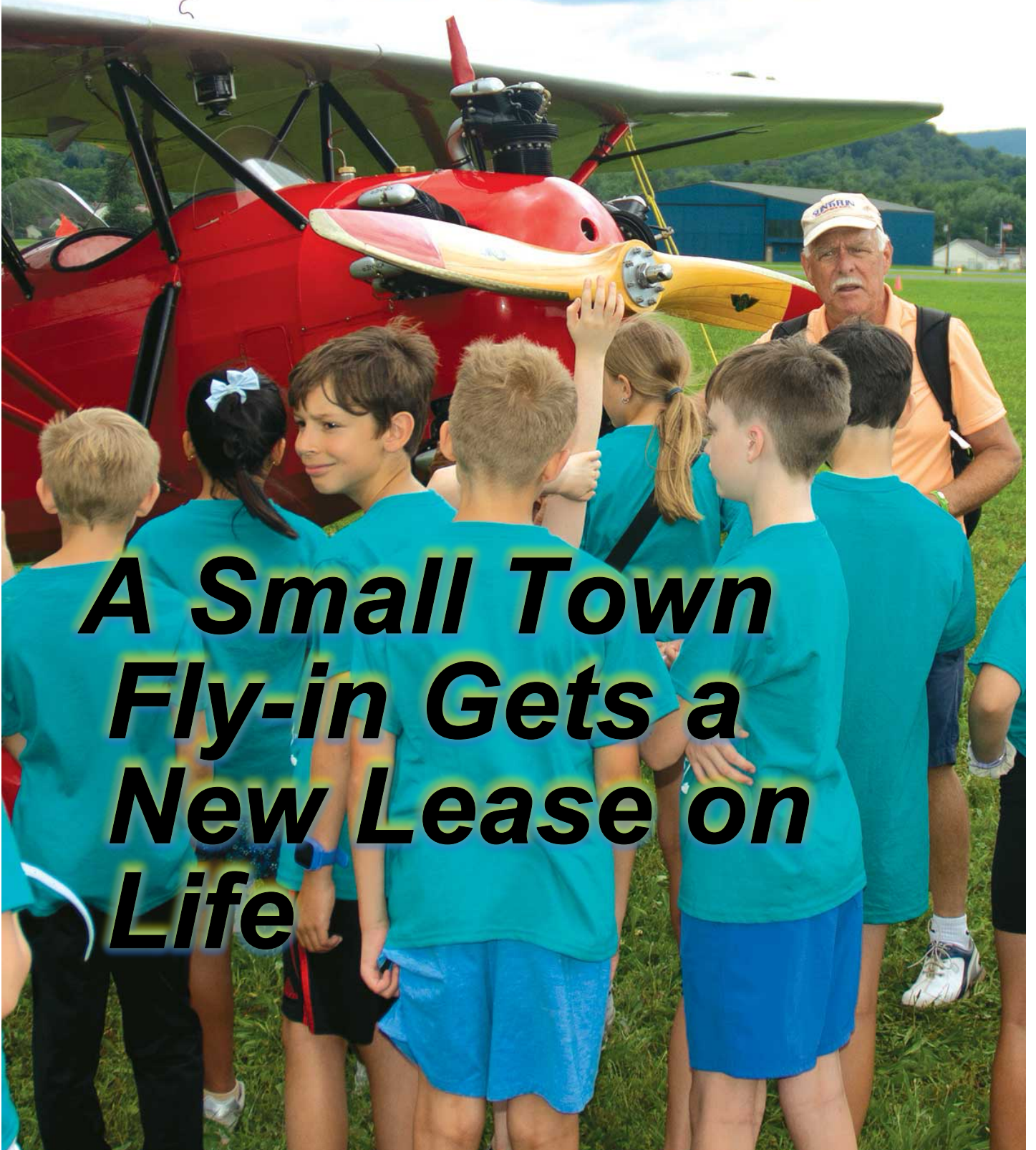


Sentimental Journey Revisited —

A Small Town Fly-in Gets a New Lease on Life



Sentimental Journey Revisited— A Small-Town Fly-In Gets a New Lease on Life

By Mike Jones

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A steep dive can be a hair-raising experience. Too many knots and too many Gs will pull the wings off any airplane. Denzel Washington saves the day in the movie “Flight” by performing a miraculous landing involving a dramatic nose-dive. But as scary as nose-dives are, when an entire organization is in a nose-dive the results can be even more calamitous.

Such was the condition of the historic fly-in called Sentimental Journey, which for 39 years reappeared on the ramp at the Lock Haven (PA) airport as regularly as the swallows returning to Capistrano. Sentimental Journey began with a group of volunteers celebrating the aeronautical heritage of Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, the city and airport where William Piper built airplanes for fifty years. But the fly-in’s management team — mostly retired Piper employees — grew older, turned inward, stopped innovating. The event languished. Slowly at first and then suddenly, it slipped into a nose-dive. COVID nearly killed it.

But this nose-dive had its own Denzel Washington at the controls. Indeed, it had twelve: a newly-invigorated Board of Directors determined to reshape the event. With modern managerial expertise and an abundance of energy and a burst of sunny weather, they have pulled the nose up and are racing back into the sky.



I grabbed this photo through the window of 7591N while on a Young Eagles flight. Notice the river in the foreground; it loops around back side of the airport as well. You can see the fly-in airplanes and visitors on the grass ramp, as well as the mountains behind the airport. Fun flying indeed.

Fixing the Organization

Starting in December 2024, a new twelve-member Board of Directors was elected by a vote of the fly-in's membership. This Board consisted of a productive mix of old-hands and new faces. Two of the long-term members on the team were Cal Arter, a retired test pilot for Piper who had served as president for the entire life of the fly-in, and Clyde Smith, Jr. who uses his decades of Piper expertise to procure hard-to-find parts.

Another valuable addition was the amiable John Spencer, an A&P and CFI who works with FritoLay. Also added were Alan Uhler, Jr., the owner of a successful civil engineering company, and Mark Stewart, an antique airplane collector who was an executive with General Electric, and a number of other new faces. The hope was that the long-term members would help preserve the



The 2025 fly-in was designed to be more inclusive than previous years, less Piper and more “anything with wings.” The flying public responded by bringing Cessnas, Stinsons, Aeroncas, WACOs, and this handsome PT-13 to the party.

traditions at the heart of the fly-in while the new members would bring fresh skills and new ideas which, in time, would rejuvenate the event. Full disclosure: this humble reporter also was elected to the Board, an honor as unexpected as it was appreciated.

At the December meeting, Arter stepped down as president and Uhler stepped in as his successor. For better or for worse, things were going to change.

Transition at Emergency Speed

“After 39 years, it’s fair to say that the Sentimental Journey Fly-In is a huge part of the heritage of Lock Haven, and even general aviation at large,” Uhler said in his opening comments. “My goal is to build on the fly-in’s many successes and to expand the event for the future.”

The obstacles were many. The bank account was empty. Fund-raising had languished. Many of the fly-in volunteers were aging-out. The website hadn’t been updated. The fly-in had no social media presence. The membership roster was a pile of 3x5 cards. The fly-in could not speedily and securely process credit cards. There wasn’t even a formal budget.

The team dug in and started tackling the issues like the layers of an onion. They began having semi-monthly meetings on Zoom (which was another first). Tasks were assigned and deadlines set. With barely six months until the event,

every problem became a potential deal-breaker and every decision had the flavor of a Las Vegas roll of the dice.

The first big change was refocusing the event from a Piper-centric reunion to a broader, more family-friendly, general celebration of aviation. While there was some push-back from die-hard Piper fans, the new team gradually coalesced around making this event a celebration of G.A. flying, and welcoming to every pilot and every airplane, no matter the make, model, or vintage.

Another goal was to keep it affordable. Lock Haven and the surrounding area is not a wealthy community so any rejuvenated program would have to be reasonably priced. Even the food vendors were asked to be as gentle with their prices as possible.

The third and biggest change was to bring in young people. The revamped fly-in included two days of Young Eagle flights, a “Youth in Aviation Career Day,” and aviation recruiters from the police and military.



Young Eagles flights are a great way to get young people out of their phones and into aviation. Here, young Jaylin flies shotgun, while buddies Wyatt and Wesley are in the second row and Emerson waves from the way-back.

For a group consisting mostly of grey-haired retirees, focusing on the interests and enthusiasm of youngsters was a true sea-change.

“Airplanes have been part of Lock Haven’s story for seven decades. Keeping that history alive is part of our ambition,” Uhler said to me. “But even more, we want to showcase aviation to youngsters. We want them to see it as fun,

affordable, accessible, exciting, and a pathway to great jobs and great adventures.”

Retired Boeing captain John Machamer built the association’s first budget in 39 years, and then volunteered to build a new website for the fly-in. He used an elaborate set of tools from a software company called ClubExpress, which provides back-office support for over 1,600 different clubs in the U.S. and Canada. Their software not only facilitated the new website but automated the club’s membership list, collected credit card payments, and simplified sending emails to all the members, all essential tasks that had been neglected under the old regime.

Board member Mark Stewart was assigned the task of reaching out to regional airports and type-clubs to invite them to the fly-in. Working with graphic artist Devon Bird, they designed a handsome invitational poster and snail-mailed it to five hundred airports in the northeast. Stewart also got on the phone and called dozens of type-clubs, such as the Aeronca, Bellanca, and Cessna 120-140 Associations, to invite them to participate. One association, the International Short-Wing Piper Club, not only recommended the fly-in to their members but jumped on the bandwagon: they scheduled their annual fly-in to be in Lock Haven the same week.

As the date of the event grew closer, more help piled in. Ron Dremel, the president of the Piper Museum, traveled to Florida with Cal Arter and together they staffed a booth at Sun-n-Fun to promote both organizations. In a very busy week, they spoke to more than 1,100 eager pilots about the “new” adventure of flying to Lock Haven in June.

John Spencer and other volunteers began readying the facilities at the airport. Acres of grass was mowed. Gear-busting groundhog burrows were filled. Ed Watson, of EA Chapter 1327 in State College, PA, rounded up Young Eagle pilots. Betsy Buchan, a long-time volunteer, organized the dozens of

volunteers needed for selling tickets and tee shirts. Bathrooms were cleaned and painted, food vendors selected, and electrical systems tested. The chores seemed to be endless but, one by one, the checklist was marked “complete.”

Weather Worries

For an outdoor event, especially one built around aviation, the weather trumps everything. In early June the long-range forecasts looked challenging. Low-pressure systems were sweeping across the country. There was flooding in West Virginia, tornadoes in the Midwest, and low clouds covered the mid-Atlantic. It almost felt biblical when heavy rains pummeled the campground for a week; we had every plague but the locusts. Pilots — including myself — opted to stay home rather than tempt fate.

Flying into Lock Haven is beautiful but not easy. The airport is in downtown Lock Haven; on take-off you're over City Hall before the flaps are up. The city and the airport both are surrounded by the Susquehanna River,



The local YMCA was very pleased to bring their young members to the fly-in. They came in two groups; the older group just turning teenagers, and the younger group between ages 7-10 or so. Each group got a 45-minute tour appropriate for their age. I was repeatedly surprised by the acuity of some of their questions.

its meandering flow is carved out of the ancient forests of the Appalachian Mountains. Steep parallel ridges tower over the airport, and farm-filled valleys lie between bends of the river. The mountains are so close to the Lock Haven runway that the airport features a non-standard right-hand pattern to keep

pilots out of the trees. There is a semi-useless RNAV approach with minimums over 2,000 feet. Those rocks are real.

Meanwhile, about twenty miles east is the Williamsport (PA) airport (KIPT) which features flatter terrain and an ILS. Lock Haven pilots routinely file IFR to Williamsport and fly a VFR “river approach” down the valley to Lock Haven after breaking out of IMC. Sounded like a plan to me!

Wednesday dawned brighter in Lock Haven. Not blue skies, for sure, but higher ceilings and good visibility below. Like a popped bottle of champagne, planes began to pour into the pattern.

My almost-sainted wife and I watched the weather from our home in North Carolina. Wednesday morning felt comfortable enough to begin the trek north. I filed an efficient IFR routing west of the Washington, D.C. airspace, looping up



What's a little rain when you're camping under the wing of your airplane? This is the Grunder family who brought both their Piper (for the fun) and their SUV (for all the supplies). They stayed the whole week and, according to Mom, enjoyed every minute.

the Shenandoah Valley into Maryland and on to Williamsport. Predictably, that plan didn't last long.

We diverted around the bigger build-ups but plowed through small ones. Potomac Approach was extremely understanding as we bobbed and weaved northward, like a prizefighter dodging heavyweight punches. Near Williamsport, Approach reported that a plane landing reported 200-foot ceilings with heavy rain. Woah! That wasn't on the AWOS. The quickly-changing weather meant the "river approach" was unavailable. I diverted to Penn Valley Airport (KSEG) in Selinsgrove, PA to develop Plan C.

Frustratingly, Penn Valley is only thirty nautical miles south of Lock Haven; just ten minutes in the Centurion. But scud-running isn't in my DNA. We waited half an hour and the weather at Williamsport improved. We filed (again) and executed perfectly. We broke out around 1,500 feet and could see the valley sprawled before us like a John Wayne movie. Visibility was at least seven miles. We motored down the center of the valley, ogled the scenery, and landed more or less gracefully on Runway 27R. The campground already was full of taildraggers, short-wing Pipers, Cessnas, Stinsons, Aeroncas, and other breeds. Let the party begin!

Sunny Days

The next four days were simple fun. The sun was bright and the temperatures mild. The puddles dried, the crowds piled in, and the campground filled. The air was a-buzz with small planes working through the pattern, mostly using the grass runway while heavier planes like my Centurion, a Debonaire, and a Piper Twin preferred the hard-surface runway. Visitors were entertained with multiple spot-landing contests, a car show, bounce houses for the smallest flyers, educational forums, food trucks, and a poker run for lighter planes at nearby turf runways.

Of course, by this time the grass ramp was full. Friday set a new attendance record for any recent S-J event. In a completely unscientific sample, I personally spoke to visitors from all the surrounding states, plus three New England states, Florida, South Carolina, Iowa, and even Hawaii.

Friday was featured as “Youth Career Day.” The show emphasized the opportunities in aviation by hosting recruiters and career advisors from nine local aviation schools, businesses and airlines. The local YMCA brought two groups of about fifty kids to the event. I had the personal joy of showing them around the field. To reinforce this youthful theme, EAA Chapter 1327 sponsored the Young Eagles rally. About fifty kids got rides on Friday and another seventy were in the skies on Saturday, and my mostly-sainted wife baked in the sun and processed all the paperwork for the Young Eagles pilots.

The culmination of the event was Saturday’s “Community Day” which was informally linked to a simultaneous event in downtown Lock Haven. On Saturday, the city closed the streets and visitors thronged through local stores as planes wheeled over downtown. Sentimental Journey amplified the fun with free admission to the fly-in, so when neighbors tired of walking on concrete they could come to the airport and wander amongst airplanes on the grass. A local day care center brought an entire busload of kids to the event. Everybody was smiling, watching, pointing, eating, laughing, and enjoying the moment.

From Here?

It’s hard to make predictions, according to baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra, especially about the future. But I’m going to put my peg in the ground and say that Sentimental Journey has a bright forecast. It’s got a lot going for it: a fine airport, a strategic location on the East Coast, an army of enthusiastic volunteers, good campgrounds, and adequate facilities. The local hotels were full and local restaurants busy. Anywhere else, this would be a home run.

But the fly-in has an exclusionary reputation of being all-Piper, and that's not healthy. One skeptic at the Penn Valley airport laughed at the event. "Oh yes," he said, "it's the 'pity me I fly a Piper' fly-in." With finances already tight, out-reach efforts to change long-held attitudes will be a "big ask" for Sentimental Journey.

The fly-in also is threatened by a city manager who wants to close the airport for commercial development. This chap even has installed a chain-link fence around thirteen acres of the grass ramp, making it harder for the fly-in to host more airplanes. Talk about shooting yourself in your own foot?

Lastly, these tough economic times make it a challenge to get support from crowd-drawing glamorous flyers, like the military, the National Guard, or the



New for 2024 were two "bounce houses" for the smallest aviators to enjoy, and they were busy all day long. It was interesting to watch some of the parents, stern-faced and arms crossed, begging their kids to climb out of the inflatable toys "to go look at the airplanes."

State Police. Celebrities aren't essential but they help draw the crowds, so we'll keep trying.

Personally, I think it's going to do fine. The new management team is finding their footing and building the

Sentimental Journey brand. New, more professional business practices will make the fly-in easier to work with. Their emphasis on appealing to non-Piper flyers, and even non-flyers — such as the bounce houses and the YMCA summer camp tours — will build friends and community support, along with memories that will last for years.

All we need now is some good weather.

About the Author



Dr. Dr. Mike Jones is a commercial pilot, a writer, and a businessman with 4,000 hours and 800 Young Eagle missions in his logbook. His “day job” is consulting with general aviation airports. He’s always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.