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BY MARK R. TWOMBLY

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longer span, semitapered wing of more recent Cherokees). When she heard the Short Wing Piper Club, Incorporated (SWPC), would be holding its national convention in nearby Wagoner, Oklahoma, this summer, she went, figuring to meet kindred Cherokee owners. Only after arriving did she discover that SWPC caters to fabric-covered, high-wing, Lock Haven, Pennsylvania-built short-wing Pipers. Owners of low-wing, aluminum, Vero Beach, Florida-built short-wing Pipers need not apply. Milor stayed anyhow, was accepted by true short-wingers as a newfound friend, and a good time was had by all.

Lest others make the same mistake as Milor, here are the facts: Short-wing Pipers, at least those recognized as such by SWPC, are the PA-15 and -17 Vaga-

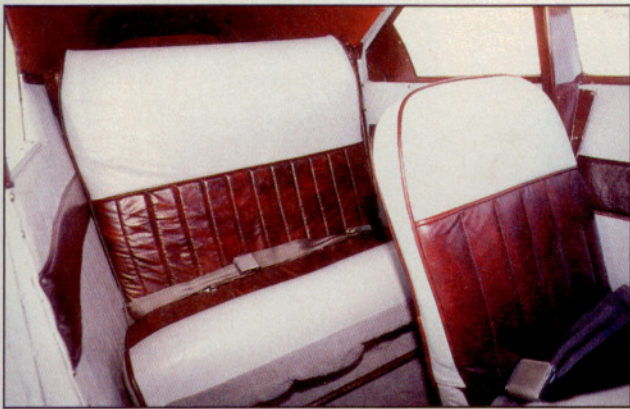
bonds, PA-16 Clipper, PA-20 Pacer, and PA-22 Tri-Pacer and Colt. The Vagabonds, Clipper, and Pacer are tail-draggers; the Tri-Pacer and Colt have tricycle gear, although many have been converted to Pacer tailwheel status.

Humble in appearance, intent, and execution, these were the last steel-tube fuselage, fabric-covered Pipers and, with the exception of the PA-18 Super Cub, the last to evolve directly from the Cub. They were designed and built at a pivotal point in the history of Piper Aircraft Corporation. The company was making a difficult transition from a family-run business that was the world's most prodigious manufacturer of small, simple, inexpensive airplanes to one that had to compete in a more sophisticated market with larger, more complex,

and much more expensive models.

Under the careful, conservative tutelage of William T. Piper, the company grew and prospered before World War II, largely on the strength of the Cub. The government forbade wartime production of light airplanes for civilians, but when the war ended, Piper rode the crest of a fantastic surge in demand. At one point, the company's backlog stood at more than 12,000 airplanes.

The boom lasted about 18 months. The sudden collapse of sales in March 1947 led to turmoil. The Piper family lost control of the company's board of directors, and a new chief executive was installed. Production of all new airplanes was halted temporarily until the inventory of completed Cubs and Super Cruisers was drawn down.



To generate more cash and also to deplete the company's expensive stockpile of raw materials, a new model, the Vagabond, was conceived. Though it differed from the Cub—it was shorter in span and length and had side-by-side seats—its primary attribute was a rock-bottom, fly-away price of \$1,990.

The PA-15 Vagabond went into production in January 1948. To achieve that price, standard equipment was kept to an absolute minimum—no shock absorbing system on the main gear, no right-seat flight controls, no engine primer, no cabin heat, and no accent stripe to set off the yellow base paint. Performance was better than might be expected from a 65-horsepower Lycoming O-145 engine because of the airplane's weight and size. The Vagabond

was light—a few pounds lighter, even, than the J-3. The wing was the same as the Cub's except that it was about 3-feet-per-side shorter.

A few months later, Piper came out with the PA-17 Vagabond, a somewhat less austere version of the original. It came equipped with dual controls, main gear shock cords, flight instruments and engine gauges, a propeller spinner, and a 65-hp Continental A-65 engine. It sold for about \$200 more than the original Vagabond. Piper built just over 500 PA-15s and about 200 PA-17s.

The Vagabond helped Piper weather the postwar bust in sales of new airplanes. As the company regained its footing, it began to embellish. The Vagabond gave way in 1949 to the PA-16 Clipper, which had twice as many seats

and, with a 115-hp Lycoming O-235 engine, almost twice as much power.

The Clipper was produced for only one year. Piper engineered some changes and for 1950 brought out a new model with a new name and number, the PA-20 Pacer.

The Pacer was the first of Piper's postwar models to have flaps and dual control yokes in place of sticks. It shared separate doors for front- and rear-seat occupants with the Clipper. Pacers were delivered with either a 125-hp or optional 135-hp Lycoming O-290. An adjustable-pitch Aeromatic propeller was also an option. All told, 1,120 Pacers were built before production finally ended in 1954.

The Pacer was joined in 1951 by the tricycle-gear Tri-Pacer. Moving the gear



Three variations on a theme (above, left to right): Colt, Pacer conversion, and Tri-Pacer. Short-wingers enjoy a convention hayride (right). The family Novak—Jennifer, Bob, and Karen—with their newly restored Tri-Pacer and its unique pilot's side open-wide door (left).



from tail to nose had a dramatic effect on sales. More than 7,600 Tri-Pacers were built over the model's 10-year production run. The Tri-Pacer debuted with a 125-hp O-290 but almost immediately was upgraded to 135 hp. Later models were offered with 150-hp and 160-hp O-320 engines.

Piper's postwar troubles subsided in the 1950s, and the family regained full control of the company. Despite its popularity, the Tri-Pacer was more representative of Piper's past than its future. The future was in an airplane like Cessna's all-metal 172, which not only was becoming the most popular four-place single on the market, but also was the template for a complete line of Cessna singles. Piper turned its sights to

the future in 1960 when it opened a new research and production facility in Vero Beach and introduced the Cherokee.

The last of Piper's tube and fabric models was the Colt, which appeared in 1961. Intended as a low-cost trainer and personal airplane, the Colt was a bare-bones version of the Tri-Pacer with a 108-hp O-235 engine, two seats, and no flaps. About 1,800 were built during its three-year production run.

The Tri-Pacer has a considerable edge in numbers, but the Pacer has to be considered the classic short-wing Piper. That assessment will draw hostile fire from aficionados of other models, but consider that the Pacer has the best combination of cabin space, performance, and—the trump card—looks. It's diffi-

cult even for loyal fans, of which I am one, to wax poetic about the Tri-Pacer/Colt's stubby appearance. I began my flight training in a Tri-Pacer and logged some of my early hours as a private pilot in a Colt. They were fun airplanes with perky personalities and just enough quirks—a spirited power-off sink rate and hand-operated wheel brakes and flaps, for example—to make them interesting and challenging to a new pilot. I also remember being the brunt of occasional ribbing about flying a winged milk stool.

Proof of the Pacer's aesthetic advantage is in the popularity of tailwheel conversions for the Tri-Pacer and Colt. Over-the-nose visibility doesn't suffer much with the conversion. The gear



isn't very tall to begin with, and the cowling is stubby and slopes downward. Once the third wheel has been moved from front to back, a Tri-Pacer becomes a PA-22/20 Pacer.

This year's short-wing Piper convention drew plenty of Tri-Pacers and conversions, a few Colts, and, for a brief time, one Pacer. Unfortunately, no Vagabonds or Clippers put in an appearance. Most club members fly Tri-Pacers because they were produced in far greater quantity than the other short-wing models.

Noel and Mary Gouldsmith of Independence, Missouri, took home the grand champion trophy for their 1955 150-hp Tri-Pacer. They have owned the airplane for five years and, three years

ago, restored it themselves to better than new perfection, right down to the chromed tiedown rings.

Another beautiful example of the breed was Wayne Richert's 1961 Colt. Richert, a former military helicopter pilot who lives in Olathe, Kansas, bought the Colt nine years ago for \$6,000. Five years ago, he restored it, nearly trebling his original investment.

Richert's Colt is a wonderful personal possession that he takes pride in and draws pleasure from, yet spends only pocket change on to fly and maintain. The airplane cruises at 105 miles per hour on less than 6 gallons of car gas per hour. The 18-gallon tank is good for about 2.5 hours of flying. Richert lends a hand on the annual inspection, which helps keep the bill to \$250 or less unless parts are required. He pays a state personal property tax of \$257 for the Colt, but in two years, the airplane will be considered an antique, and the tax will be waived. The biggest expense is monthly hangar rental.

"Inexpensive," was one of Richert's answers to my question, "Why a Colt?" The other answer was, "Why not?" He usually flies by himself and therefore doesn't need more seats, it's a simple and reliable airplane, and, says Richert, "I just like rag-wings."

David W. Johnson of Jacksonville, North Carolina, is on his third Tri-Pacer. He bought his first three years ago for \$7,000 just after starting primary flight training. He sold it at a profit after earning his private certificate, then bought a second. Though sold on the Tri-Pacer, Johnson preferred the look of a tail-dragger. His third short-wing Piper, which appears in the photographs accompanying this story, is a conversion.

Johnson had owned it two months when he flew it to the SWPC convention this summer. Originally a 125-hp Tri-Pacer, it had been rebuilt five years ago by a craftsman who, in addition to converting it to a taildragger, installed a 150-hp engine, toe brakes, leather seats, drooped wing tips, and a modern panel with a Narco Mark 12D nav/com, transponder, audio panel, Arnav R-20 loran, Alcor EGT gauge, and Hamilton vertical card compass.

Johnson paid \$17,000 for the airplane. That's a bargain for an airplane as pretty, as pleasant, and as capable as N7603D. Johnson can cruise at 125 mph for about three hours before the two 18-gallon tanks need replenishing (some Pacers/Tri-Pacers are equipped with an

8-gallon fuselage belly tank that Piper offered as an option). Payload with full fuel is 600 pounds. One of the nice things about the Pacer and Tri-Pacer is the number of doors: a front door on the right for the crew, a rear door on the left for passengers, and a small baggage door on the right. The baggage area can hold 100 pounds of cargo.

Johnson's conversion is a pleasure to fly. Piper built the Tri-Pacer with an aileron-rudder interconnect, but it has been removed on N7603D. It's a common modification and a desirable one, too, if Johnson's airplane is representative. The controls are light, well-balanced, and responsive.

Short-wing tube and fabric Pipers are gaining in stature, thanks in part to SWPC. Founded a decade ago, the club has grown to about 900 members. (For more information, contact Wayne Richert, the membership chairman, at 12018 Hagan, Olathe, Kansas 66062; telephone 913/829-1071.)

The pride of the club is its magazine, *Short Wing Piper News*, published every other month. It's an engaging mix of nuts-and-bolts technical information, spirited repartee among highly opinionated club members, and down-home sociability. The same can be said of the club's national convention. It's a family-oriented affair that draws members from Washington, Florida, Maine, and other corners of the country, but what better excuse than attending the convention to do some serious flying in a jaunty, clipped-wing page from Piper's past? Type clubs are important in promoting older airplanes and keeping them flying, and SWPC is one of the best.

Short-wing Pipers may represent some of the better bargains in aviation. Their humble reputation works for the buyer. Prices are relatively low; \$5,000 to \$7,000 for a flyable, though tattered, example is not uncommon. On the other hand, the good ones can fetch premium sums; Noel Gouldsmith last year turned down a \$21,000 offer for his Tri-Pacer.

Modifications are available to turn a short-wing Piper into just about anything a pilot could want. The list of mods includes, among other things, floats, skis, tundra tires, 180-hp engines, STOL kits, extended wing tips, speed fairings and seals, auxiliary fuel tanks, and metal skins to replace the fabric. But even unadorned, the airplanes are fun to fly, simple, and, with more than 10,000 produced, abundant. There is no shortage of short-wing Pipers. □