



Finding our candidate

We embark upon the restoration of the Timeless Tri-Pacer

John Lammers stood by the edge of the runway and watched his (or, what used to be his) red-and-white Piper Tri-Pacer take the active. As the jaunty little airplane rushed down the run-

By Marc E. Cook

way—OK, it was cool out and I was alone—Lammers grabbed his radio and called,

“Good luck, Marc. And, so long, Big Red.” Sentimental types would have heard the pangs of regret in his voice. ● Thus began a journey for N8134D that would take it first to its temporary home in Long Beach, California, and eventually, if you’re lucky, to your hangar or tiedown spot. Meet the airplane on its way to becoming AOPA’s 1998 sweepstakes airplane, the Timeless Tri-Pacer. ● Yes, this is a different one. In recent years AOPA has given away a pair of refurbished Cessna 172s—our mild makeover in Good As New, and the radical departure from Skyhawk norms in the Better Than New—as well as a pair of brand-new Cessnas and last year’s

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER







will essentially be a new airplane, with fresh fabric and paint, an engine overhauled to new limits, a shiny stack of the latest avionics, a slew of other pilot conveniences only imagined in 1958, and a cash bonus of \$10,000 to help pay for fuel, flight instruction, or 100 opportunities to chase the perfect \$100 hamburger. A year's membership in the Short Wing Piper Club is also part of the deal.

Getting started

In the first few months of the project, I've heard the question posed several times, in different ways: Why a Tri-Pacer? Why not an airplane, well, more attractive, or modern? The responses are actually quite easy to render. Beauty is, of course, in the eye of the beholder, but the Tri-Pacer possesses a kind of fearless charm, an appearance that's close to cartoonish without really venturing into self-parody. What's more, it grows on you. The Tri-Pacer is also a very good basic airplane with excellent flying qualities and a simple design philosophy that has proven to be rugged and easy to

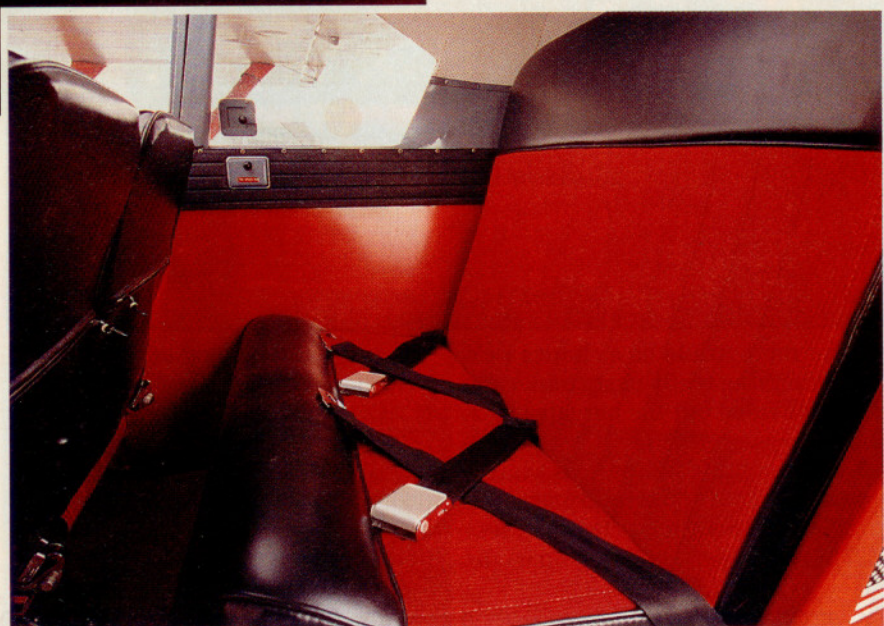
by dint of shorter wingspan and side-by-side seating. The then-new PA-22 (the Pacer was the PA-20) started with the Pacer's 135-horsepower Lycoming O-290, but by 1955 it got the larger 150-hp O-320. By 1956, a higher-compression version of the O-320 offered 160 hp, and the Tri-Pacer was then two models sharing an otherwise identical airframe. Also new for 1956 was a larger instrument panel with the radios stacked in the center. Although the Tri-Pacer had come from the Pacer, the success of the trigear model soon rendered the taildragger obsolete. Later, in an effort to trim costs and provide a reasonable trainer, Piper removed the Tri-Pacer's two back seats, one of the two 18-gallon fuel tanks, and the flaps, then fitted a 115-hp Lycoming O-235 to the Tri-Pacer fuselage and called the result the Colt. Piper built more than 2,000 Colts through 1963.

Through it all, the Tri-Pacer has retained a few basic virtues. It's a genuine four-seater, with enough room for a small family or two intimate couples. Although you hear that the Tri-Pacer is cramped, it is, in fact, not as bad as advertised. Staff photographer Mike Fizer and I, neither of us what you'd call petite, fit into the front seats without crowding. The baggage space behind the rear seats will hold enough for weekend jaunts, although month-long, continent-hopping sojourns are better left to a pair of hardy souls than to four.

Tri-Pacers have also always been delightfully simple airplanes, with a basic steel-tube framework in the fuselage and aluminum wing spars; later in the production run, most of what little wood was in the original Pacer had been replaced with metal. Modern covering systems have given a new lease to fabric, with a well-protected (read: hangared) ragwing able to withstand a decade's use without much worry. (In fact, many mechanics think the current fabrics are *too* good, in that they encourage owners to keep flying for more than 10 years with little incentive to open the structure and see what's going on in there.)

Our candidate

Finding a Tri-Pacer is easy—there are enough of them on the market that the odds of one's being for sale near you are quite good—but it's not so simple to find the *right* one. I spent more than two months looking for our candidate—poring over *Trade-A-Plane*, spending time browsing the myriad classified ser-



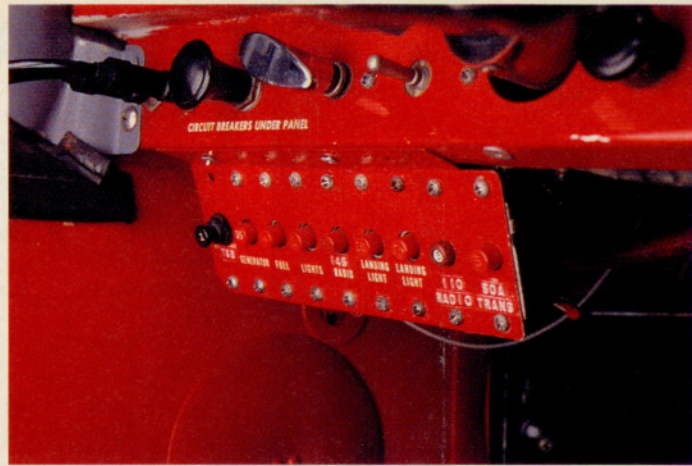
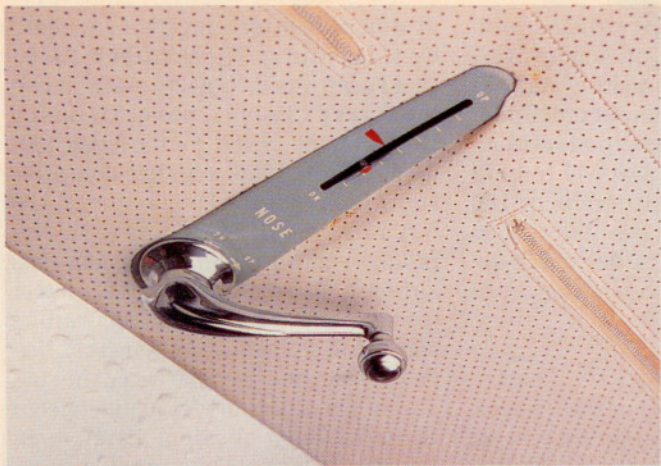
The interior in our project Tri-Pacer was in remarkably good condition. The panel layout of the post-1955 PA-22 allows plenty of room for center-stacked radios.

heavily reworked Piper Arrow. For 1998, AOPA is set to give some lucky member a prize of a different hue—a completely refurbished and appropriately modernized Piper Tri-Pacer. Unabashedly retro, the Tri-Pacer recalls simpler, less-expensive flying times—but it's also a useful and easy-to-fly conveyance that won't cripple the bank account every time it's taken aloft.

When we're done, this 1958 PA-22

maintain, and aftermarket support (thanks to Aurora, Colorado-based Univair) that makes every other 40-year-old airplane seem a true orphan.

Piper produced the Tri-Pacer in tremendous numbers—more than 8,000 in all—from 1951 through 1960, when the all-metal Cherokee bowed. It started as an option on the popular four-place Pacer taildragger, itself only slightly removed from the Piper Cub genealogy



VICES on the Internet (including our own section within AOPA Online), and checking out the bulletin boards at local airports. What I saw was an interesting dichotomy in Tri-Pacers, with the pristine, recent restorations on one end, and rather decrepit basket cases on the other—with not much in between. I

ing that there would be a chance we'd find something really nasty under the skin. This ruled out the bargain-price beaters.

We found our candidate in what is probably the most obvious place, the Short Wing Piper Club's classified section. John Lammers' 1958 160-hp model

but otherwise in good condition. The avionics stack consisted of an Icom IC-A200 com radio, a Narco AT-150 transponder, and an old King marine loran that was in the panel simply to take up space; it wasn't connected to anything. "It never really worked, so I disconnected it,"

Nostalgic lines, modern performance, and simplicity make up the economical Tri-Pacer.

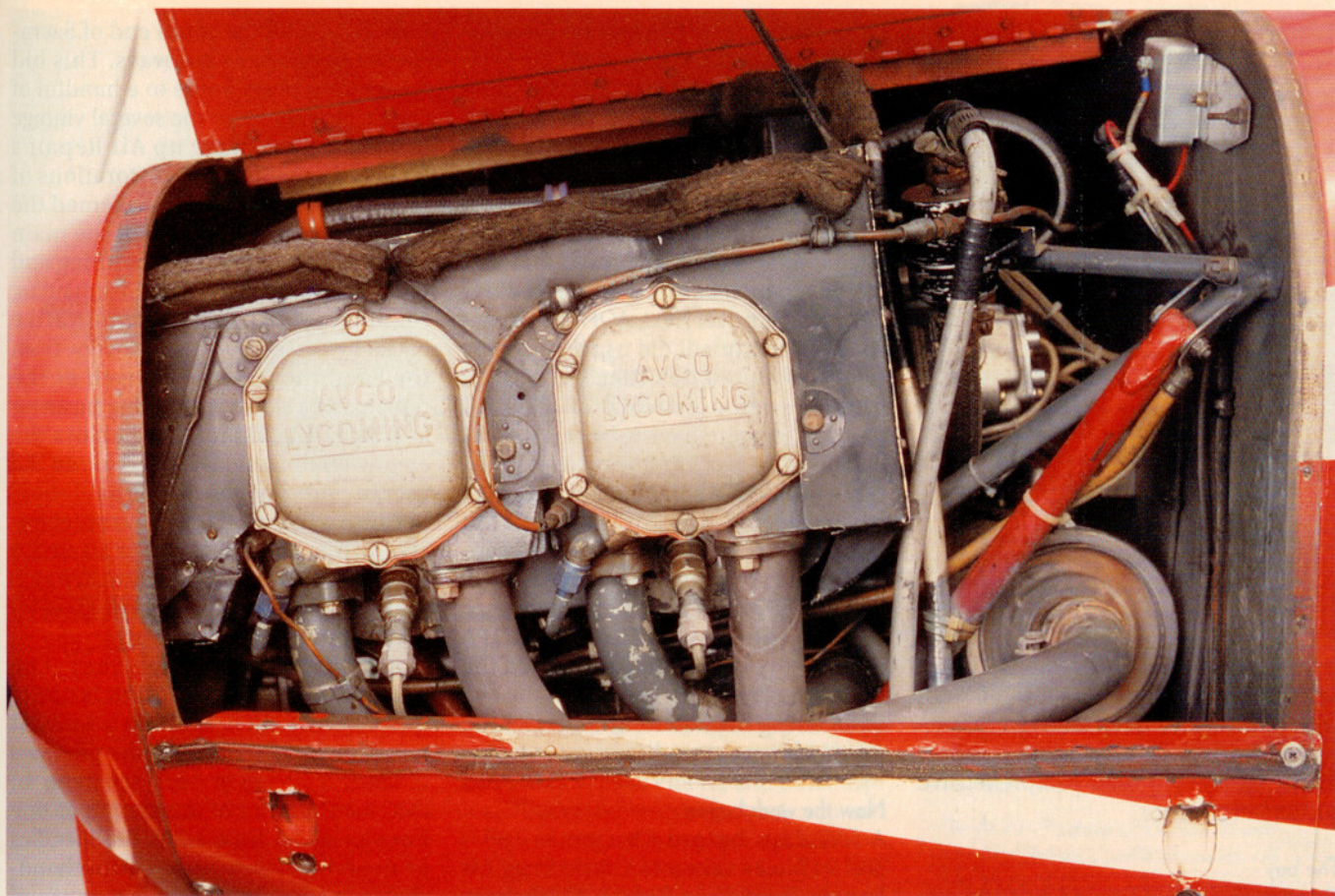
queried one owner who had advertised on AOPA's Web site, but when he found out that we were planning a comprehensive refurbishing, he politely declined to sell us his nicely refurbished airplane. Understandable.

What we needed was a basically sound airframe that had just enough time on the fabric and engine that it wouldn't be wasteful to tear immediately into them. But we also wanted one that was not such a huge undertak-

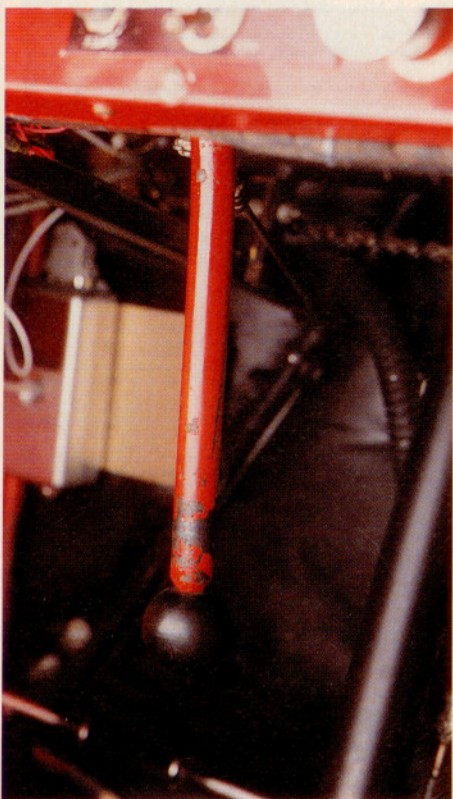
had been kept hangared since a mid-1970s restoration, and the airplane was very clean and tidy, if not immaculate. Lammers, a retired Navy technician on the F-14 and now working for the Marine Corps at Miramar, based the airplane at San Diego's Gillespie Field, an inland airport that can reasonably be called a dry environment.

My initial flight in the airplane revealed that it was a bit out of rig and somewhat slow (possibly related items)

said Lammers. The 950-hour-since-major Lycoming was of the older, narrow-deck design but had the one-half-inch valves; previous iterations with the 7/16-inch valves have 1,200-hour TBOs compared to this engine's 2,000-hour TBO. There were no apparent leaks, and the oil was clean despite being near the end of its 25-hour cycle. Overall, the airplane appeared to be as represented—a 20-some-year-old restoration kept in excellent condition by periodic main-



Some elements of our PA-22 will remain in the finished product—overhead trim crank, 160-hp Lycoming O-320-B, and Johnson-bar brakes. Some will not—the scattershot instrument panel layout and an afterthought circuit panel, to name two.





History repeats itself. Our 1998 Timeless Tri-Pacer will not be the first PA-22 to be given away by the association. In 1956, William J. Meehan (above, left), of Ormond Beach, Florida, accepts a spanking-new Piper Tri-Pacer from William Piper, Sr. In the following years, AOPA gave away a Champion Tri-Traveler, a pair of Fournay Aircoupes, and a Mooney M20. Forty-two years later, our refurbished PA-22 will be far better equipped, at least in terms of avionics, than Meehan's airplane.

tenance. Better yet, all the logs were present and even the quaint—by today's standards—pilot's handbook came as part of the deal. (It has almost no performance data, but a fairly comprehensive section on rigging.)

The buy

Confident that we'd found a good basis

for our project, I put in motion the actual purchase. Craig Brown of AOPA's Aviation Services staff calculated the value of the airplane based on the *Aircraft Bluebook-Price Digest*. When all the number crunching was complete, our Timeless Tri-Pacer was worth \$17,500, which included adjustments for the engine time, avionics package, and lack of wheelpants. Lammers accepted our offer at that price. Next, AOPA's Title and Escrow department did its part. Discovered was an old lien that had passed from one defunct savings and loan to another, despite having been satisfied two decades ago. Lammers had had the same problem when he bought the airplane in 1993, but got it cleared up. Apparently the feds had not been properly advised, or the fix slipped through the cracks, because the lien reappeared on our title search. Then the AOPA escrow service dutifully deposited the funds into Lammers' bank, with the two of us doing little more than watching the machinery at work.

Now the work begins

A few days before Christmas 1997, N8134D was taken to Clarksburg Air Repair, located on Borges-Clarksburg

Airport, just off the south end of Sacramento Executive's runways. This old duster strip plays home to a handful of classic airplanes and the several vintage buildings that make up Air Repair's facility. Specializing in restorations of classic aircraft, Air Repair seemed the ideal place to handle two of the main aspects of this project—recovering and repainting the airframe and overhauling the engine. Air Repair owner Mike Pavao has assembled a crack crew from the Sacramento area (as well as the remains of a slowly crumbling business at Borges-Clarksburg) and enjoys the engine equipment that used to run the Sacramento Sky Ranch overhaul shop. Because a re-covering is a comprehensive project, it made sense to find a facility that could handle the airframe as well as administer a thorough new-limits overhaul simultaneously.

But there's more than that. The atmosphere around Air Repair is one of quiet confidence, with no apparent need to wow customers by the presence of fancy facilities or hard-sell hype. In fact, the character of this shop is as one from an earlier time, when the specifics of an overhaul were sealed with a handshake and the shop's employees would



Our Tri-Pacer's wire-braced tail shows off the characteristic 1950s Piper "swoosh," a styling element that we expect to reappear on the final item.

filter out *en masse* on a cold December afternoon to survey a ragwing Piper in for service.

Which is exactly what they did.

In the months ahead, we'll keep you posted on the progress of our Timeless Tri-Pacer as it gets a new skin and has its

trusty Lycoming overhauled. Beyond that, expect to see installments on the avionics and interior replacement, and other topics. During the refurbishment, you can follow along with regular updates on AOPA's Web site (www.aopa.org/pilot/tripacer). In addition, we would like to

seek your advice. We will place several candidate paint schemes on the Web site and ask which you'd rather have on *your* refurbished Tri-Pacer. We'll tally the results and let it guide us on this no doubt exciting journey. □

Links to all Web sites referenced in this issue can be found on AOPA Online (www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml). E-mail the author at marc.cook@aopa.org

Help with the process

AOPA offers a variety of services and assistance for members interested in purchasing an aircraft.

- AOPA Aviation Services (member assistance with aircraft valuation)
.....800/USA-AOPA
- AOPA's Title and Escrow Service
.....800/654-4700
- AOPA Air Power Loan Program
.....800/627-5263
- AOPA Aircraft Insurance Program
.....800/622-2672

The AOPA Purchaser's Pack costs \$5 and contains a plethora of useful information; call 800/USA-AOPA.