

Lords of the Fly

Vintage planes will be on display at McAllister to help fund aviation museum

by Philip Ferolito Yakima Herald-Republic



A set of wings is moved around Dick Pingrey's 1929 Curtiss Robin Wednesday, August 19, 2009, in Pingrey's hanger at the Yakima Airport. The plane is one of several that will be on display at the Yakima Airport next month during an event to inform people of the old or unique planes in the area and to garner more interest in the McAllister Museum.

YAKIMA, Wash. -- When Dick Pingrey bought his 1929 Curtiss Robin J1 seven years ago from his late friend's estate, he wanted to preserve the aircraft for its historical value.

"He was a good friend and I just wanted to give it a good home," he said.

Constructed of a steel frame with a fabric shell and single high-wing, the orange and yellow bird features wicker seats in a two-man cockpit lined with wood trim.

A five-cylinder radial engine behind a single prop wraps the nose of the aircraft.

First produced in 1928, the plane was used by the U.S. Army in a test program for unmanned, radio-controlled flight.

It's believed to be the oldest operating aircraft in the Yakima Valley, and next month it goes on public display at McAllister Museum of Aviation along with a handful of other vintage or aircraft officially classified as unique.

A plane will be featured each Thursday beginning Sept. 3 and continuing through October as part of a display to showcase and preserve the area's aviation history.

The events are free, but donations will be accepted to help fund museum operations.

So far, a single engine plane without a cockpit, a Russian aerobatics trainer/fighter plane and a 1943 Beech Staggerwing are in the lineup along with Pingrey's Robin.

Each pilot will taxi out a nearby runway, make a few passes overhead and return, where visitors can peer into the aircraft and ask questions.

It's hoped the event will spark more interest in flying and help a struggling museum survive, said museum volunteer Don Rasmussen, who helped organize the event.

"We have been really struggling (financially) to keep it going," he said.

Previously a flying service owned and operated by Charles McAllister, the museum building now contains memorabilia of early flight, including nose art that was popular on World War II fighter planes.

McAllister, whose pilot's license was signed by Orville Wright, was credited with personally training roughly 1,600 pilots and his flying service trained more than 7,000, Rasmussen said. He began his flying career by launching a glider off Ahtanum Ridge.

It was McAllister's wishes to have his flying service converted into a museum when he died in 1998 at age 95. He left a sum of money to a group of his friends to convert the business into a museum, and those funds have run out, Rasmussen said.

The museum, adjacent to the Yakima Airport, has been hosting small events involving displays of various aircraft and seeking donations to stay afloat, he said.

"We're doing about as much as we can with that small building," he said. "It really is a gem of a little local museum."

The museum is at the center of a small community of local aircraft buffs eager to bring out their planes for the public to see, said Mike Butterfield, who will display his Breeze, the plane without a cockpit.

Designed in the 1960s by a group of guys who wanted to make flying fun, the Breeze falls in the unique aircraft category.

"We just like to share the gift of flight," he said. "We feel like the luckiest people of all time. A lot of people look up and can't do what we do."

His plane features a rear single engine with an open seat mounted to a small platform at its nose. A passenger seat is mounted behind. In this plane, there is nothing obstructing the view or blocking the wind.

"It makes you grin," he said. "Everyone gets off this plane and you can't slap the grin off their face. It just takes your breath away."

Communities of vintage and unique aircraft can be found all across the country, but restored antique planes are hard to come by and irreplaceable, said H.G. Frautschy, executive director of Experimental Aircraft Association, a national organization that promotes recreational aviation.

There are fewer than 100,000 vintage aircraft built prior to 1971 nationwide, and people buy and restore them just to preserve their historic value, said Frautschy, also editor of Vintage Airplane magazine.

"Most folks consider themselves caretakers of these (antique) craft," he said. "Rather than just let it go and be lost ... you can't just replace these planes," he said.

Dick Hester and Mitch Travis, both local aircraft buffs, plan on bringing out their Yak 52, a 1982 Russian fighter plane used to train Russian pilots.

Former owner of a business that imported Russian aircraft, Travis purchased the Yak 52 after it went up for sale following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"Every pilot from 1974 in the Russian military flew one of these airplanes," Travis said. "These planes are now flying on American soil, which is really weird."

Somewhere along the line, all these guys were introduced to flying and developed a passion for it, said Pingrey, who also owns two Swallows and a Piper Cub that eventually will be refurbished.

"I certainly don't do it for the money," he said with a laugh. "It costs a tremendous amount of money and you get pennies back. But it brings a lot of pleasure and you pay for pleasure too."

For him, restoring the old planes keeps a piece of aviation history intact.

"If we lose that, then we lose an important part of American history," he said. "We were the first (nation) in aviation."

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