

Unusual Attitudes: Appalachian Ohio and Its Air Force

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The Flying Mayor of Moraine, Harold Johnson, after a performance in his Waco UMF-3.

In the 1960s, Ohio Gov. Jim Rhodes committed to putting a 4,000-foot paved runway in every county — an idea promoted by his friend Norman Crabtree. Both men were from rural southeastern Ohio and proud Bobcats — graduates of Ohio University at Athens. Norm, director of the Ohio Aviation Division, flew the governor around in the state's DC-3, but he'd flown B-24s in World War II, sung professionally with Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians, taught at Ohio University and was a recognized aviation authority, a fierce general aviation advocate and one of God's more splendid creations.

State road crews poured concrete, and 84 of the state's 88 counties got airports with lighted, paved runways, avgas and terminal buildings. In places where the airports stimulated the local economies, they grew with longer runways and more facilities; other airports stagnated and look about the same today as when they were built.

Most small airports have letter/digit identifiers (I17, K62, etc.) so I always wondered why tiny Lawrence County Airport, on the banks of the Ohio, tucked under steep hills across from Huntington, West Virginia, rated the ICAO identifier KHTW.

It turns out that KHTW isn't one of "Jim and Norm's" airports. It dates back to 1929, when the Embry-Riddle Co. wanted to expand its airmail and passenger routes east to the then-prosperous Ohio/Kentucky/West Virginia tri-state area. Embry-Riddle was the brainchild of

John Paul Riddle, an entrepreneurial barnstormer from Pikeville, Kentucky, and was funded by the wealthy Cincinnati he taught to fly, T. Higbee Embry. They put up \$100,000 and, with additional local money, purchased farmland on the river at Chesapeake. The Huntington-Ironton-Chesapeake Airport came alive on Labor Day 1929 with 45,000 people watching aerial stunts, many buying \$10 rides in Embry-Riddle Wacos, a Flamingo and a Ford Tri-Motor and raffle tickets for a free flight to Lunken Field.

Within the year Embry-Riddle sold out to The Aviation Co. (AVCO) conglomerate and the entire operation was absorbed by another AVCO subsidiary called American Airways. I always smile when I remember that what became American Airlines was born at Lunken Airport in the same hangars where I started instructing 50 years ago, work today as an examiner and hangar my J-3 Cub.

Incredibly, American provided semiregular mail and passenger service in and out of Lawrence County in DC-2s and -3s (at significantly reduced weights) into the late '40s, when the company moved across the river to the new Huntington Tri-State Airport in West Virginia. When the airline left, the little airport at Chesapeake languished and its original 3,600-foot runway shrank to 3,000 feet of deteriorated, cracked asphalt.

With no licensed repair stations or operators, there wasn't much of an FAA "presence" at Lawrence County, which I saw as good excuse for safety seminars — summer only because we used a T-hangar. But the sleepy little airport suddenly came alive again in the late 1980s, when Lawrence County Sheriff and pilot Dan Hieronymous put on annual weekend airshows promoting the local Drug Abuse Resistance Education programs — a sad problem in that once prosperous but now economically depressed area.

FAA safety program people don't normally monitor airshows, but nobody in our FSDO was eager to spend a summer weekend in Chesapeake, Ohio. I loved the place and, after an Academy Award-worthy "don't throw me in dat briar patch" performance, "reluctantly" accepted the assignment.

When I arrived at the local "Used-to-Be-a-Holiday Inn" on Friday, most of the airshow people, whom I didn't yet know well, were at the pool. They were a friendly bunch — well, except for a pretty blonde who, fueled by an afternoon of beer in the hot sun, told me exactly what she thought of feds in general and me in particular: an officious bureaucrat there to hassle everybody, throw her weight around and screw up everybody's fun. Jan, I learned, was engaged to Lou Manyak, who had been through some minor but pesky issues with the FAA, so I understood the situation and even admired her spunk. We would all (including the now Mrs. Manyak) become fast friends, and the weekend would, for me, be a seminal experience — the beginning of a long and precious relationship with the Appalachian Air Force.

The AAF was a "no jumpsuit/Nomex glove" operation commanded by airshow announcer AAF Gen. Norm Crabtree with Adjutant General Joe Kessler orchestrating the show. Harold Johnson, the "Flying Mayor of Moraine," did a ballet in his 1934 Waco UMF-3, and Darrell Montgomery roared around in a 450 Stearman called Miss Piggy with Jimmy Dorsey walking

his wing. Bill Bruns, an FAA air traffic controller, demonstrated stuff a Decathlon simply can't do, Col. Manyak dazzled in his Swift, and Col. Greg Pfeil, an airline pilot, did bumps and grinds with a Pitts. (Note: Everybody in the Appalachian Air Force was at least a colonel).

Jim Priebe came with his Bede BD-10 jet, a state helicopter demonstrated its nifty bucket that could scoop up and dump water, the legendary Roger Gustin brought his jet dragster, the locals had a remarkable and memorable pyro demonstration, and there was a fly-by with two Harriers. It was one helluva show for a 3,000-foot strip hemmed in by hills, trees and a big Ohio River bridge on the approach end.

At Saturday's briefing Norm suggested we have a race between the dragster and Bill Bruns' Decathlon, which wasn't exactly in the waiver but sounded OK if everybody was briefed. The act proved to be a showstopper when Billy, doing about 150 mph, rolled inverted as he passed over the dragster. At that, Roger's dragster emitted an ear-shattering boom and passed the airplane like it was standing still, which, Billy later admitted, was unnerving. The crowd went wild.

It was so hot that the fire department was spraying down everybody on the ramp — until the pyro got out of hand. Now the helicopter scooped and dumped river water for real on burning brush, and the fire department raced across the field to extinguish what was becoming a conflagration. Another showstopper and crowd pleaser.

As we "debriefed" over dinner on Saturday, I was envisioning the consequences if my boss found out about the dragster and the pyro, so I threatened to tell unless everybody came to 8 o'clock Mass with me at St. Ann's in Chesapeake.

What fun, what friendships, what a blessing it was to work with and be an "official" member of the Appalachian Air Force. For many years they did shows all over southern Ohio — Chesapeake, Vinton County, Jackson, Chillicothe, Portsmouth, Piqua, Moraine and Fayette County. These were no amateurs; they did the "big" stuff at Cleveland and Dayton but liked the county airports best.

Maybe suspicious that I was having too much fun, one year the FSDO assistant manager monitored the show at Jackson, Ohio; I was there only to do a safety seminar. When the ceilings looked too low for the "Air Force" to get in, he gave up and drove home. But around noon they lifted, and over the hill came Harold, Darrell and Billy in formation. We looked at each other and Norman said, "Let's have an airshow — we have performers, a waiver and an FAA inspector."

That put another letter of reprimand in my growing file, but it was worth it!

Billy told me later that "at some places they could pay a little but usually it was gas, motel and a car if we stayed overnight. It was often a 'you-do-mine-and-I'll-do-yours' deal; Harold would go to Gallipolis and in return Louie did the show at Moraine, or Norm would announce Moraine and we'd all fly at Jackson. Nobody kept very close track, and if we got anything, it was like getting sprinkles on our ice cream!"

Norm's gone now, and Billy kept his vow to stop performing when Harold Johnson passed away. Darrell got married and Miss Piggy's gone. Louie and Jimmy decamped to Florida, Greg still flies for the airlines, and Joe's retired. But what splendid people and what great

image: <http://images.intellitxt.com/ast/adTypes/icon1.png>

memories: Norman's running commentaries like "He can turn on a dime and give you five cents' change," "That boy flies slicker than a satin sheet," "Louie would fly a shoe box if you put wings on it," "Wish my mother-in-law were in there when Harold turns upside down and it sputters;" Joe effortlessly handling three frequencies on a couple of handhelds from the show platform; Harold's soft admonishment at the end of every briefing, "Just don't do nothin' dumb."

What said it all was when this great man, Norm Crabtree, turned to his friend Joe Kessler as they drove back to Columbus after a show and said, "Joe, you got any idea how lucky we are that Harold and the gang let us hang out with them?"