

1939-1964: General Aviation's Growth Era

Although powered flight is over 60 years old, emergence of private flying as a significant activity dates back to about the same era as the birth of AOPA.

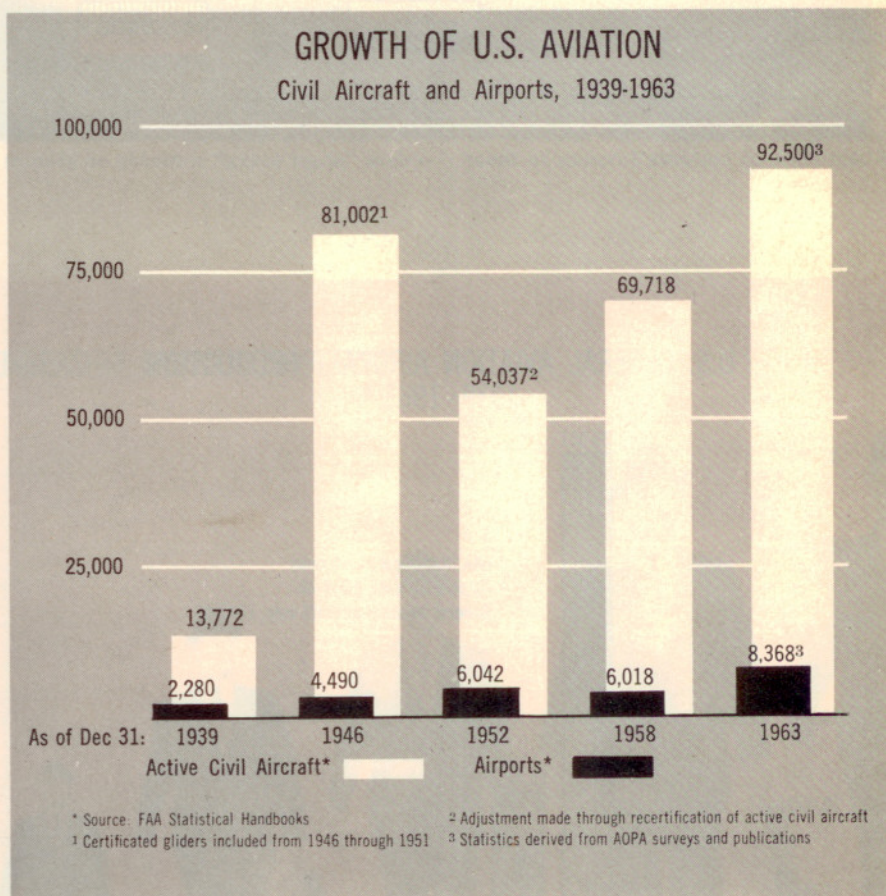
Here is a brief comparison of general aviation then and now

When AOPA came into being in May 1939, private flying bore little resemblance to the bustling activity that is general aviation in the United States today. With less than one person in 4,500 then licensed to operate an airplane, flying could hardly be considered an overwhelmingly popular pastime. But it was poised on the threshold of a growth spiral that has carried it to the pinnacle of world aviation leadership, its licensed active pilots now numbering 374,000 strong.

It is ironic that the growth of private flying was nurtured in part by a Federal instrument that took little notice of the non-scheduled flyer. The Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938, which centralized all non-military flying in this country under the control of one Federal agency, was designed primarily to benefit the fledgling commercial airline industry. The Act provided in part for the airlines to receive route certificates—in essence, permanent franchises—to carry air mail, thereby putting them in a position to more easily obtain financing for expansion.

Chambers of Commerce and similar civic betterment groups throughout the country were quick to discern unintended advantages to their communities in the Act. They used it as a wedge to gain more and better airports for their areas, and for expansion of local private aircraft fleets. Their argument was that private planes could provide a feeder service for the mail from their communities to the metropolitan terminals where the scheduled airlines found it more economical to centralize passenger service operations.

With this foot in the legislative door, private flying interests began an expansion that has been retarded only briefly by the two wars in which the United States since has been engaged. In June 1939, a month after AOPA was

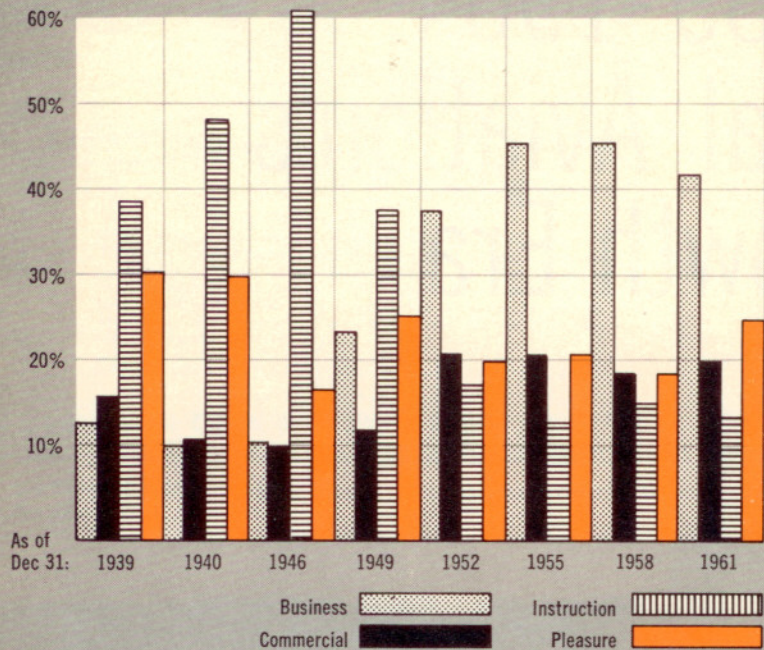


incorporated, there were 11,160 certificated civil aircraft in operation, 10,911 of which were private planes. Today's active private fleet numbers about 95,000 (AOPA estimate), compared to about 2,100 commercial air carriers.

Historical records of the Civil Aeronautics Authority for 1939 indicate

that the Federal Airways System covered 24,249 miles of America's skies. CAA traffic control measures, maintained over about 45% of that system, recorded a grand total of 375,000 airport movements during that fiscal year. Compare that to the latest FAA statistics: Air Route Traffic Control centers

PROPORTIONATE TYPES OF LIGHT AIRCRAFT USAGE (in per cent) 1939-1961*



* Latest official published report, FAA Statistical Handbook of Aviation, 1962

handled 10,602,032 departures and overs during calendar year 1963 and FAA control towers logged 30,976,773 aircraft operations. Today's Federal Airways System blankets the nation.

While scheduled airline operations in fiscal year 1939 accounted for some 76,000,000 passenger air miles, private flying activities chalked up 177,868,000 miles. Comparable figures for 1963 (CAB preliminary statistics) indicate that the scheduled air fleet tallies about 1,095,020,000 aircraft miles and general aviation covers some 1,943,000,000 miles a year.

Of 2,326 airports and landing fields known to the CAA in 1939, 760 were municipal airports, 454 were commercial, 596 auxiliary, 262 were intermediate landing fields, and the rest were Army, Navy, miscellaneous government, private or state facilities. One in three provided night lighting. Today's total is 8,370 airports and landing places, and lighting is available at about 2,600 of them.

In 1939, there were nearly 50 different aircraft manufacturers competing in the limited airplane market. Naturally, mortality rates among the less financially sound were high.

Popular new planes of that year included Stinson's 105 and *Reliant*, the *Monocoupe 90-A*, *Aeronca*, *Porterfield*, *Waco*, *Luscombe*, *Taylorcraft*, *Piper Cub*, *Cessna Airmaster*, *Rearwin Cloudster*, and *Fairchild 24-W40*. Among the more seasoned craft moored at community airports, the old *OX-5*, *Waco* trainers and *Stearmans* probably were most prominent.

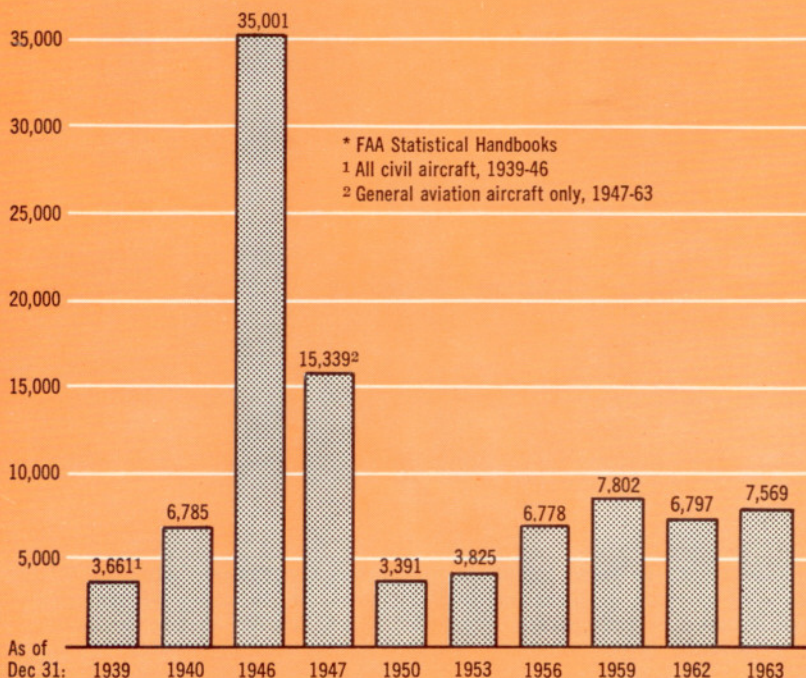
Fierce competition for volume leadership among manufacturers of the day was apparent in advertisements carried in flying publications. The 40 h.p. *Piper Cub* trainer was offered for \$995, complete with free flying instructions. *Aeronca's Scout*, and *Chief* series carried price tags from \$1,290 to \$1,795. *Taylorcraft* boasted of flight economy, claiming U.S.-spanning trips for only \$27.50 for gas and oil. Of the 2,528 single engine planes produced in calendar year 1939, 1,663 were 50 h.p. or less.

Only 15 of the many U.S. lightplane builders weathered World War II still committed to that aspect of aviation. By 1960 there remained only eight major light aircraft firms. Just three of these could trace their historical thread back to the prewar era.

The term "general aviation" is itself of postwar coinage. Twenty-five years ago private flying was considered generally as a sport, a thrill-seeker's pastime. Postwar years erased that image, to a large extent. General aviation today is considered as any powered flying other than military and scheduled air carrier.

With wartime restrictions removed from private plane flying and production in the waning months of 1945, civil aircraft building boomed. Manpower that for the past three years had been filling the skies with fighters and bombers found it easy to revert to construction of civil aircraft. In

U.S. GENERAL AVIATION AIRCRAFT PRODUCTION 1939 - 1963*



* FAA Statistical Handbooks
¹ All civil aircraft, 1939-46
² General aviation aircraft only, 1947-63

1946 alone, some 20 companies turned out well over 35,000 lightplanes. The following year 15,594 more were added to the growing fleet.

Because production outstripped demand, distributor-dealer inventories mounted and production dropped sharply. It was obvious that the lightplane manufacturers had wrongly judged the postwar market. They had attempted to mass-produce the same type of lightplane that had been popular before the war, intended principally for sport or pleasure flying. But times had changed. The buying market demanded planes that were safe and useful as well as fun to fly.

A study of private flying trends reinforced this assessment. In 1939, commercial and business flying accounted for about one-fourth of all nonscheduled aircraft activity. Ten years later those two categories made up 42% of private flying, and in 1961 they were responsible for 66% of nonscheduled air mileage.

Following the initial postwar false boom, general aviation embarked upon a more carefully calculated program of expansion. Through the 1950's it grew at a steady if unspectacular rate. Output of new pilots nationally averaged about 40,000 a year and aircraft production, which dropped to a low of 2,300 in 1952, at the height of the Korean Action, revived cautiously, year-by-year, to a 1959 peak of some 7,700 lightplanes. While airspace con-

trol programs of the CAA and the military contributed added red tape to the problems of private flying, AOPA had grown more firmly established and was making marked headway in winning greater consideration for the non-commercial pilot and plane owner. Passage of the Federal Aviation Act of 1958 was hailed as a further step forward in recognition of private flying as the backbone of the aviation industry. That optimism was rudely jarred, however, as the new Federal Aviation Agency, established under the Act, set out on a course of "letter of the law" enforcement of existing rules and enactment of new measures that threatened wholesale grounding of general aviation pilots.

The force of protest from the majority of the nation's 350,000 licensed pilots, as voiced by AOPA and other flying interests, brought public opinion to bear on the iron-handed methods being wielded by FAA. The Federal Aviation Act since has been amended to eliminate to a degree the Agency's autocratic exercise of unquestioned power over all aspects of flying.

When the present FAA Administrator assumed office, he accorded private flying a previously unparalleled voice in the promulgation of proposals and regulatory measures. Early in his assignment, he conducted a series of meetings throughout the country with all elements of the U.S. aviation community to obtain a "grass roots" under-

standing of the needs and desires of all flyers. In 1962, a new office was created in the Agency for a Special Assistant to the Administrator for General Aviation.

The trials and tribulations of general aviation in the United States are far from over. But in the past 25 years private flying has achieved a position of prominence that probably will not be enjoyed in any other country for decades to come.

The social scientist could give numerous reasons for the success American general aviation has achieved in the scant span of 25 years: Long distances between culturally similar metropolitan centers and the ease of state border crossings were conducive to air travel. The United States was the birthplace of powered flight and Americans are an adventurous people by nature; therefore, general popularity of flying was inevitable. Our form of government and our heritage of independence rebel against attempts to over-control us in any manner.

These and many more reasons undoubtedly have played a part. One other factor is that Americans always have readily organized to fight for what they consider to be the common right. The response of pilots and plane owners in joining together over the past 25 years under the banner of AOPA has been—and will continue to be—of vital significance in the advancement of general aviation in America. ●

AOPA MEMBERSHIP GROWTH 1939-1963

