

The Oregonian

Hood River museum cherishes, preserves aviation history

Forty finely restored aircraft (all still fly) and classic autos are now on view

Sunday, May 18, 2008

DESTON NOKES

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On your next flight, when you're scrunched between a seat-kicking brat and a buzzard-breath bore, try to remember that there was a time when America loved to fly. Passengers donned their Sunday best, were greeted with smiles instead of scowls, ate real food and sat in seats designed for actual human beings.

Those days are long gone, but Hood River's new Western Antique Aeroplane & Automobile Museum, which opened in September, preserves the romance of flight's earliest years. Its hangar houses 40 colorful, meticulously maintained antique airplanes. The classic machines date back to the early barnstormers, the first airmail service and the first and second World Wars.

Most impressive, they all still fly.



A 1937 Aeronca LC, one of seven left, is among the functioning airplanes at the Western Antique Aeroplane & Automobile Museum

"Other museums only display them," Jeremy Young, the museum's director, said. "We want to restore and preserve the golden era of flight."

Young pointed to the museum's latest project: a tattered, 1934 replica of a 1910 Curtiss Pusher. "When we bought it at auction, it was a mess: covered in pigeon poop and its fabric torn," he said. "So we're restoring it and hope to have it airborne this summer."

The museum's collection is impressive by any measure. Its centerpiece is a 1917 Curtiss JN4D Jenny, Serial No. 1 -- built to train pilots in World War I. The original woodwork is rich, and its Irish linen finish shines.

"This is the airplane that captured America's imagination and made the country want to fly," Young said. "There are only three in the world."

Other notable models include a 1937 Aeronca LC, a distinctive, burnished metal-nosed 1928 OX-5-powered American Eagle, and dozens of others. Already the museum is developing a national reputation for the quality of its collection.

Alan Holloway, who restores antique airplane engines in Quincy, Calif., sought the museum's help in refurbishing his 1929 Curtiss Robin. The museum had one in pristine condition. "I'm really dazzled," he said. "Here, the planes are as close to factory originals as any I've ever seen."

The museum's collection also includes 30 historic cars, such as early models from Ford, Mercury, Studebaker, Dodge and Packard, plus military vehicles and weaponry.

The museum resulted from the combined enthusiasm of its directors. Young was raised flying his grandfather's J-3 Cub and dreamed of building a museum to show off his grandfather's numerous antique aircraft. But Terry Brandt, the museum's president and founder, already had amassed a substantial aircraft collection over 50 years, and hired Young to run the Hood River museum.

"Terry even bought some of my grandfather's planes," Young said, "so this has been the best of all worlds."

The museum's director of restorations, Thomas Murphy, enjoys a bit of local celebrity for his re-enactment of a daring flight from Portland to Vancouver. The original flight took place as a Rose Festival stunt in June 1912, when about 50,000 spectators watched Silas Christofferson pilot a Curtiss Pusher biplane off the top of the Multnomah Hotel and fly to Vancouver.

Murphy took off from a 200-foot ramp on top of the restored Multnomah Hotel. The biplane hangs from the ceiling of the museum's lobby.

Murphy described the experience of piloting the craft, fully exposed to the elements, as "putting a lawn chair on top of a telephone pole, strapping it onto the front of a Mack truck and driving on a freeway at 60 mph."

Sounds only slightly more uncomfortable than getting stuck with a middle seat in the back of today's commercial planes.

Freelancer Deston Nokes can be reached at travel@news.oregonian.com.

Western Antique

Sunday, May 18, 2008

Aeroplane & Automobile Museum

Where: Ken Jernstedt Airfield 4S2, 1600 Air Museum Road, Hood River

Hours: Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except for Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day

Highlights: Nearly 40 operational airplanes from the early 20th century in pristine condition. The collection also includes 30 early model cars and military vehicles.

Admission: General \$8; age 55 and older and veterans, \$7, students 5-18, \$6; children 4 and younger, \$2; active military (with ID), free. Group rates available, and school trips are encouraged.

Details: 541-308-1600, waaamuseum.org