

A decade of **Independence**

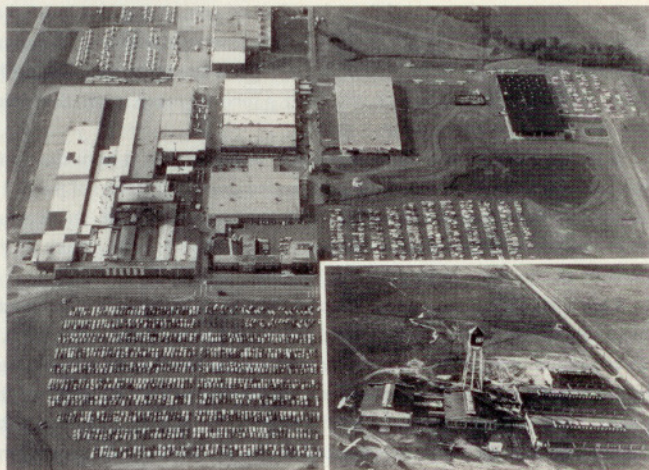
Cessna celebrates another anniversary in 2006

1956
50
2006

BY JULIE K. BOATMAN



The Cessna plant in Independence (top). The Cessna Pawnee division in 1975 (right) began in 1929 with five buildings encompassing 55,000 square feet; by 1975, the facility covered 1,362,798 feet.



While the celebration of the Cessna 172's fiftieth birthday may steal center stage, another no-less-important anniversary is taking place in a town in southeastern Kansas.

In July 1996, Cessna opened its new facility in Independence, bringing single-engine piston-aircraft production to the town, population 10,000, and becoming its largest employer (well outpacing the local Wal-Mart), according to chamber of commerce statistics. When the 172 line at Cessna's Pawnee facility in Wichita shut down in 1986, no one knew for certain if the model would come back to life—but there was hope. And when Congress passed the General Aviation Revitalization Act (GARA) in 1994, and Cessna made good on its promise to start building piston singles again,

there was little doubt it would start with its tried-and-true favorite, the 172.

The company picked Independence from four contenders in the state of Kansas. "It was a green field—a clean-sheet, single-engine-piston facility" from the start, says Jack Pelton, current chairman, president, and chief executive officer of Cessna Aircraft. A facility that could handle not only the production of aircraft but also house a world-class customer delivery and acceptance center. And it brought jobs to one of the most economically depressed regions of the state, and, according to Pelton, that fit in well with Cessna's corporate culture.

Pat Boyarski was general manager of single-engine production at the time. "I watched the facility as it was built in Independence, as we hired and trained new employees, and as production ramped up." The company took a core group of about 50 employees from Wichita out to the new factory to help train local workers.

"We decided to call back a large number of retirees who had previously built [the 172] to help our new employees on the line," says Boyarski. Though the majority of the new hires in 1996 had no prior aircraft-assembly experience, Bo-

yarski relates that for "key skilled positions, such as flight line mechanics, we did look for prior experience and preferred A&P-licensed mechanics."

While the transition wasn't without its challenges, there were advantages to starting with fresh employees. "You can develop an employee from scratch, teaching him or her the skills and behaviors for the particular job that they will perform," says Boyarski. Bringing back the retiree group also smoothed some of the rough edges.

Within a year of the plant's opening, the 172 was joined by 182s and 206s in production. Now, after a year in which Cessna's Independence facility rolled

out more than 850 singles, the company is looking at increasing production significantly in 2006. Pelton indicated that the current order backlog supports production of nearly 1,000 piston singles for the coming year. So far, more than 6,000 airplanes have been delivered from the plant's wide apron.

In the early days of the Citation Mustang program, Cessna looked at its Wichita facilities and saw a full house. Pelton says the decision to move Mustang production was a way "to reward the folks in Independence while leveraging our floor space," and he likens the neighboring piston and jet lines to the same mix of Caravans and Citation Xs

Those guys have guns

By David W. Robb, AOPA Pilot Executive Editor

I have many memories of flying Cessna 172s, but for better or worse the one that stands out featured a nighttime encounter on the ramp with four armed soldiers. This was nowhere near an Air Defense Identification Zone, temporary flight restriction, or no-fly zone, which didn't exist yet as we know them today. This flight took place in the confusing weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when a GA pilot following all the rules still might get a surprise.

After an uneventful nighttime landing at an airport I'd been to many times before, I turned my Cessna 172 toward the taxiway to head back to the departure end of the runway for takeoff. It was about 10 p.m. and, except for the runway lights that I had keyed on, the airport was completely dark and seemingly deserted.

As I rolled along, my taxi light illuminated something just in front of me, so I hit the brakes. In the narrow beam of the light, I could just make out a line of low, unlighted orange barriers blocking my way. It took me a second to realize that the entire taxiway had been closed, I guessed, because it was near a military ramp located at this civilian airport. Someone had neglected to publish a notam.

Before I could turn around, a military truck appeared from the darkness and drove onto the taxiway in front of me. Still in my naive pre-9/11 frame of mind, I actually thought that someone might be coming out to move the barriers for me. Think again. To my surprise, four men—armed with automatic weapons!—emerged from the back of the truck and "deployed" themselves in front of the barriers.

I sat a bit stunned for a few seconds, trying to comprehend the meaning of this standoff between my idling 172 and this armed patrol. Did these guys really think I was a threat, this little red-and-white 1981 P-model Skyhawk sitting there quietly pattering away on the taxiway? In the chaotic atmosphere immediately following 9/11, I considered the possibility that they might. I called on the common traffic advisory frequency, and every other frequency I could think of, to find out what they wanted me to do, but they weren't listening. I guessed they didn't really know what to do either, but they had the guns so I was waiting for them.

Nobody made a move and our face-off continued until, finally, one of them stepped forward crisply and held his weapon up in front of his chest like a sentry might do to say, "Halt, who goes there?" OK, that I could understand—time to turn around and go home. But, to turn around, I knew I would first move toward them before I could get the nosewheel to turn. Would this look threatening? Was it even possible for a 172 to look threatening?

I gingerly added a little throttle and lurched forward a bit while stabbing the rudder pedal to turn the nosewheel, all the while carefully watching for any reaction from the troops. Nobody pointed as much as a finger in my direction, so I added a little more throttle and turned a little more. Still no reaction, so I turned the airplane around 180 degrees and slowly—I mean *slowly*—taxied back the way I had come, the hairs on the back of my neck standing at attention as I could only wonder if they were following me. They didn't, my 172 and I departed uneventfully, and I let the guys with the guns have their taxiway back.

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Member of the family

By John Hughes

We're currently on our third Skyhawk. This one we purchased in August 2005 after being away from aviation for more than 27 years. At this writing, we've had it less than six months, but have already put more than 50 hours on it, including a trip from Traverse City, Michigan, to the Tampa Bay area to attend the 2005 AOPA Expo.

My wife, Sue, and I both learned to fly during the late 1960s in the Piper Colt, then spent many hours flying Civil Air Patrol Cessna 150s, so when the time came to buy our first airplane in 1970, we chose a Cessna 150. When our first child arrived on the scene in 1971, we moved up to our first Skyhawk, a 1967 model with the Continental six-cylinder engine. In 1974, a newer, more colorful, and better-equipped model caught our eye, so we made the switch to a 1972 Skyhawk, with the four-cylinder Lycoming. This one became known as *Yellow Bird*, and was a definite family favorite. It transported our family, which had grown to three kids by 1976, on many memorable trips. Based in Michigan, we flew to Florida, North Carolina, and Nebraska, and even made a couple of trips to the Washington, D.C., area, with one a night, IFR trip to Washington National Airport. The stork caught up with us again, and when child number four arrived in 1978, we could no longer squeeze the entire brood into the family airplane. So in September 1978, I took my then 6-week-old daughter around the pattern for her first airplane ride and then turned the keys to our beloved *Yellow Bird* over to its new owner.

For the next 27 years, we were too busy with careers and raising kids (we eventually had six) to even think about aviation, much less miss it. However, by 2005 our children had grown and all but one had moved out of the house. Three had married and we now have five grandchildren scattered in various parts of the country. We began to feel the subtle, but firm tug of aviation again. How much easier it would be to fly rather than drive from Michigan, through Chicago, to Peoria, Illinois; to Milwaukee; or to Minneapolis! And our youngest is attending college an eight-hour drive away in Michigan's upper peninsula, which would be less than a two-hour flight. Time to get some dual, clear the cobwebs, and learn all about the alphabet soup of today's airspace. Six hours and a flight review later, we began a three-month search, culminating in the purchase of our latest Skyhawk, a 1977 model with an Air Plains 180-horsepower conversion engine, a two-axis autopilot, and a yoke-mounted GPS. This Skyhawk we've named *Traveler*, and it has already taken us on trips to Overland Park, Kansas; Houghton, Michigan; Thomasville, Georgia; and St. Petersburg, Florida.

That little girl I took for her first airplane ride when she was 6 weeks old is getting married next month in Kansas City, and *Traveler* will be called upon to get us there.

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currently in the main Wichita plant. Efficiencies introduced with the combination of the 172, 182, and 206 lines freed up the space to allow for this new personal jet to come to roost. The company also broke ground on new buildings in late 2004—a 90,000-square-foot flight and delivery building and an 11,000-square-foot aircraft completions building plus expansion of the customer service center—in anticipation of Mustang production.

The Mustang comes to Independence with modern tooling and manufacturing processes already in place, and the workforce—with 10 years of experience behind it—is ready. After all, the 172 goes out the door now with a very similar in-



i More stories on the Cessna 172 from AOPA members may be found online (www.aopa.org/c172).

strumentation and navigation system (the Garmin G1000 integrated flight deck) as the Mustang will—Mustang pi-

lots of the future likely got their start in the company's prodigious singles. There's really no better proof that Cessna's good-faith commitment to invest again in single-engine production—and in a willing rural community—has paid off.

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