

Aviation's Grand Old Man

William T. Piper, Sr., will celebrate a birthday this month—his 80th—but he's still 'the boss' at Piper Aircraft and goes on building planes. He believes general aviation's greatest growth lies ahead

William T. "Bill" Piper, Sr., will be 80 years old this month. More than 52,000 Piper airplanes built in the past three decades qualify Bill Piper as the "Henry Ford" of aviation.

Still an active company president, Bill Piper (AOPA 50445) calls the shots for the orderly expansion of his 2,500-man organization, the Piper Aircraft Corporation. His three sons, all vice presidents, sometimes disagree with the decisions of "the old man," but they seldom make him change his mind.

Bill Piper differs completely from any other aircraft company executive. He was 45 years old before he took his first airplane ride; a once-around-the-town of Bradford, Pa., in an OX-5 *Travel Air*. He wasn't much impressed.

"It was noisy, windy and not very comfortable," he remembers. "We didn't go anywhere and I couldn't see much future in the whole operation."

William T. Piper, Sr., president of the Piper Aircraft Corporation, can be found in his office at Lock Haven, Pa., practically every day he is in town. Here he relaxes as he looks over a copy of *The PILOT*.



During these predepression days, Bill Piper was president of the Bradford Motor Club and supervised some small oil property holdings owned by his sisters. At this time, C. G. Taylor opened a small factory in the town and, aided by local financing, started to build airplanes. Bill Piper had an original investment of \$400 in the company, made by a partner without previously consulting the future aircraft company president.

"I was actually in the aviation business, in a small way at least, before I ever knew anything about it," said Mr. Piper.

Soon Bill Piper was requested to go on the Taylor board of directors by one of the larger stockholders who felt that he, himself, was too old to become active but still wanted to know what the company was doing with his money.

"This was just after the Lindbergh flight," said Piper. "We were building a high-wing, two-place, side-by-side monoplane called the 'Chummy.' It was priced at \$4,000 and reached the market just at the time of the 1929 depression. I told the board of directors that we would go broke because we couldn't compete with Stinson, Waco and other well-established companies.

"I believe that we finally made four or five 'Chummy' planes," continued Piper. "Between fires and floods, I've lost all the old records. The last time the Susquehanna river flooded this town, all the remaining canceled checks from the old company were in my basement."

Since the 90 h.p. Kinner engine was the most expensive part of the "Chummy," the Taylor company began working on an experimental glider, based partially on the "Chummy." Many of the basic designs of the later ubiquitous *Cub* came from this 1930 Taylor glider.

The glider flew well, but proved to be virtually unsalable. The company then set out to redesign the glider and add an inexpensive power plant. The first engine tried was a 20 h.p., two-cylinder, two-cycle power plant called the "Brownback Kitten," which led directly to the name of *Cub* for the aircraft.

"We wanted a short, simple name that people would remember," said Bill Piper. "I forget who actually came up with the idea of the *Cub*."



Bill Piper and his sons. Eighty-year-old Piper Aircraft Corporation President William T. Piper (seated) poses with his three sons, the company's three vice presidents, in his office at Lock Haven. They are (left to right): Howard, Thomas F., and William T., Jr.



Piper and his sons participate in ceremonies at Lock Haven commemorating the 30th anniversary of the first Piper Cub flight. They are standing in front of one of the original E-2 Cubs. Incidentally, the plane back of the Cub is the record-breaking N110LF Piper Comanche, owned and flown by Max Conrad (AOPA 95611). Other modern Piper planes, including an Aztec, may be seen in the background

by DONALD CHASE

Twenty horsepower proved to be strikingly inadequate for Pilot George W. Kirkendall, Sr. (He is now an instructor in mechanical engineering at the Pennsylvania State University.)

"The first flight with the 'Kitten' engine was on Sept. 12, 1930," reminisced Mr. Piper, "I'll never forget it. The plane was so underpowered that it was barely five feet off the ground before it ran out of runway. However, as an airplane, it handled remarkably well."

The next step in the development of the *Cub* was installation of a second-hand French Salmson nine-cylinder engine purchased from the Aeromarine Company of Keyport, N. J., for \$350.

"This power plant had wonderful performance," said the manufacturer. "However, it had metric threads, ran backwards and would have cost far too much money to purchase new. It just wouldn't do for a cheap airplane."

About this time, the Continental Engine Company began production of the 37 h.p. A40 four-cylinder engine that cost \$350 when ordered in volume. The struggling Pennsylvania company ordered one engine.

"It was most fortunate that this engine came into being just when it did," said Piper. "Without a low-cost engine in this horsepower class, I don't know how we would have been able to stay in the business."

As it was, the Taylor Brothers Company did go bankrupt in 1931.

"I called a stockholders' meeting," said Piper, who had by then been appointed treasurer of the company. "No one showed up and there I was, treasurer of a company without any money. Later, Taylor and I sat down and discussed our problems. We both thought that there was a good, salable product in the *Cub* and decided to work on a 50-50 basis—my money and his brains. We worked this way until 1936."

The first Continental A40 engine reached Bradford in

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Bill Piper's 80th birthday this month undoubtedly will be happier because of this airplane. It is the prototype of the new, low-priced Colt, which he insisted—over some opposition from his sons—upon developing

This photograph gives a thumbnail account of the growth of the Piper Aircraft Corporation. William T. Piper (right) and George W. Kirkendall, Sr., who flew the original Cub airplane 30 years ago, stand in front of one of the first E-2 Cubs produced on the apron at Lock Haven. In the background (left) is the biggest and fastest plane in the modern Piper line—the five-place, twin-engine Aztec

Photos by the author and Piper Aircraft Corp.



Grand Old Man

(Continued from page 29)

February of 1931 and the E-2 Cub was certificated on June 15. Production figures indicate that public acceptance of the *Cub* was anything but enthusiastic. Twenty-two planes were sold in 1931, 22 the next year and only 17 in 1933.

"Flight school operators were still sure that the public wanted to learn to fly in heavy, high-powered, tricky planes, mainly designed around World War I OX-5 engines," said Piper. "The use of a slow, inexpensive, easy-to-fly trainer took a great deal of education."

However, the *Cub* began to take hold in 1934. Seventy-one units were sold that year, including the first export contract to Sao Paulo, Brazil. The total soared to 212 in 1935 when the price tag was \$1,325. In 1936 the cockpit was enclosed, wingtips rounded and the landing gear widened; 522 units were sold.

As so frequently happens in partnerships, C. G. Taylor and Bill Piper had their differences of opinion. In an "either-you-buy-me-out or I'll buy-you-out" meeting, Taylor sold his interests in the company to Piper and moved to Alliance, O., where he founded the Taylorcraft Corporation. Soon the confusion of Taylorcraft vs. Taylor Aircraft became a problem and the company was renamed Piper Aircraft Corporation in 1937.

During this period, while Bill Piper was in Hollywood attending an air show, the *Cub* factory in Bradford burned down from a fire originating in the dope room. The factory was valued at \$200,000 but it was covered by only \$10,000 in insurance because of the highly inflammable materials, wooden frame buildings and a location that was not served by the city's water hydrants.

Jigs and tools were salvaged and a limited production continued in garages, empty buildings and virtually in employees' living rooms while Bill Piper searched for new quarters.

He found a 100,000-square-foot silk mill in Lock Haven, Pa., that had been empty since early in the depression. Even the looms were still in the building. The property adjoined the airport and was only a half-mile from the Susquehanna river, where seaplane operation could be conducted. Piper purchased the mill and its 16 acres of land for \$100,000.

A number of employees moved the 125 miles to Lock Haven with the company.

Despite the slow down in production caused by the fire and move, 683 J-2's were built in 1937. The continued growth of Piper is aviation history. A 40 h.p. Model J-3 trainer sold for \$995, while higher horsepower (50-65 h.p.) versions sold up to \$1,650. More than 75% of all trainers on the Civilian Pilot Training programs were Pipers. In 1940, a total of 3,016 planes were built. During World War II days, Piper produced the "Flying Jeep" and a glider training version, the TG-8.

Following the war, Piper, like other aircraft manufacturers, was caught in a market flooded with surplus military planes—cheap to buy, expensive to maintain and frequently difficult to fly. During 1947, Piper closed down for six months to reorganize and re-evaluate the market. The result was a "cheapie," the 65 h.p., side-by-side *Vagabond* that sold for \$1,995.

"The *Vagabond* kept us in business while we could develop the four-place *Clipper*, and later the *Tri-Pacer*," Piper said. "Then came the twin-engine *Apache*, the *Comanche*, *Pawnee* and now *Aztec*. Since we were in the twin-engine business, I went ahead and worked on a twin-engine rating. The CAA issued it seven years ago when I was 73. After all, how in the heck can you offer a twin-engine airplane for sale and not be able to fly the thing yourself?"

Piper history is now repeating itself because of the insistence of 80-year-old Bill Piper.

"We're going to build a new two-place 'cheapie,'" he said, with a tone of calm authority in his voice. "Two of my sons were against the idea and the other one wasn't really enthusiastic, but we're going to build 500 two-place trainers that will sell on today's market for \$4,995."

The new plane spearheaded by the company president is a stripped-down version of the *Tri-Pacer*. It is called the *Colt* and production has already begun.

"We've taken everything off the *Tri-Pacer* that we could to cut costs," explained Piper. "There's no radio, no rear windows, no rear seat and no wheel pants in the standard model. Even the propeller spinner was deleted, in the interests of economy, and horsepower reduced to 108." The two higher-priced models of the *Colt*, the Custom and Super Custom, have added equipment, including a Narco Superhomer radio.

"Any new plane takes a million dollars of engineering money. The *Colt*, originally called the *Pinto* until one of our test pilots remembered that Temco had already produced a trainer with a similar name, will merely be a continuation of our old *Tri-Pacer* production line," said Piper. "We'll make the *Colt* at a relatively low cost since the burden of design has already been paid off."

"We've already built 8,000 *Tri-Pacers* so that the engineering, tooling, shop set-up and expensive learning period is already behind us.

"We're not going to make much money on the *Colt*," continued the Grand Old Man of Aviation, "but I believe that this little low-cost airplane will give us something better than money. It will help us build up a tremendous sales organization of men and women all over the country representing us who will be 'bird dogs' for the company—and for the industry as a whole."

"The main delay in getting this little airplane into production is the engine," he added. "Lycorning had to dig up and dust off all the old tooling for their

The Piper Painting

The oil portrait of William T. Piper, Sr., appearing on the cover of this issue of The PILOT, will be presented to Mr. Piper in a ceremony observing his 80th birthday at Vero Beach, Fla., this month. It was commissioned by a group of friends of the "grand old man of aviation." It was painted by "Executive Portraits," a division of Portrait Group of Westport, Conn., which specializes in portraits of corporate executives and airplane owners. The artist is the nationally known portraitist, William Gillies. Mr. Piper's 80th birthday will be celebrated at the same time Piper Aircraft's new Vero Beach factory is dedicated. Official dedication ceremonies will be held at 2 p.m., Sunday, Jan. 8. The company has announced that "open house" will be held at the new factory and the adjacent Piper Research and Development Center from noon to 5 p.m. on that day. The public is invited to attend. Top Government and aviation officials are expected to be there.

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108 h.p. engine, and we had to order 500 units right off the bat to get the production moving again.

"This is the airplane, I believe, that will get students back flying again. The cost of this airplane will be less than anything of its type in the air today—lower depreciation, lower operating cost and lower insurance. An operator can rent it out at a lower rate and still make a reasonable profit."

Bill Piper had the gleam of personal achievement as he walked around the prototype *Colt* in the experimental hangar at Lock Haven.

"Speaking of students," he continued, "I believe that the Federal Government is going too far in protecting the individual in its regulation of the activities of the pilot. I don't believe that an instructor's rating should be required to teach anyone to be a private pilot. No such rating is required for automobile instruction, and that's certainly as difficult as learning to fly.

"I can't see where the lack of regulations has hurt us any in this industry. Take my son 'Pug' (Howard) who has flown for 27 years and is, I believe, our best family pilot. His son is now 17 and he's flown both single-engines and twins all over the country with his dad. Yet, he can't get his license until he's flown with a rated instructor.

"That's not helping aviation."

All of Bill Piper's sons are Harvard graduates. William T., Jr., at 49, is executive vice president. Thomas F., "Tony," 46, is vice president of operations, and Howard, "Pug," (AOPA 97315), 42, is vice president of research and development. He has two daughters, one married to a San Francisco architect and the other to a New York advertising man. He has two brothers and a sister. One of his brothers, Dr. A. L. Piper, was a medical missionary in

Katanga province in the Congo for many years. There's a hospital named for him there. Dr. Piper now is retired and living at Ossipee, N. H. A second brother, A. D. Piper, also is retired and living at Bradford, Pa. The sister is living in Rochester, N. Y.

Bill Piper is a man who is not reticent about his thoughts on aviation.

"Take this business of an FAA-approved doctor," he said. "That's just building up a monopoly. Here, I'm in good physical shape. There's no reason why I should have to take a special physical exam unless I'm going to run into someone else—and that's a darned sight easier to do in an automobile without a physical than in an airplane.

"Naturally, I'm an objector," continued Piper. "I don't like the new regulations that make it compulsory for us to be better trained in the air. I feel that a new pilot should know what all his instruments are for, and that he should be able to make a 180° turn 'on the gauges,' but I also feel that he should learn this out of pride of accomplishment, not because there's a regulation that forces him to do it."

FAA Administrator Quesada wrote a select group of industry leaders some time ago, (Piper was one of them), asking their opinions about the then-proposed new medical program, and the 60-year age limit for airline pilots. Piper answered, and objected to the FAA proposals in no uncertain terms. He's heard no more from Quesada on the subject.

Commenting acidly, Piper says: "There are many ways a person can commit suicide. But it's only in aviation that you need a permit from the Federal Government!"

Sitting back in his unpretentious, tastefully decorated penthouse office above what was once an abandoned silk mill, Bill Piper spends a very small part of his time in reviewing the past.

"We've just begun to make this a big industry," he says with a not-so-far-away gleam in his sharp eyes. "As I see it, the important expansions are still ahead of us. It's my idea that few in the industry yet see the real impact of the tricycle landing gear. It has obsoleted the multiple runway and made it practical to establish minimum airports all over the country—small grass strips located everywhere that people might want to go.

"There's a mistaken idea that an airport must have an operator or a manager. These flight strips should be just like a pony-league baseball park; merely a place for people to come and set down.

"Just as soon as a community gains the stature of a general store, a gas station and a few houses, it's ready for its own airstrip. America must have tens of thousands of spots of ground where planes can drop in occasionally. We'll not be complete till we get this country covered with airports.

"The big, new, jet, passenger liners are wonderful machines, but of limited usefulness because they can economically serve only large centers of population. It's the outlying areas where

I expect to see aviation activities mushroom in the next few years." Then grinning, Mr. Piper said, "All the prehistoric monsters are dead—except the elephant." He was referring to the bulk of the big jets. "But the little bugs are still with us," he added.

Many years ago, when the company was growing and every expense a problem, Bill Piper frequently delivered his own new airplanes when he had business out of town. "Every time I got into a jam, it was caused by the fact that I didn't know how to fly weather. I'm still not an instrument pilot, but I don't believe that the airline pilot is a bit smarter than the rest of us."

Piper has curtailed his own piloting lately. He has a tendency toward cataracts, and is content to have one of his sons, or a company pilot, along these days. He still has his pilot's license, however, complete with multi-engine rating.

As the "grand old man of aviation," Bill Piper is called on to attend many civic and social gatherings. "I go to more meetings than anyone in the aviation business," he said. "When I went to Harvard, English 'A' was a required subject—and a nightmare to me. One day my professor took me aside and said, 'Mr. Piper, you seem to have difficulty in finding a subject on which to write, and when you find one, you don't seem to have much to say about it.'"

"Now when I make a speech, I just get up and ramble. The dearest thing in the world is reading a speech. I find that talking in public is much like flying an airplane: it may sound like hell, but you've just got to keep going."

One of Piper's goals, incidentally, is to some day lead the Harvard parade, a distinction reserved for the oldest living alumnus. "But I'm afraid I'm going to have a long wait," he mused, "because half of my class is still alive. Godfrey Lowell Cabot still leads the parade, and he's 100."

At the conclusion of this interview, Mr. Piper was due to take off for Cedar Rapids, Ia., to give a goodwill talk to a service club. Many an aircraft com-

pany would have rolled out the plushiest twin-engine plane in the shop to take the Company President on a speaking engagement, but not at Lock Haven.

"I'll have one of the boys fly me 35 miles to Williamsport and then climb on the airline. It isn't economical to fly one man halfway across the country to a town that the airlines already serve. Now, if I were talking at some out-of-the-way place that the airlines didn't serve, then I'd use one of our own airplanes."

His personal life has always been simple, modest, God-fearing. Born Jan. 8, 1881, in Knapps Creek, N. Y., William Thomas Piper was married to the first Mrs. Piper (now dead) in 1910. He married the present Mrs. Piper in 1943. Originally a successful oil man, he served as a private in the Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in 1898, and a captain in the U. S. Army engineers in 1918.

He and Mrs. Piper live quietly in a large house on the edge of the Lock Haven airport. His regular practice is to walk the quarter-mile to and from his office each day, and he frequently walks into town, another mile or two.

A staunch Republican, Bill Piper could be seen everywhere for the past few months wearing a large Nixon button. At home, he loves to work in his garden, where he's specializing in the organic farming method of raising vegetables. He still reads a lot, and has little interest in food. He rarely eats lunch, and then usually at the local Rotary Club meetings he attends. He often eats such health foods as millet and lecithin (made of egg yolks and soy bean oil). He likes music, and used to be in the church choir.

Though he strongly dislikes the use of liquor, Piper is quite tolerant of cocktail parties, even those staged by his own company. He usually walks around with a glass of ginger ale in his hand. Several years ago, at an AOPA weekend flight at Rehoboth Beach, Del., he won a prize in a drawing—a bottle of Scotch. With great humor, he raffled the bottle off for \$13, which he donated to charity.

He's chairman of the Lock Haven hospital organization and recently succeeded in raising \$1,400,000 for the hospital. They hired a professional fundraising organization from Pittsburgh to do the job—appropriately named Ketchum, he points out with a chuckle.

If he hadn't drifted into the aviation business, what would Bill Piper probably have done? Here is his answer: "Gone west and stayed in the oil business."

Looking back, what stands out as the most outstanding point in his years as an aviation company president? "It's the association with young people," he said. "I've enjoyed the work."

And the future for Piper Aircraft? "More and more production. Someday possibly a larger plane. A six-place model wouldn't seem unlikely."

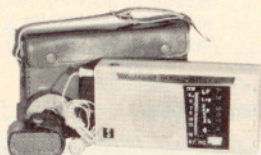
The first production model of the Colt will undoubtedly make a fine 80th birthday greeting for William T. Piper, Sr.

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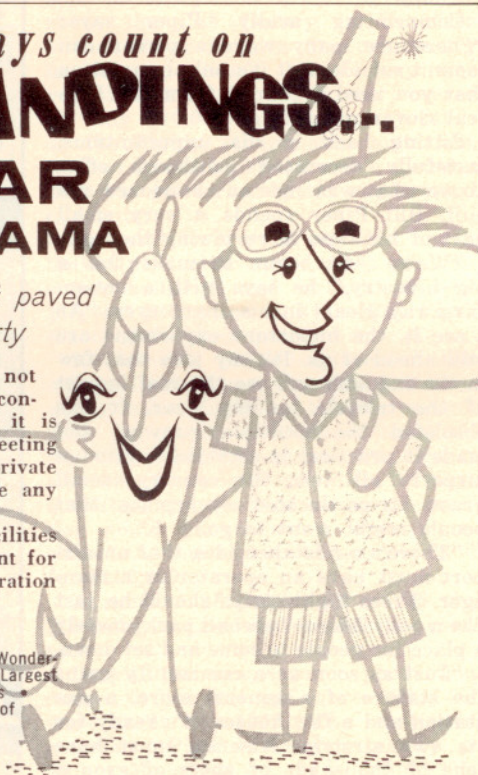
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