

William Thomas Piper, Sr.:

Inventor
and
Local Benefactor*



by William Piper, Jr.

William Thomas Piper, my father, was one of six children born to Thomas and Sarah Malthy Piper. Three daughters were older and two other sons were younger than he. My father was born in the small New York village of Knapps Creek on January 8, 1881, and died in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, at the age of eighty-nine on January 15, 1970.

Thomas Piper, my grandfather, was an oil producer in northwestern Pennsylvania and, shortly after my father was born, the family moved into a new home in Bradford, Pennsylvania, only a few miles from Knapps Creek. At that time, Bradford was known as the "Oil Metropolis of the World." In 1859 the

country's first productive oil well had been drilled near the small city of Titusville, Pennsylvania, by Colonel Edwin Drake. The oil boom that this precipitated brought fame and wealth to the region. Compared, however, to the deep wells drilled later in the Midwest and the Southwest, these shallow oil fields never equaled the volume of oil that other parts of the world eventually produced. However, the quality of the crude oil was much finer and, even today, many people consider that Pennsylvania crude oil is superior to that found in other parts of this country and the world.

My grandfather was not a wealthy man. But, the income

derived from several small oil holdings was sufficient to educate six children and also maintain comfortable surroundings. My father graduated from Bradford High School in 1899 after serving one year as a soldier in the Spanish American War. By lying about their ages, he and several of his high school friends had enlisted in the army but saw little action. After his separation and return, my father completed high school and entered Harvard, from which he graduated cum laude in 1903 with a degree in mechanical engineering. While he was in college, he played some football, but

* See "Behind the Scenes," inside front cover.

not in any noteworthy fashion. He did excel on the track team as a hammer thrower and was one of the best in college ranks.

He and my mother, Marie Vandewater of Buffalo, New York, were married in 1910 and, for the next several years, they lived in the various cities where his mechanical engineering jobs took them. Over the years my parents raised five children, of which I am the oldest. The others are Mary, Thomas, Howard and Elizabeth. Eventually, we sons also went to Harvard and our sisters attended Radcliffe and Wellesley colleges.

In 1914, my father elected to forgo the engineering field and returned to Bradford where he assumed the management of his father's oil producing property. He gradually increased his investments in oil fields and became one of Bradford's more successful private producers.

During the 1920s there were indications that these natural resources were being depleted and small cities like Bradford began to seek out other industries which would provide an economic base for their communities. Consequently, in 1927 Taylor Brothers Aircraft Company of Rochester, New York, was invited to re-settle in Bradford.

In order to underwrite the move and build a small factory for the new company, the Bradford Chamber of Commerce sought financial aid from prominent citizens. Shares of stock in the Taylor Brothers Aircraft Company were sold and my father became one of the new shareholders. Although the number of shares that he owned was smaller



TOP AND BOTTOM: C. 1950, original Fort Lauderdale home, original Piper "Cub." (Piper family)

than that of some other citizens, he had an engineering background and was younger than most of the other investors. Subsequently, he was elected to be one of the directors of the company and was able to assume an active role in its operations.

C. Gilbert Taylor, an engineer and former owner of the company, had designed a two place, side-by-side aircraft called the Chummy. It was not a particularly good airplane because, basically, it was too heavy for its 100 horsepower Kinner engine. It did not

compete well against the more popular planes such as the Waco, Curtis-Wright Robin and Travelaire. Not surprisingly, sales were insufficient to show a profit. When Mr. Taylor and my father attended an aircraft show in Detroit, they had an opportunity to examine a newly designed, light aircraft called the Aeronca. Often referred to as the Flying Bathtub, the Aeronca was not an attractive airplane. But, the idea of a smaller and lighter aircraft, one that would be cheaper to build



and less expensive to operate, appealed to both of them.

After he returned to Bradford, Mr. Taylor started working on the design of a small, lightweight model that would be more attractive than the Aeronca. Eventually, this model became the famous Cub. Taylor had just started to work on the design when the stock market crash of 1929 threw the whole aircraft industry into a tailspin and near bankruptcy. Among those companies to fail was Taylor Brothers Aircraft Company.

By this time, the company's investors in Bradford were thoroughly disenchanted with the aircraft industry and were not about to throw good money after bad. It appeared that the Taylor Brothers Aircraft Company was doomed to oblivion after it went into bankruptcy. For some reason, which he probably could not even explain, my father felt that the new

TOP: William T. Piper, Sr., in a "Vagabond," C. 1950. BOTTOM: 80th birthday party for William T. Piper, Sr., at Vero Beach, Florida. Left to right: W.T. Piper, Governor Bryant and Reverend Billy Graham. (Piper family)



breed of small, lightweight planes would revolutionize the private plane industry. Unable to convince any of the other stockholders, he scraped together virtually all his money, bought the company, and started a new one, the Taylor Aircraft Company, with Mr. Taylor as president and himself as treasurer.

It was during the holiday season of December 1928 and January 1929 when we made our first trip to Florida. The family had a seven passenger Packard sedan which adequately accommodated my parents and us five children. Most of the luggage was kept on the running boards. We drove down the east coast and went sight-seeing in St. Augustine and driving on the beach at Daytona. After we stayed in Fort Lauderdale and Miami for several days, we drove across the Tamiami Trail and then north along the west coast. Of all the places that we visited, Fort Lauderdale seemed to be the most attractive. While we were there, we stayed in the hotel that was located in the Maxwell Arcade on Andrews Avenue.

Later that year, my father went back to Fort Lauderdale for the express purpose of purchasing some property. He became acquainted with L. C. Miller, a realtor; after looking around, he bought property along the Old Dixie Highway. He thought it likely that the south Florida cities would grow northward and along the main highways.

Some of the land that he purchased was on the west side of Northeast 4th Avenue, where the Sea Grill cur-

rently is located. The main investment was across the avenue, from 16th Street north to the north fork of the New River. This property was a farm of about twenty-five acres, with two relatively new stucco homes on it. This site now accommodates the present Fort Lauderdale High School. Beginning in 1930, my mother and the four younger children, who would transfer schools from Bradford to Fort Lauderdale, would come to Florida for the winters. I was the only one of the children who did not attend a Fort Lauderdale school because I had graduated high school in 1929. Nevertheless, I often would visit. Through my brothers and sisters, I became acquainted with so many people that Fort Lauderdale came to be a second home. Until her death in 1937, my mother enjoyed spending the winters in Fort Lauderdale.

With the exception of just a few years, I have been coming to Fort Lauderdale for more than a half century. Back in the 1930s, only someone with a super imagination could have visualized the Fort Lauderdale of today. At the close of that decade, we kept a Cub at the airport, which was a dirt strip with a hangar, near the present location of Red Aircraft. Other than a nine hole golf course in Wilton Manors, the only full sized course was at the Fort Lauderdale Country Club, where Norman Somers was the professional. My brother Thomas, more familiarly known as Tony, and I would fly to the course, land on the number two fairway, which was on the older course, tie down the plane while we played, and then fly back to the airport.

Since forming the Taylor Aircraft Company in 1930, sales of the Cub had been slow to develop; financing the operation had become a burden. But slowly, by 1937, sales had improved and the annual production increased from fifteen or twenty planes to several hundred. The Cub was considered to be the best of the light planes then in production. It sold for about \$1,300 and was powered by a small four cylinder, 37 horsepower Continental engine. It was not a practical plane for travelling because it held only nine gallons of fuel and cruised at the low speed of about 65 miles per hour. However, it was stable and safe and became an excellent trainer for airport operators to use in the instruction of pilots.

In 1937, just when the company was beginning to prosper, the plant burned to the ground. Offers to re-locate came from numerous communities all over the country. The decision to leave Bradford was based on several factors. Airport facilities in Bradford were not adequate and, for several months each year, the weather was not suitable for deliveries or for testing new aircraft. Moreover, there was no local interest in supporting the aircraft business. One of the best offers came from the small city of Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. It featured a good airport, an adjacent factory and excellent transportation facilities. Thus, late in the summer of 1937, the Taylor Aircraft Company re-located in Lock Haven.

During the previous year, Mr. Taylor and my father found themselves in constant disagreement over operating

policies. It became evident that there should be a parting of the ways. Mr. Taylor was given the opportunity to buy out my father but, when he failed to secure a backer, my father purchased Mr. Taylor's share in the company. With a new location, as well as a new factory to buy, it now became necessary to seek additional financing. The company was re-organized, the name was changed to the Piper Aircraft Corporation, and stock was sold to the public. By 1939 both my brothers also had graduated from college and were active with our father in the aircraft business.

Soon after the move to Lock Haven, a national need began to develop for an expanded aircraft training program. It was becoming obvious that the threat of world war loomed on the horizon. Backed and subsidized by the federal government, new training schools developed all over the country. Light planes were in great demand. The two principal competitors were the Aeronca and the Taylorcraft. This latter new aircraft was manufactured by a company that Mr. Taylor organized after he left Bradford. But, the facilities of these competitors were limited. In contrast, Piper Aircraft had its new and much larger plant. It was able to meet the increased demand for trainers and, in short order, became the major producer. Thus, the Bradford fire became a blessing in disguise; it resulted in better and bigger facilities at just the time when increased production was required.

During World War II, the Cub was used extensively for artillery observation and

for all types of liaison work. It gained a worldwide reputation, which later facilitated export sales. Following the War, the company continued to expand gradually. Annual sales increased from a few million dollars to the several hundred million of today. A large variety of aircraft is being manufactured, not only in Lock Haven and two other Pennsylvania towns, but at two Florida plants in Vero Beach and Lakeland. The largest twin engine model sells for a price in excess of one million dollars.

In or about 1955, my father was approached by the City of Fort Lauderdale or, more likely, the Broward County Board of Education to sell the property on old Dixie Highway. The downtown site of Fort Lauderdale High School was then insufficient for the number of students. The facilities also were inadequate. Rather than sell the property, my father made a contribution of the land. Some years later, when a new high school was erected in the city of Sunrise, it was named Piper High to commemorate my father's generosity. After giving the farm to the school board, my father and his second wife Clara, whom he had married in the early 1940s, purchased a home on Northeast 24th Court, east of Bay View. After his death in 1970, his widow sold the house and moved to Dallas, Texas, where she died in 1975.

It never was anticipated that the Piper Aircraft Company would be directed by anyone other than a member of the family. But,

in 1969, when raids on publicly held companies became a fad, Chris Craft Industries began purchasing Piper Aircraft stock with the intention of gaining control. This Chris Craft Company, however, was no longer controlled by its founders. A short time prior to its raid on Piper Aircraft, a group of individuals had taken over the boat company through a similar manipulation of stock. A merger between the old Chris Craft company and Piper Aircraft might have been successful because both were engaged primarily in the manufacture of recreational vehicles and their management philosophy was similar. But, at once it was evident that Piper Aircraft, a low-key company, would not have anything in common with the new owners of Chris Craft. So, the take-over attempt was challenged. Eventually, the family sold its stock to the Bangor Punta Corporation, which was successful in gaining control. At this time, the Piper family is completely divorced from the company.

My father had learned how to fly in 1931 at the age of fifty-one. In the mid 1950s, though, when the company introduced its first twin engine model, he upgraded his rating to include multi-engine aircraft. Widely known in his field, he often was referred to as the Henry Ford of aviation. In 1980 he was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio. He received numerous other awards for his role in the development of private aviation and remained active in the company until a few months before his death in 1970 at the age of eighty-nine. BL