

AOPA: The First Twenty Years

A Profile

Of a "healthy, happy, kicking" infant who has reached maturity

The giant wings pumped up and down. Groaning creaks came from the ancient truck whose top supported the strange-looking machine. Baffled and frightened motorists traveling Chicago's South Dearborn Street came to a screeching halt. Pedestrians stopped in their tracks to gaze at the thing with flapping wings. Police whistles blew. "Move along! Clear the street!" members of Chicago's finest yelled at the rapidly growing crowd.

On the 21st floor of Chicago's Transportation Building there was excitement, too.

"Come to the window and look, Doc!" an excited voice begged. "I know it will fly."

Doc went to the window and looked.

His visitor was pointing down at a would-be ornithological flying machine—Da Vinci could have drawn the specs for it. The inventor saw only his pride and joy. Doc saw the flapping wings, but he also looked uneasily at the snarled traffic and growing crowd on the street below.

The door of the small office opened with a bang. A policeman burst in.

"Which one of you guys owns that thing on the street?" he demanded.

"I do," the inventor admitted proudly.

"Okay, bub, come with me."

On the way to the door the officer stopped, turned and looked at Doc.

"I'll bet you're in this, too," he accused. "Who are you?"

"I am J. B. Hartranft, Jr., executive secretary of AOPA," the slender, blondish young man explained.

"What's AOPA?" the skeptical officer countered.

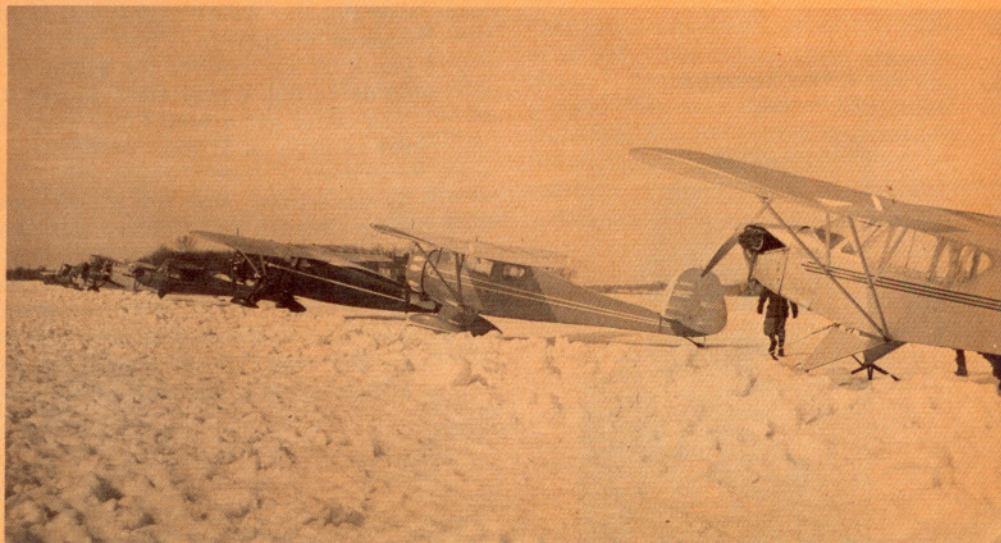
Doc Hartranft, who on that day back in 1940 was the only full-time employee of the newly organized Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (it was only a few months old at the time), must have given the irritated policeman a satisfactory answer. Chicago police records do not show that a J. B. Hartranft, Jr., was booked that day for obstructing traffic on South Dearborn Street.

He and the ever-growing AOPA staff—first an assistant to the executive secretary, and then on up to the present 65 staff members—have been

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explaining AOPA ever since: what it stands for, its safety program, how it is trying to protect the rights and privileges of persons who fly personal aircraft, and why it is the largest, strongest—and often the most militant—supporter of general aviation in the world.

Each year this task becomes simpler, because almost everybody in aviation has heard of AOPA. Scores of thousands of pilots swear by it—a few swear at it—but all know they have a champion in the Association, this month celebrating its 20th anniversary, which was set up for just that purpose. Pilots in many countries have felt its influence, through



About 40 airplanes landed on the frozen lake at Oconomowoc, Wis., in February, 1940, for AOPA's Eskimo Party flight. The event was one of the most successful and novel flights of this early period.



C. Townsend Ludington
Honorary President



L. P. Sharples, Chairman
AOPA Board of Trustees

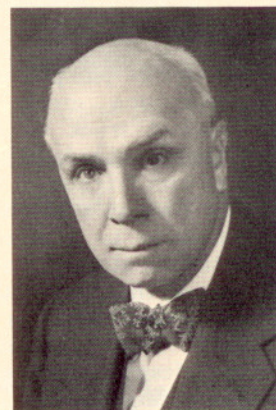


Alfred L. Wolf
General Counsel and Secretary



J. Story Smith
Vice President

Philip T. Sharples
Vice President



AOPA'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Five Philadelphians, back in the late 1930's, reached the conclusion that a strong organization was needed to represent the "forgotten men" of aviation—the private pilots and airplane owners—and stimulate the growth of general aviation in the United States. Being men of action, they did something about the situation. As a result, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association was organized in 1939.

These five men, who have devoted 20 years of effort without pay to the organization they founded, now comprise AOPA's Board of Trustees. They prefer to remain in the background, and their photographs for this AOPA 20th anniversary issue of *The PILOT* were obtained after much persuasion.

its hundreds of members who live abroad, and through AOPA's efforts to better the environment of private flyers on the international level.

The year AOPA was born was an interesting one for general aviation.

J. B. "Doc" Hartranft, Jr.
AOPA President



Use of airplanes by individuals was on the upswing. Planes were selling at what would now be fantastically low prices. "Only \$366 down gives you a new \$1,098 Piper *Cub* 40 h.p. trainer on the easy pay-as-you-fly plan," Piper Aircraft advertisements told Popular Aviation readers. If you wanted to splurge, Piper would sell you a 50 h.p. trainer for \$1,298 or a 60 or 65 h.p. *Coupe* from \$1,910 up. You could get a new Piper seaplane for as little as \$1,793.

Stinson *Reliants*, which were heavily advertised, sold for \$2,995; low-wing Cessnas and Culvers were getting a play.

"More private flying in 1939 than in the history of American aviation," was the way Howard Mingos summed up the year in his annual review. Mingos gave a big play in his year-

book to Al Bennett (AOPA 103) who claimed, after slight urging, that he owed his success to studying airplane sales in college. He broke all sales records in 1939 by selling a hundred *Cubs*. Mingos also took notice of the formation of a new pilots' association which was known as AOPA.

Mingos' report just about summed up AOPA's slogan, which was adopted in 1939: "To make flying more useful, less expensive, safer and more fun."

Recently, in reviewing AOPA's activities during its first 20 years, President Hartranft said the Association had made every effort through the years to live up to its original slogan.

"Our 75,000 members, I believe, attest to considerable success in that effort," he said.

The inventor of the ornithopter went to the right place for attention when he called on Doc Hartranft at AOPA's Chicago headquarters in 1940. Always on the lookout for new devices, ideas and systems that might make a contribution to general aviation, AOPA seldom turns down without a hearing, a person who thinks he has something that may give a boost to personal flying. The vast majority of the ideas, like the ornithopter, never make the grade, but a few do. For example, AOPA played an important part in the development of the pre-stall warning device, invented in 1940 by Dr. Leonard M. Greene, which has saved many a pilot from crashing. Dr. Greene often has given AOPA credit for providing the encouragement needed to bring out the potentialities of his Safe Flight Indicator.

When AOPA was organized there was ample room for improvement in all directions. Landing places were few, and in most instances inadequate; air traffic control was in its infancy; equipment available to private flyers often was actually dangerous, and the private pilot sometimes was victimized by a small minority of the persons around to cater to his needs. It was fun whizzing through the air at 100 m.p.h. or less, often in an open cockpit biplane, but Mr. Bayer didn't make enough aspirin to relieve all of the headaches one found in trying to use the great open airspace.

Development of AOPA since its incorporation papers were signed—May 15, 1939—has kept pace with the growth of civil aviation in this country. Today, its membership is 25% greater than the total number of pilots who were eligible to join in 1939. When the papers were filed in Trenton, N. J., a total of 60,000 pilots were eligible for membership. Today, AOPA has 75,000 members. All but about 2,000 of them reside in the United States.

Need for a strong organization to represent the "little fellows in the air" had been apparent for several years before AOPA came into existence.

Gill Robb Wilson (AOPA 1), who was State Aeronautics Director of New Jersey at the time he filed the incorporation papers at Trenton for the five Philadelphians who sponsored the new organization, announced AOPA's arrival in an article appearing in Popular Aviation (now Flying magazine).

"The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association—long overdue—has just been born," Wilson wrote. "You

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A Look To The Future

L. P. Sharples, AOPA board chairman and one of its founders, tells AOPA'ers of some of the plans the Association has for the years ahead

Why was AOPA started? What has it done? What should it do next?

It started in a turkey blind near Savannah. Ed Noble, the first CAA administrator, said the airlines always came to his office with a carefully thought out program they wanted put into effect—and usually got it. By contrast, individual private pilots would write in demanding this or that, one demand usually conflicting with another, with the result of no action. Why didn't we pilots organize?

So we did. In Philadelphia. About five of us. Then a few basic principles were adopted—AOPA's Bill of Rights:

1. *AOPA would be run by full time employed professionals.* Part time amateur enthusiasts don't have the skill and follow-through year in and year out to make a permanent success.

2. *AOPA would be financially self-supporting.* Depending on a big annual gift for financing would mean subservience to the giver—serve his interests or else. Hence AOPA's policy of operating on a businesslike basis and supporting itself on its own revenues.

3. *AOPA Board Members would have no ax to grind.* No one could be a Board Member if he could use AOPA as a tool to further his own business.

4. *Only pilots could belong.* AOPA was to work for one master only—the pilot—to make flying more useful, less expensive, safer, and more fun.

We started with these basic principles, they have proven sound, and they appear to be with us for keeps.

The first thing the little group did, and we were shot with luck, was to employ Doc Hartranft to run AOPA. He has run it ever since and with skill and dedicated energy. Meantime, it grew from five members to 75,000.

That's how AOPA started.

What has it done? This may better be told by someone else, as blowing one's horn does not always make good music.

What should AOPA do next? Always there are so many things to choose from. Next might come:

1. Reasonable rental of planes in Europe for flying vacations.

2. Reasonably priced jet planes or STOL planes, accomplished partially by swaying military specifications.

3. Our own insurance company to accomplish even lower rates.

4. AOPA service offices in California, Texas, etc.

5. Annual forums, mainly to promote technical progress in nonscheduled aviation.

6. A "Consumers Research" restricted to aviation items.

... to mention a few on the list. Money and time restrictions mean picking one target at a time and driving it through to a success.

The above remarks are written by a member of the AOPA Board of Trustees. But the Board does not run AOPA. A wonderful professional staff of some 60 persons under Doc Hartranft runs AOPA. The Board monitors their work and their finances with rapt attention and from time to time gives what we hope is good advice. At quarterly meetings the staff reports in some detail to the Board. At weekly staff meetings the dozen or so department heads report on all new or troublesome situations and the combined brain power and knowledge of the others is applied to each problem.

When the staff does a poor or mistaken job they catch it right on the chin. Not from the Board, however, but direct from the members. Seventy thousand constituents can raise a lot of Cain when they are displeased. And if they are enough displeased they won't pay their annual dues. So, for the staff it is, "satisfy the members or don't eat." That, we think, is good democracy.

Thanks for supporting AOPA. We hope you feel that AOPA has served you well. The phenomenal membership renewal rate of 86.3% last year would indicate that you think we have.

L. P. SHARPLES