'I enjoy flying it (the 1933 open-cockpit plane) anytime. . . . Fewer gadgets to fool with.'

Flights of Fancy

Weather keeps aviator, 76, from flying solo again but doesn't dampen spirits

By Rich McKay
JOURNAL REPORTER

Thomas Henry Davis stood yesterday by the open cockpit of the first plane he ever flew, 60 years ago when he was a skinny 16-year-old flight student.

Back in 1935, there were just two dirt runways on what would become the Smith Reynolds Airport and the base of Piedmont Aviation Inc., a multimillion-dollar company he founded and built from the ground up. It was later sold to USAir but still bears the name and logo Davis gave the company.

Davis, now 76 and retired, planned to fly his 37-horsepower plane yesterday to mark the anniversary of his first solo flight. But the weather didn't cooperate.

It was too cold, wet and foggy for a man his age to be in an open cockpit, he said.

So he and his guests settled for standing around the plane and swapping tales of the old days and the growing aviation industry.

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Among the guests were James E. "Skinny" Pennington, who helped build the Wilmington Airport; Dick Taylor, a top official with the Boeing Aircraft Company; and men who designed and test-flew aircraft in World War II.

Davis is in the Aviation Hall of Fame along with Wilbur and Orville Wright.

But he started as a boy building model planes that flew under power of elastic bands.

"I learned more from building models than anywhere else," he said.

He left Winston-Salem to study medicine in Arizona, where the climate was better for his asthma.

While there, he taught flying for $1 a lesson, and he'd fly a small plane between school and home.

But instead of going on to medical school, he took a job with his old flight instructor at Camel City Flight Services, where he sold airplanes and taught people how to fly.

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He bought Camel City in the 1940s and named it Piedmont. During the war, he taught fighter pilots how to fly. After the war, he made Piedmont into a commercial airline that carried people to small airports where the big airlines didn't go.

In 1978 the company went public,

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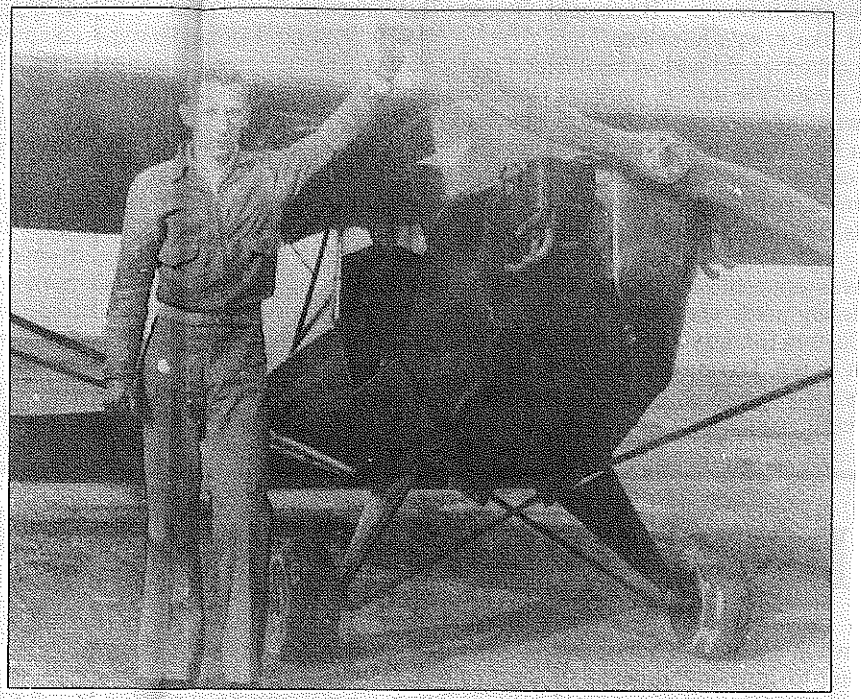
JOURNAL PHOTO BY STEPHEN MATTESON JR.



Tom Davis, who founded Piedmont Aviation, took his first solo flight in a 37-horsepower plane 60 years ago (right). He now owns and flies that plane (above) after spending decades trying to track it down.

selling shares on the New York Stock Exchange. But Davis said that his prize possession is the old single-engine Taylor Cub, which must have someone spin the propeller to start it.

Its red shell, made of Irish linen, looked primitive next to the row of sleek metal-skinned Pipers in the hangar yesterday.

The Taylor is actually the predecessor of all Piper aircraft, Davis said.

He said that of all the planes he's flown over the years, this is the one he's sentimental about.

"It's special to me. I learned to fly in it."

The plane first flew over Winston-Sa-

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lem in 1933, when it was delivered new to Camel City Flying Services, the company that taught Davis how to fly.

The company sold it just a few years later, shortly after he had learned to fly.

He wondered often over the years what had happened to the plane.

"I kept tracking it the best I could. But I was busy trying to keep my own company going," he said.

In 1960 he began to search for it in earnest. He found it in the late 1960s, disassembled in Wade Teague's basement in Aiken, S.C.

Teague, an antique airplane buff, was planning to restore the craft. It took Davis a couple years to persuade Teague to part with it.

Davis bought it and had it shipped to Winston-Salem in boxes in 1970.

His son, Tom Jr., and a few Piedmont Aviation mechanics rebuilt it.

It has most of its original parts, except for the fabric that covers most of the plane, and the tires and wooden propeller.

"I enjoy flying it anytime," he said. "You can see more of the countryside from it, than in modern planes. Fewer gadgets to fool with."

"It has a sophisticated gas gauge," he said wryly as he pulled a stick and cork out of the fuel tank.

"When the stick hit there, that's it, you're out of gas," he said. If that happened, he said, the plane glided well.

He didn't answer directly when asked if he ever ran out of fuel.

"Very seldom would I not be within gliding distance of a field," he said.

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