



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

# Mr. Piper and his Cub

Aviation's Henry Ford

BY JEFF SKILES

**IN LAST MONTH'S COLUMN** I related the story of pioneer aviator Clyde Cessna and his founding, if not lasting, influence over the Cessna Aircraft Company. This month we'll look at an almost coincidental aviator and aircraft manufacturing mogul, William T. Piper. William was a man who had an outsized influence on aviation, yet he began both in life and in business with no particular interest in aviation at all.

## THE TAYLOR BROTHERS

Back in 1927, Clarence Gilbert Taylor and his younger brother Gordon formed the Taylor Brothers Aircraft Manufacturing Company of Rochester, New York. C.G. Taylor was a self-taught aeronautical engineer and had designed a two-place, side-by-side, radial-engine aircraft that he called the Chummy. The brothers wanted to mass-produce the Chummy supported by their catchy slogan, "Buy Your Airplane Taylor Made." They priced their creation near \$4,000, which was quite expensive for the day. Both sales of the Chummy and corporate financing for production were proving scarce.

You might ask, what does all of this have to do with William Piper? Just one year later, in 1928, C.G. was alone, his brother, Gordon Taylor, having been tragically killed in the crash of a Taylor Brothers aircraft. C.G. was still looking for capital, and the town of Bradford, Pennsylvania, was looking for new industry in the face of declining Pennsylvania oil production. C.G. convinced the Bradford business community to invest \$50,000 into his company in exchange for moving his facility to Bradford.



## WILLIAM PIPER

William Piper was a local businessman who'd made his money in oil and was one of the community supporters who personally invested \$400 in the company. He was born in 1881 in Knapp Creek, New York. His father was involved in dairy farming and the burgeoning crude oil business that was then driving the economy in western New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. While William was still a boy the family relocated to nearby Bradford, Pennsylvania. Young William was only 17 when he lied about his age to enlist and serve in the Spanish-American War. He later served as a captain with the Army Corps of Engineers during World War I.

In the intervening years between conflicts, William attended Harvard University, where he studied mechanical engineering. His father chose Harvard over Yale for William after a friend shared his belief that there were fewer saloons in Harvard Square than in New Haven. The relative lack of drinking establishments must have had the desired effect because William practiced a lifelong abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea. After graduation in 1903 William worked as an engineer with construction projects until 1914 when he returned to Bradford to live, in his words, "a good, solid, Rotarian kind of life." There he pursued the oil business pioneered by his father and with a partner founded a well drilling concern, the Dallas Oil Company.

Perhaps it was due to his solid, upstanding prosecution of life that William was known as Mr. Piper to just about everyone except his immediate family. He was a basic man who mowed his own lawn and only owned one car. When his wife would take the car to Florida to escape the Pennsylvania winters, Mr. Piper would walk to where he needed to go.

**Mr. Piper will forever be known as the spiritual inspiration for the J-3 Cub, the inexpensive, everyman's airplane that has launched so many into a lifetime in aviation.**

**FRICTION**

Mr. Piper was 17 years C.G. Taylor's senior when they became involved in business together, and from the start they weren't of the same mind when it came to aircraft production. C.G. wanted to build bigger, more expensive aircraft. Mr. Piper, who is often referred to as aviation's Henry Ford, wanted to produce small, inexpensive airplanes — easy to fly and easy to sell. Mr. Piper's desired path seemed to be increasingly prudent as the economic crisis of the late 1920s deepened into the depression of the 1930s.

**THE CHUMMY**

C.G.'s original Chummy with its big radial engine proved too big and expensive to produce economically, so Taylor designed and built a small, tandem-seat, light plane around the diminutive 20-hp Brownback Tiger Kitten engine. The first test flight was totally unsatisfactory, however, with the airplane woefully underpowered. This version of Taylor's small, inexpensive airplane never made it into production. The story of the prototype probably would have been lost to history, but legend has it that the accountant for the company professed the notion that with an engine called a Tiger Kitten, the aircraft should be called a "Cub."

**THE CUB**

Whether the story is true or not, the Taylor E-2 Cub gained certification in 1931 with a Continental A40 engine rated at 37 hp. Priced at \$1,325, Mr. Piper's vision of a low-cost everyman's airplane had been achieved.

Unfortunately, the Taylor E-2 was completed too late to save the company from insolvency. The initial Bradford investment was gone, and much was owed to the bank. The fledgling company filed for bankruptcy. With no other bidders, Mr. Piper invested in aviation once again and bought the remnants from the bankruptcy court for \$761. He installed C.G. back in as president and himself as treasurer, but Mr. Piper now was in control.

**SALESMANSHIP 101**

Growth was slow for the reorganized manufacturer. In 1931 it sold a little more than 20 Cubs, but by the mid-1930s that number had increased tenfold. This was driven to some extent by Mr. Piper's expansive view toward his dealership network. When he sold an airplane, Mr. Piper would suggest that if the buyer became a distributor, he could get a 20 percent discount. Distributors of course needed more than one airplane so the next would be at a 20 percent discount as well.

Mr. Piper also realized that teaching people to fly led to aircraft sales. He set up a flight school at his manufacturing plant and charged only \$1 per hour for aircraft and flight instructor. This dirt-cheap rate would apply for his employees as well.

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As C.G. and Mr. Piper slowly built the company around the small, inexpensive, and easy-to-fly E-2 Cub, a young aeronautical engineer came to work for the company. Walter Jamouneau claimed to have an aeronautical engineering degree from Rutgers University and moreover agreed to work initially for no salary — this was the Depression after all. Since his work came so reasonably no one questioned the authenticity of his degree, even though Rutgers didn't have an aeronautical engineering program at all. Nevertheless, Mr. Piper put him to work and directed him to modernize the E-2 design.

WALTER JAMOUNEAU

Walter rounded the wingtips, redesigned the tail, added a turtledeck behind the cockpit, and enclosed the cabin. The resulting airplane was called the J-2 Cub. When C.G. saw the product, he fired Walter for his efforts. But Mr. Piper rehired Walter and bought out C.G.'s interest, leading to C.G.'s exit from the company. Much has been written about the

relationship between C.G. and Mr. Piper and how it may have been contentious at times. In the end, however, Mr. Piper decided to move forward alone. C.G. left in 1935 to form his own company and eventually built a side-by-side, high-wing airplane like his original Chummy, the Taylorcraft we know today.

Mr. Piper's company was now ready to move into the future. He changed the name to the Piper Aircraft Corporation and assigned Walter the design work of the new J-3 Cub. Walter continued to work at Piper his entire life and even served on the board of directors.

THE J-3 CUB

The introduction of the J-3 in 1937 was a watershed moment in the small company's history in more ways than one. A fire had destroyed the original factory, and the community of Bradford showed little interest in helping to rebuild. In need of an immediate production facility, Piper Aircraft Corporation moved 100 miles

southeast to an abandoned silk factory alongside an airport in central Pennsylvania. This location, in the city of Lock Haven, is still thought of as the ancestral home of the iconic J-3 Cub. Many models of Piper followed from the L-birds of World War II to the short-wing Piper series and then the Cherokee, which has inspired much of the lineage today.

Mr. Piper continued as president until his death in 1970. While his company has built everything from the original E-2 to corporate turboprops, Mr. Piper will forever be known as the spiritual inspiration for the J-3 Cub, the inexpensive, everyman's airplane that has launched so many into a lifetime in aviation. As Mr. Piper himself was fond of stating, the Piper Cub was "the nursery in which aviation grew up." *EAA*

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