration, Sentimental Journey is all about the flying. Almost every plane flies every day, and it's easy to win a ride with a well-timed compliment about somebody's bird. Yellow Pipers, green Aeronicas, faded Cessnas, glossy Stearmans, and other planes I simply didn't recognize lift off the runway, sight-see over the town, and then re-join the pattern. Sunrises and sunsets, when the air is calm, are particularly favored by the taildraggers.

Chris Maily and his neighbor John Chapman flew a 1956 Cessna 172 to Sentimental Journey from Kalamazoo, Michigan. "We usually fly our



John Chapman (left) and Chris Maily rested in the shade at Camp FUBAR. They flew their Cessna 172 (not shown) all the way from Kalamazoo, Michigan to attend the fly-in. They try to make the trip every year, usually in their taildraggers.

taildraggers, a Luscombe and a Tailorcraft L2," Maily explained. "But this year we just thought it would be easier in the Cessna." The flight was 4.5 hours but would have been much longer in the taildraggers. "We fly at half the speed of snow, but we're still faster than a Cub."

As for the fly-in, they return every year they can. "It's a really great grass-roots fly-in, the food's fantastic, the people are fantastic, we love it here," Chapman said. "We're restoring a plane, and we met some people who actually have one. So we got a

line on parts and resources that we didn’t have before. There’s a lot of camaraderie. It’s a win-win.”

I met 81-year old Bill Clifford standing by his Aeronica, N2125E, which he flew from Long Island, New York. “I’ve only had it for four weeks,” he told me proudly. “I have a friend who’s an A&P, he crawled in there, checked all the tubing, checked all the cables, lubricated everything, and put some paint on the plane. It took a couple of days, and now we’re here. We still have some adjusting to do.”

Clifford first came to Sentimental Journey in 1973. “It’s the most fun. You see people constantly flying; flying friends, and kids, and even strangers all day long; it’s a great fly-in.”

Flying a Piper Vagabond down from Syracuse, New York, was John Whitford. The Vagabond is a two-seat, high-wing taildragger built by Piper around 1948. He’s puts about 100 hours a year on it. “I had no idea I was going to have so much fun with the airplane,” he said. “It’s a little faster than a J-3, it’s very responsive in pitch and roll, like a little sports car. Plus my wife can sit beside me.”

As for Sentimental Journey, “I come to Sentimental Journey every year, almost since it started,” Whitford said. “There’s nothing to do here but sit in the shade of a wing and watch airplanes. And Camp FUBAR is the best.” Camp FUBAR is a shady spot for old-timers, tightly nestled between the food vendors and the runway. It features an awning, cold beverages, and short walks to the flush toilets.

Close But No Cigar

The Sentimental Journey flight line is always entertaining and sometimes enlightening. Young Ben Presten had flown his Piper PA-16 Clipper all the way

from Sonoma, California. His Clipper lugs around an unusual landing gear system with four tires.

"This is the Whittaker tandem landing gear, and it was an option straight from the factory," Presten explained. "My Dad also has a PA-16 with the Whittaker tandem gear, so I decided to restore a set for myself. I had to buy three sets to get enough parts to make one good set," he said, laughing.

The tandem gear was never a commercial success. "[It] was an attempt to make bush tires before bush tires had been invented, but it didn't work very



well," he acknowledged. "A full set of tires for this is \$4,000, way more than comparable tundra tires."

But it gets worse. "You can't push the airplane around. You have a huge turning radius.

I can't turn around on a runway that's less than 200 feet wide." Plus the brakes are on the rear tires. When the pilot brakes, momentum shifts the airplane's weight on to the front tire, lifting the rear tires off the ground so the plane rolls brakelessly. "I can see why bush tires caught on," he chuckled.

I asked Presten about his solo transcontinental peregrination. "I've just graduated from college. This is my last free summer before I go to work for Milwaukee Tools," he explained. "I've been touring the country showing off my

plane, and this is the third of five events. I'll be at Oshkosh this year, and then I'll be heading home." Not a bad summer vacation, it seems to me.

One thing you don't see very often at an airshow is a pink airplane. Eric Lunger, of Mifflintown, Pennsylvania, has about 8,000 hours in the air, teaches tailwheel skills, and flies for the Golden Age Air Museum. He is sufficiently emotionally confident to handle the teasing about the paint job on his historic 1947 Aeronica, N4008A.

"It's a military observation aircraft from the Korean Conflict," Lunger told me. After Korea it spent most of its life in the Civil Air Patrol flying around Philadelphia. When the CAP retired the plane, it ultimately was discovered by Tom and Elaine Huff.

"Tom had his plane, and this plane was Elaine's, and she wanted it pink. They were very active with Sentimental Journey, and everybody keeps coming up and telling me stories about Tom and Elaine. That's why I come back to Sentimental Journey; it's kick-back time, a couple days out of the office, good times with good friends and airplanes."

Berlin Airlift

On the paved ramp in front of the Piper Museum was a massive aircraft that definitely was not a Piper: a Douglas DC-4 in military livery, which makes it a C-54. The C-54 is rightly famous as the plane which saved the city of Berlin when Stalin barricaded that city in 1948, hoping to starve 2.5 million Berliners into submission. The Allies didn't back down and began airlifting everything into the city. From June 1948 to September 1949 American and British pilots flew more than 278,000 missions and delivered 2,334,000 tons of cargo. The peak delivery was 12,941 tons in one day, with a plane landing every 45 seconds at Tempelhof Airport. Amazingly, nearly two-thirds of the cargo was coal, which kept the city mostly warm and the lights mostly on. The C-54 on the



ramp at Lock Haven was one of the 330 C-54s which helped preserve democracy without firing a shot.

Capt. Tim Chopp is the president, founder, chairman, and chief pilot of the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation which flies that beautiful aircraft. Chopp confesses, "Most of my flying was in the corporate world, out of Teeterboro, flying jets, but my heart was always in the piston planes of the 1950s."

"One day in Life Magazine there was an article about the Berlin Airlift and I got hooked," he told me. "From the age of six, I fell in love with the C-54."

But Life Magazine is no more, and Chopp realized years ago that most Americans know nothing about the Cold War. He created his flying museum to educate people about the airlift and the airplane. "Most times, people go to a museum to see the airplanes inside. Our museum is inside the airplane." I

watched dozens of school kids and parents filter through the plane, asking questions and reading the signs.



It's hard work, running a 70-year old flying museum. “Prices are out of hand. We burn 220 gallons of avgas an hour. We use six gallons of oil an hour. The tires only will last three years,” he

said. Fund raising is a challenge, “but the hardest part, in my world, is working with government agencies. They insist on answering everything by computer. The old-fashioned phone was easier. And government reports consume so much time. I have one question on an IRS report that takes me a week to answer.”

Grass-Roots Flying

Small-town aviation is charming, if you can find such a place today. Sentimental Journey showcases the best of the interesting and affordable airplanes of the 1950s, giving all of us a gentle taste of what flying (and life) used to be. It taps into wonderful history, and reminds us — midst the NOTAMS, satnav, moving maps, and bluetooth flight bags — that simpler can be good. Maybe even better. My recommendation? Find a small fly-in near you, and enjoy the time-travel.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He’s been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He’s always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

