



William T. Piper presented a Piper Tri-Pacer to winner William J. Meecham (far left) and Donald G. Rhodes (below) won a Champion "Sky-Trac" in the 1956 giveaway.



Sweepstakes airplanes such as 2006's Piper Cherokee Six, have come a long way (left).

# The lucky ones

All kinds of winners, all kinds of airplanes in the AOPA sweepstakes

BY DAVE HIRSCHMAN

**I**n the 51 years since AOPA gave away its first prize airplanes on national TV, winners have received brand-new aircraft and painstakingly restored antiques. The fortunate few have won singles and twins, fixed gear and retractable models, fabric-covered and metal airplanes.

Fewer than half of the winners of AOPA Sweepstakes aircraft owned their own airplanes when they were handed the keys to their gleaming windfalls with wings. A few have kept their airplanes for many years, but most elected to sell—sometimes within days—because AOPA Sweepstakes airplanes are so coveted.

The first award in 1956 was covered live on CBS with host and AOPA charter member Arthur Godfrey emceeding the giveaway of two airplanes: a Piper Tri-Pacer and a Champion "Sky-Trac," a tricycle-gear Champ.

World War II veterans won both airplanes. The Piper went to William J. Meecham of Ormand Beach, Florida, and the Champion to Donald G. Rhodes of Midvale, Utah. The airplanes were awards in a contest to create the best AOPA slogan or reason for joining the then-70,000-member organization. AOPA didn't have its own membership magazine at the time, so contestants clipped entry forms from AOPA inserts in *Flying* magazine.

The giveaway was so popular that AOPA did it again the following year with a Champion "Tri-Traveler" as top prize. Second prize was a boat, a 25-horsepower Spartan



The 1958 prize was a Mooney M20A.



The airplane **proudly** carried the signatures of **hundreds of** Cessna workers who built it in **Independence, Kansas.**

Sprite, which seems an odd choice for an aviation organization. But AOPA officials said at the time that 22 percent of its members also owned boats, so they included the ornate, \$1,800 Sprite.

Edward Moore of Westport, Connecticut, a cartoonist and World War II bomber pilot who had flown more than 50 combat missions, won the Tri-Traveler that year.

In 1958, AOPA gave away a pair of Forney Aircoupes. One went to member Martin Postal for the best safety slogan, and Ralph Hanley won the other by offering the best reason for joining AOPA. The airplanes were a promotion for rental car agency Hertz, which planned to use rudderless Aircoupes for its short-lived "Rent-a-Plane" division (see "What Ever Happened To?" on page 121).

AOPA raised the stakes in 1958 to \$30,000 in prizes (about \$210,000 in today's dollars) and heavily promoted the upcoming contest in its brand new membership publication, *The AOPA Pilot*. The marquee prize, a Mooney M20A valued at \$14,290 (about \$100,000 today), would go to the member who came up with the best new advertising slogan (15 words or less!).

The 150-horsepower, wood-wing, retractable gear airplane was touted as

"The World's Most Efficient Airplane" with operating costs of just six cents a mile, and was equipped with the latest navigation technology: a Narco "Superhomer" radio that weighed 11 pounds and sold for \$575 (more than \$4,000 today).

The organization wanted a catchy replacement to its old rallying cry of "AOPA makes your flying safer—less expensive—more useful." However, the winning slogan appears to have been lost to history. It wasn't publicized at the time, and AOPA kept on using variations on its anything-but-splashy old one. By the way, the Mooney, N6509B, is still registered in Bakersfield, California.

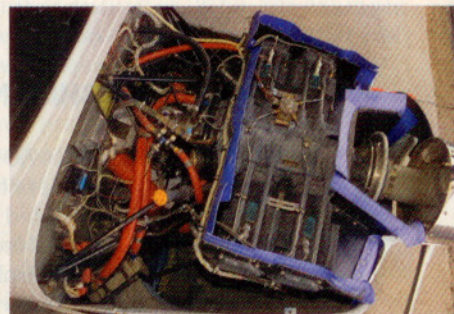
#### Extreme makeovers

The giveaways took a long hiatus but emerged in its current form in the early 1990s after several years of giving away BMW cars in a simplified sweepstakes format instead of a contest. In 1989,

AOPA's fiftieth anniversary, member Margaret Puckette won a new Piper Archer and with it flew ecological research missions in Oregon for years.

In 1993, instead of giving away new airplanes (most large U.S. manufacturers had stopped producing single-engine airplanes because of liability concerns), AOPA began updating existing ones with its own "extreme makeovers." The spinner-to-tail renovations showcased a variety of new products and skilled craftsmanship that could improve the aging general aviation fleet. AOPA's "Good As New" Cessna 172 (N172GN) went to dentist Bill Teschner of Fort Pierce, Florida. The airplane was refurbished with new avionics that had been unavailable when Cessna had halted Skyhawk production in 1986.

In 1994, AOPA's "Better Than New" Cessna 172 (N172B) with an engine upgrade went to Marshall Stambovsky of Athens, Tennessee.



AOPA's "Better Than New" Cessna 172 (left) had a complete engine upgrade. In 2005, a turbocharged Rockwell Commander 112B took center stage (above and right).

Cessna jumped back into single-engine aircraft production, and AOPA put the spotlight on the company's bold step in 1995 by awarding the first new Skyhawk to come off the production line to Sharon Hauser of San Jose, California. The airplane (N172FN) proudly carried the signatures of hundreds of Cessna workers who built it in Independence, Kansas.

Cessna revived its 182 Skylane the following year, and AOPA awarded the first one (N182FN) to Michael Raisler, a flight instructor in Clermont, Florida, in 1996.

AOPA renewed its tradition of giving away refurbished aircraft in 1997 with the "Ultimate Arrow" awarded to flight instructor Paul Perrone of Medfield, Massachusetts.

Then, in 1998, AOPA went back to its 1956 roots with a "Timeless Tri-Pacer" (N198TP) won by Lee Burton of Indianapolis.

In 1999, AOPA featured another single-engine Cessna, a 206 known as an "aerial sport utility vehicle" (N206SU) that went to Carl Rice of Reedville, Virginia.

In 2000, AOPA gave a "Millenium Mooney" 201 (N2014U) to Alex Thurber of Puyallup, Washington.

An updated, IO-550-powered V35 Bonanza with a glass cockpit went to Norm Elliott of Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 2001.

An antique, candy-apple red Waco UPF-7 was totally restored in celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of flight and awarded to Mark Zeller of Houston, Texas. The 2002-2003 contest was AOPA's only two-year sweepstakes.

A Piper Twin Comanche was the top prize in 2004, the only time AOPA gave away a multi-engine aircraft, and the overhauled, totally refurbished 1965



Phil Boyer presented the "key" to this UPF-7 Waco to Mark Zeller (left) in Houston, Texas, in 2003. Coast Guard Cdr. Rocky S. Lee took home the "Win a Six" Cherokee Six two years ago (below).

aircraft went to Roy Wilbanks at a ceremony in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

A high-flying, turbo-charged Rockwell Commander 112 was the grand prize in 2005 and it went to Rob Melnick of Denver.

A thoroughly modernized Piper Cherokee Six went to Coast Guard Cdr. Rocky S. Lee of Petaluma, California, in 2006.

A sparkling Cessna 177B Cardinal was awarded to Longview, Texas, flight instructor Bruce Chase in the 2007 "Catch a Cardinal" sweepstakes (see "Sweepstakes Winner," page 26).

The sweepstakes has been a valuable tool for building AOPA membership, but AOPA officials say there's little or no correlation between the value of the prize airplane and interest among members. The "Timeless Tri-Pacer," for example, got members as motivated as the high-performance singles or even the Twin Comanche. And the Cessna 172s generated as much enthusiasm as the Waco biplane.

Although a few sweepstakes winners have kept their prizes for many years, many sold them soon after taking delivery. The IRS charges a hefty tax bill, and selling the prize airplanes is a way to pay the taxman and put away a large gain at the same time.

Also, the airplanes are highly sought after, and sweepstakes winners commonly receive offers within hours—and sometimes minutes—of learning about their wins.

When Bill Evans, an AOPA member and Rockwell Commander owner in Santa Maria, California, found out the 2005 sweepstakes Commander had been awarded to Rob Melnick in Colorado, Evans sent Melnick a congratulations letter with a post script: "If you ever decide to sell, give me a call."

"I never expected to hear back from him," Evans said. "But one day he called and asked if I was serious. After a very short negotiation, we struck a deal."

Evans, a commercial real estate developer and property manager in Santa Maria, California, said he followed the Commander restoration closely throughout 2005 in *AOPA Pilot* and was amazed at the high quality of the components, craftsmanship, and documentation.

"This is an airplane I intend to hold onto forever," he said. "I was already a Commander fan. But this airplane is one of a kind."

AOPA

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