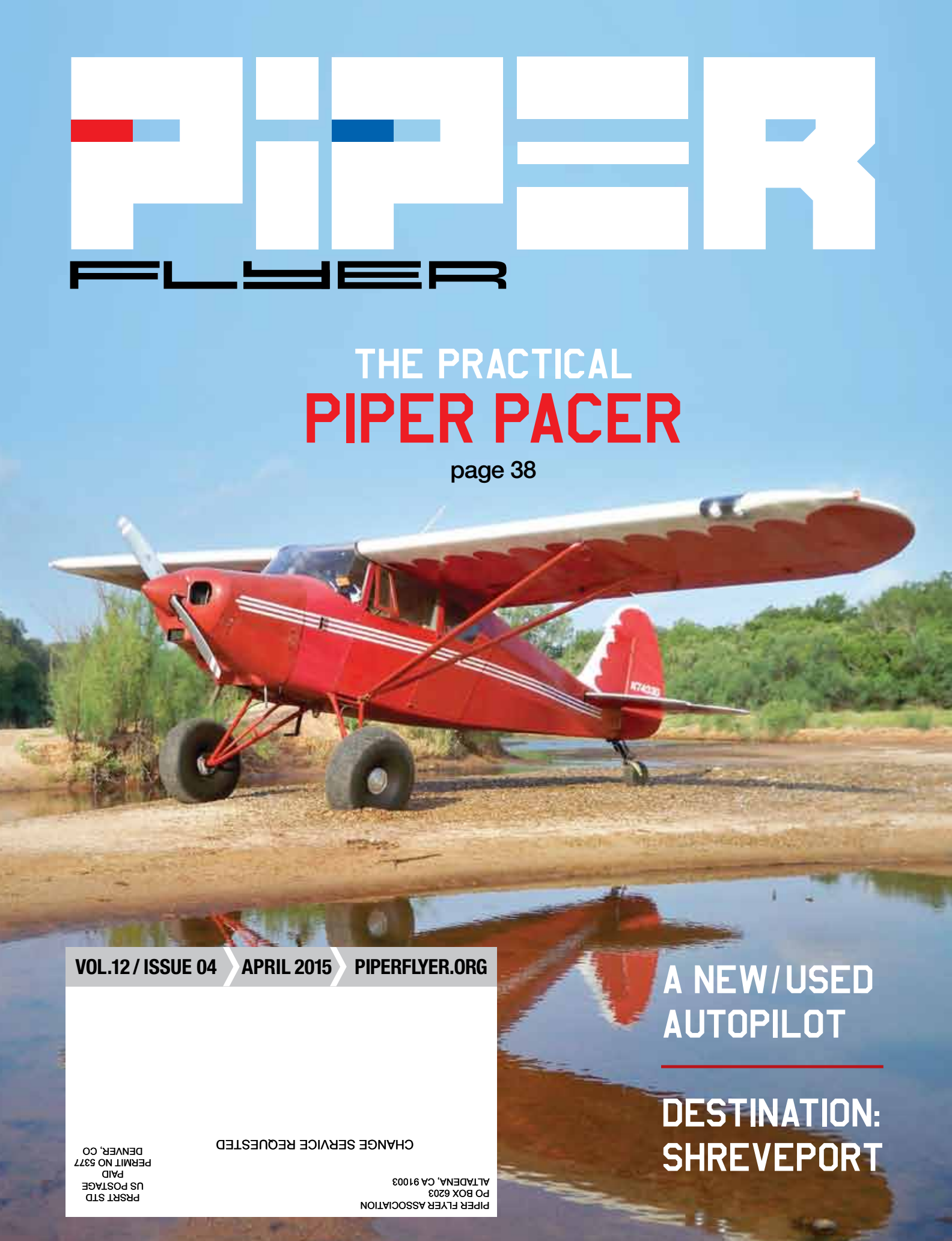
PIPER FLYER

THE PRACTICAL PIPER PACER

page 38



VOL.12 / ISSUE 04 APRIL 2015 PIPERFLYER.ORG

A NEW/USED AUTOPILOT

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PIPER FLYER ASSOCIATION
PO BOX 6203
ALTADENA, CA 91003

VOLUME 12
ISSUE 04
APRIL 2015

The View From Here 08
by Jennifer Dellenbusch

Letters 08

Events 10

Left Coast Pilot 14
by John Ruley

Vero Vectors 16
by Elaine Ryan

Affirmative Attitude 18
by Dan Pimentel

Questions & Answers 20
by Steve Ells

Navigating PiperFlyer.org 24
by Scott Sherer

Press Release 60

Advertiser Index 72

Flyer's Marketplace 73

Back When: Vintage Piper Advertising and Marketing 74

Cover: 1957 PA-22/20-150
Photo: Steve Pierce

CONTENTS

The Do's and Don'ts of
BUYING AND SELLING A PLANE
26

Restoration on a Budget:
A NEW/USED AUTOPILOT
30

Louisiana's Other Side:
SHREVEPORT
50

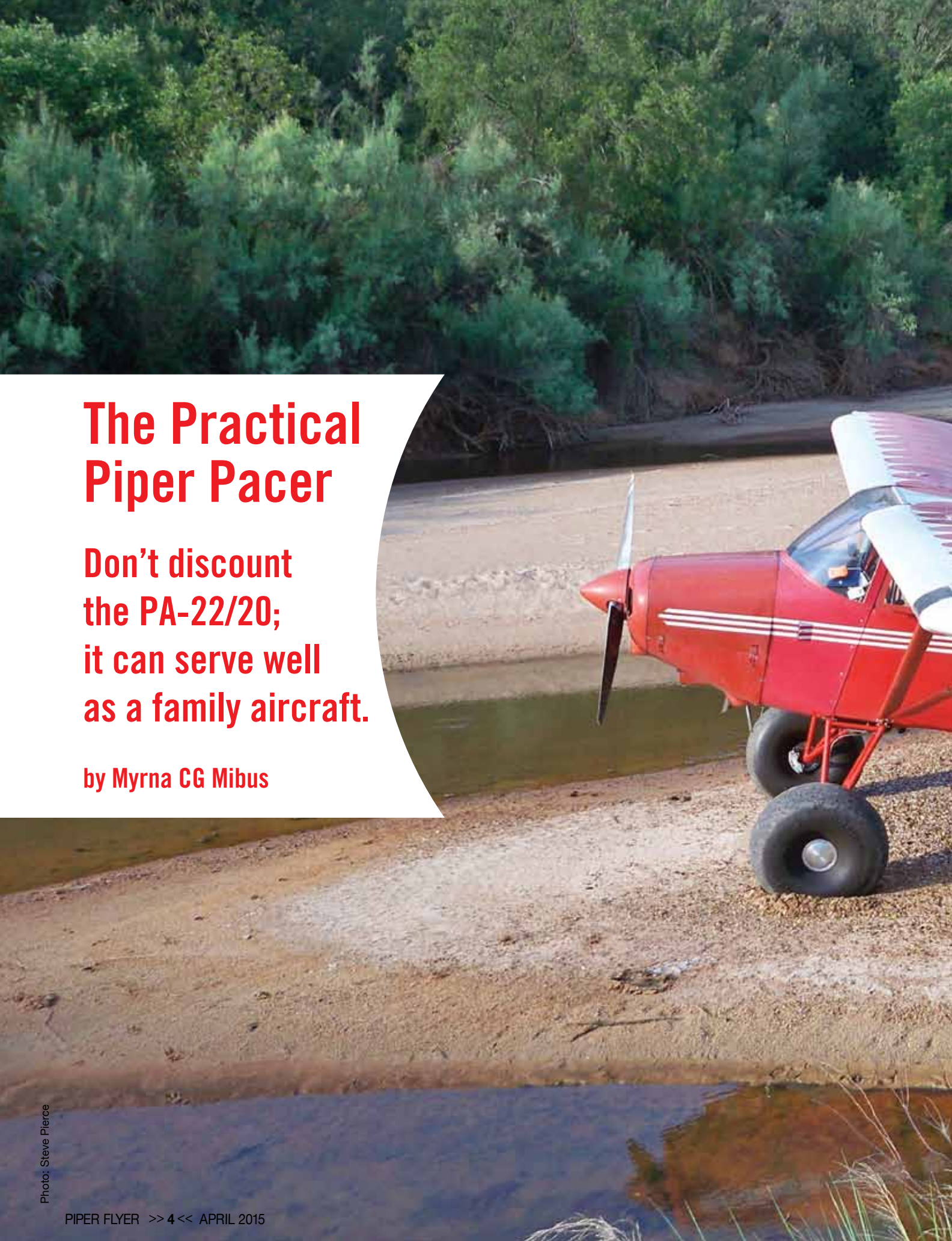
The Practical
PIPER PACER
38

Photo: Mike Cultra

The Practical Piper Pacer

Don't discount the PA-22/20; it can serve well as a family aircraft.

by Myrna CG Mibus



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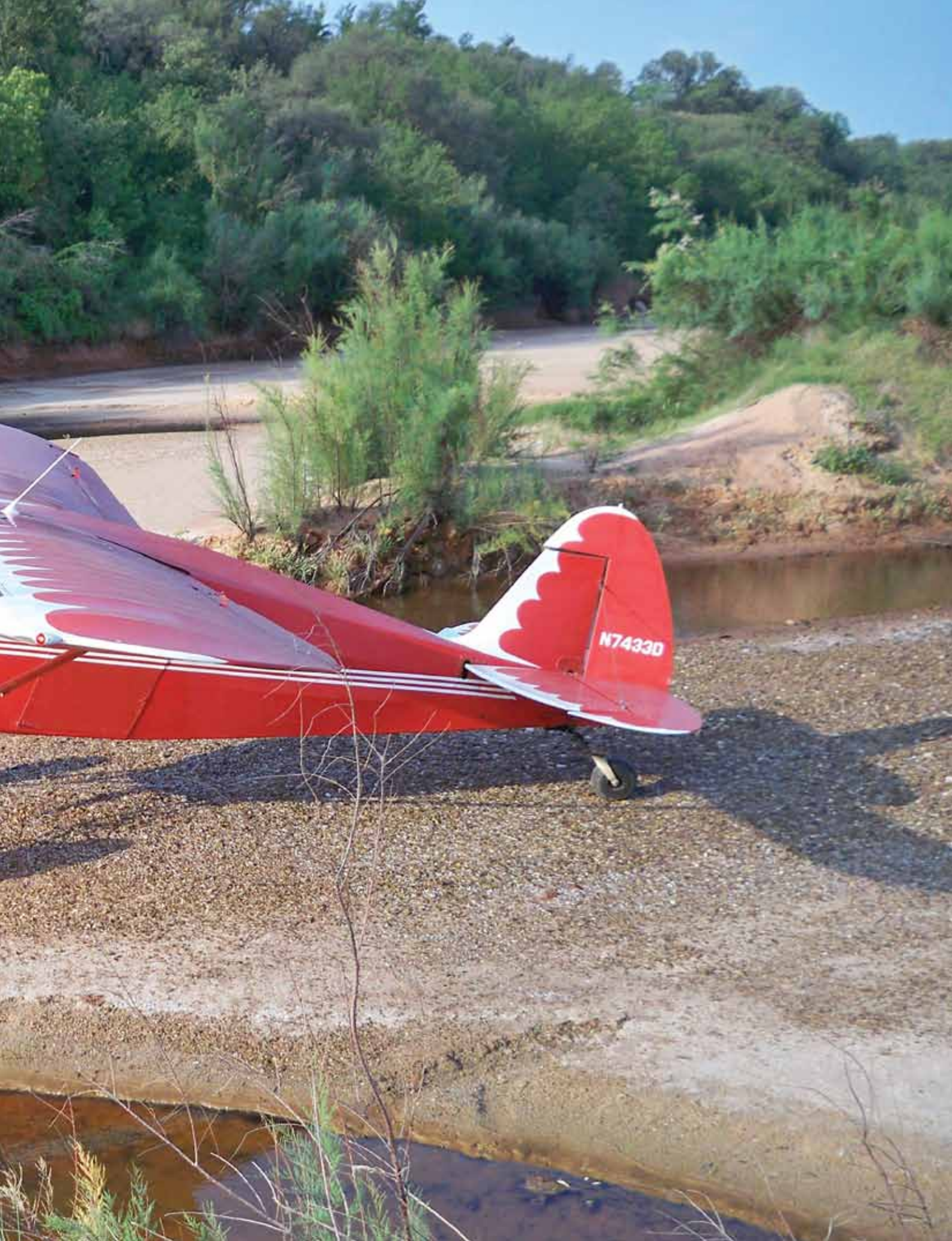
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Both my husband, Owen, and I are pilots who fly for fun. We met over Unicom: I was working at an FBO and Owen made a call in for 100LL. One of our first dates was a flight out to a grass strip to visit mutual friends.

Early in our marriage, in our pre-child years, we flew aerobatics in competition and for pleasure in a club-owned Super Decathlon, and later, in our own Christen Eagle II. Flying is a big part of our lives.

I fully expected to keep actively flying when our daughter Rose was born in 1999. But I found that even though I lived on an airpark, had a plane in the hangar and a runway out the backdoor, I was hard-pressed to get much time in the air.

Once our son Ryan was born in 2002, I was determined to get a family airplane—a magic carpet of sorts. Our mission profile was rather humble: fly-in breakfasts on weekends, family vacations, and other trips that would introduce our kids to the wonder of flight.

Research and review

Finding a used four-passenger airplane isn't all that difficult. There's a wide selection of pre-owned, relatively affordable options out there like the Piper Cherokee and Cessna 172.

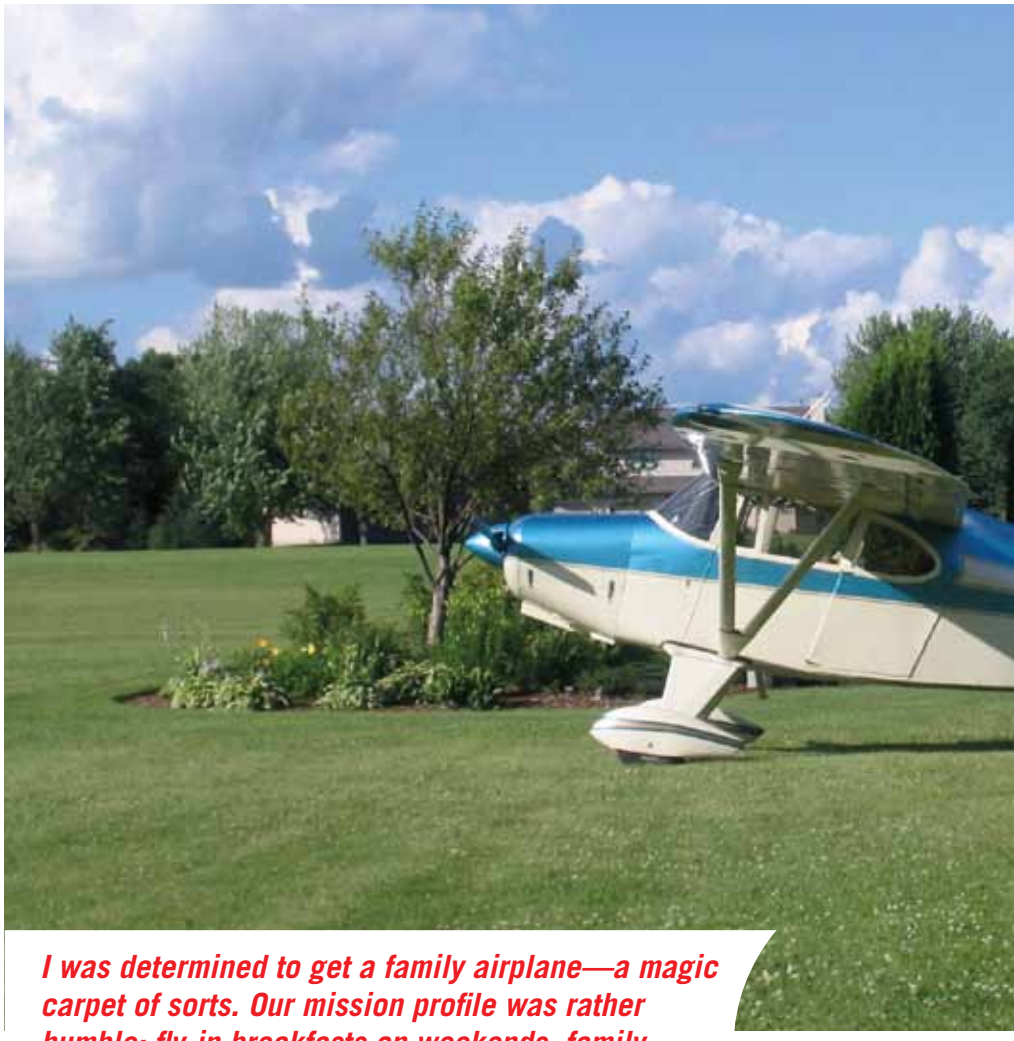
Our challenge was that we didn't just want an affordable family airplane. I wanted to buy a taildragger so I could keep up on my tailwheel proficiency. (And, well, I'll be honest: I simply like taildraggers and think they're cool!)

I paged through *Trade-a-Plane*, searched the internet and talked to a lot of my aviation friends, and I quickly discovered that the list of affordable four-passenger taildraggers is a short one.

I narrowed my choices to three airplanes that I thought would fit our needs: the Cessna 170, Stinson 108 and the Piper Pacer. For the Pacer, I was willing to consider either a PA-20 or a PA-22/20, which is a Tri-Pacer converted to a taildragger configuration. *(For more about this conversion process, see the sidebar on page 48. —Ed.)*

I noticed that I could get a Pacer for about $10,000 less than a Cessna 170. I also discovered that the Pacer, with its shorter wings, would fit in my hangar more easily than a long-winged taildragger.

Parts for Pacers are readily available. Univair sells pretty much everything you'd need for the airframe. Friends I talked with said the plane performed well, and I liked the way the Pacers looked. I decided that I would buy a practical Piper Pacer, and my search to find our family airplane began.



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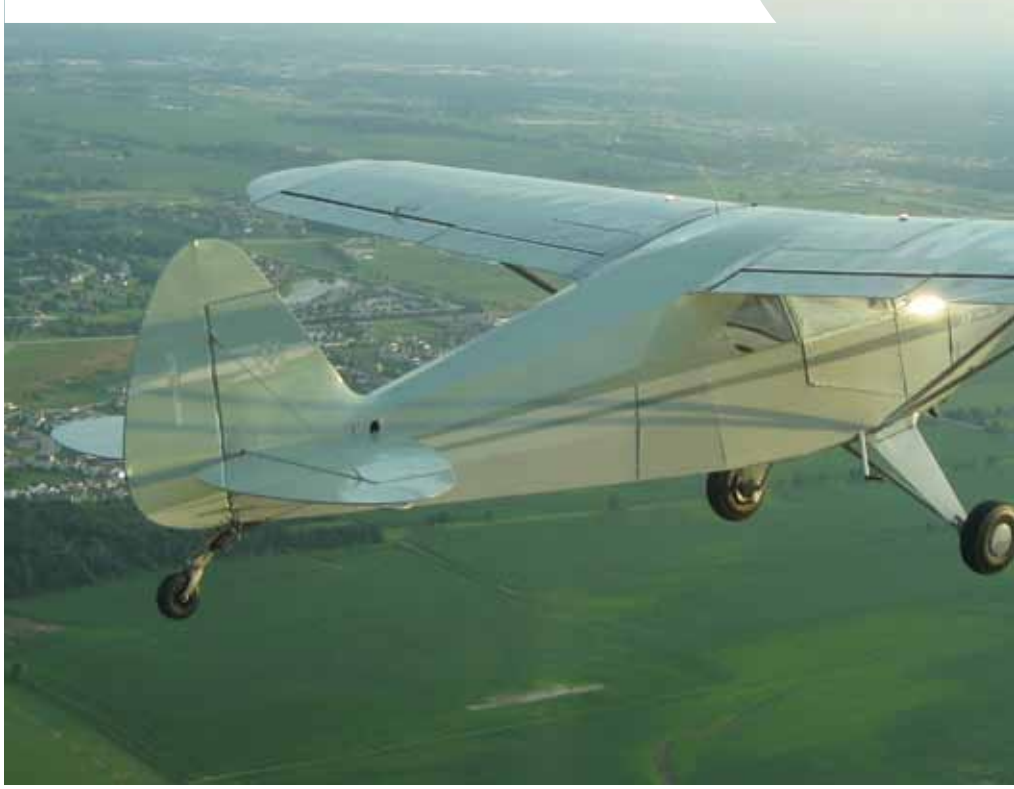


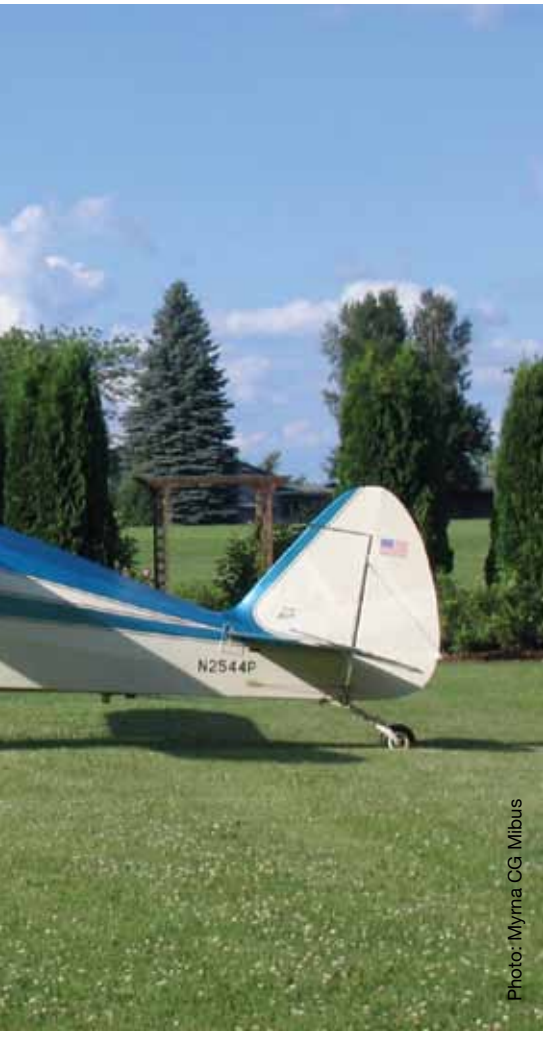


Photo: Myrna CG Mibus

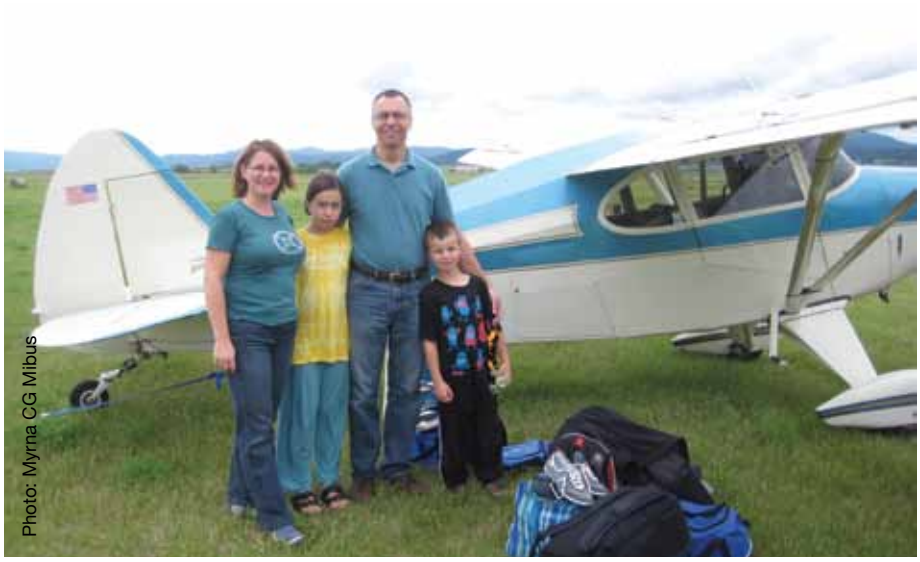


Photo: Myrna CG Mibus

Cloclwise from Left: Miss Angela*, a 1955 PA-22/20-160 owned by Myrna Mibus in the Mibus' backyard, adjacent to a grass runway.*

Myrna, Rose, Owen and Ryan Mibus with Miss Angela *at Black Hills Airport – Clyde Ice Field (SPF) during a family vacation in 2011.*

This 1957 PA-22/20-150 owned by Steve and Cathy Pierce is equipped with 29-inch Alaskan Bushwheel tires and a Baby Bushwheel tailwheel for off-airport operations.

Fred and Bonnie Mayes' 1950 PA-20 has been in Fred's family since 1953. A restoration and recover of the Pacer was completed in 2004.

Bryan Hunt's beautiful 1956 PA-22/20-150, N4763A.

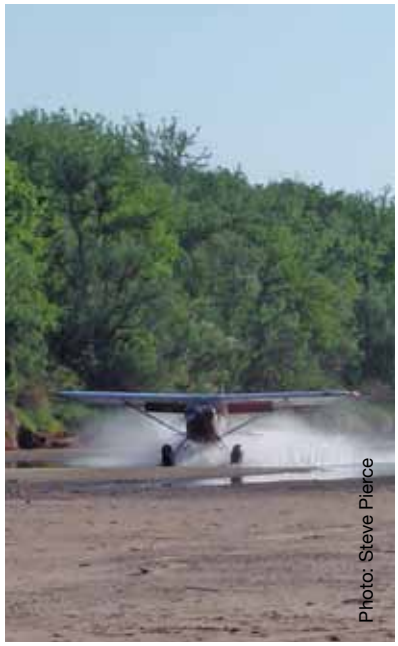


Photo: Steve Pierce

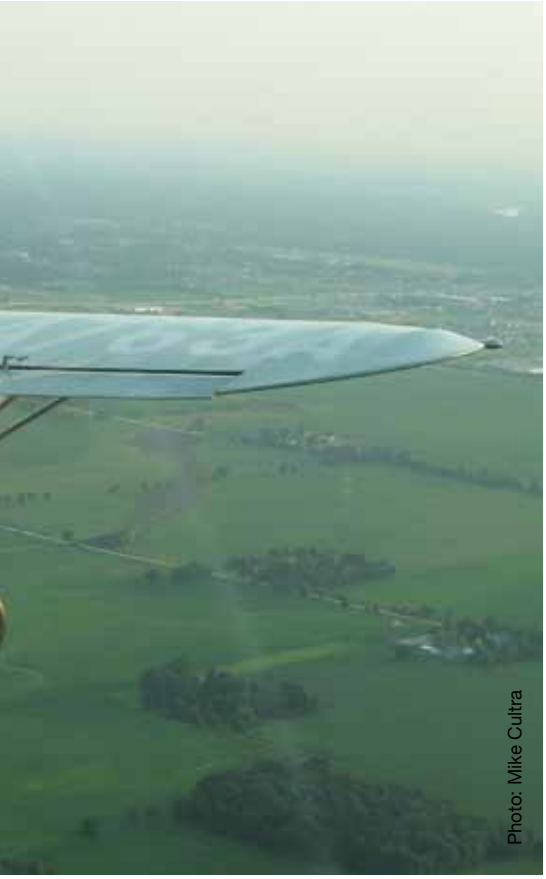


Photo: Mike Cultra

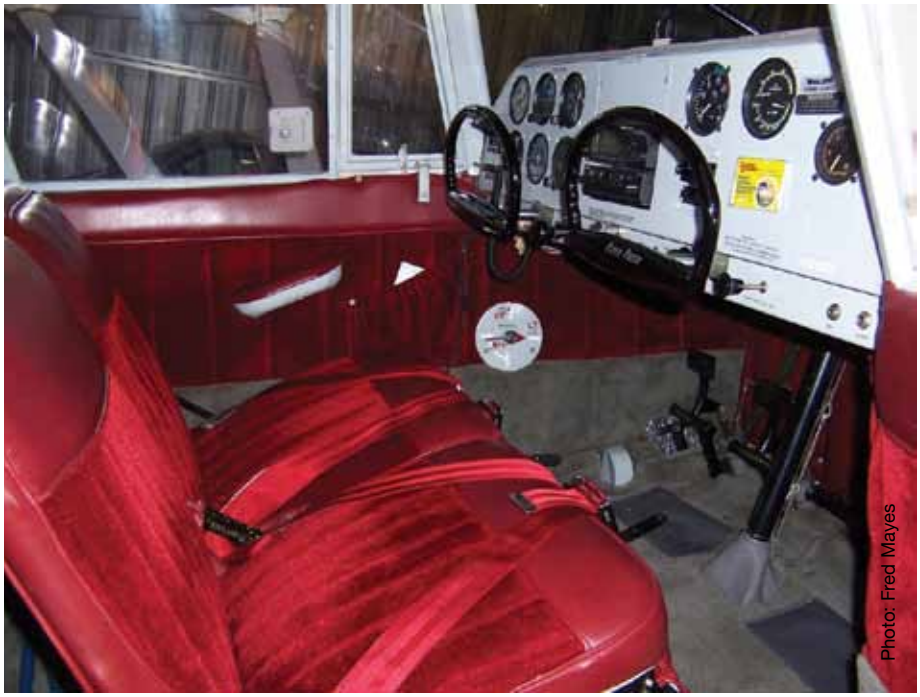
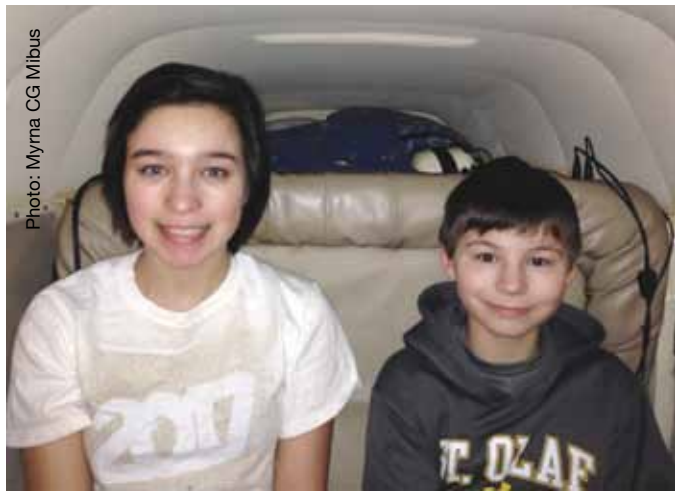


Photo: Fred Mayes


Photo: Myrna CG Mibus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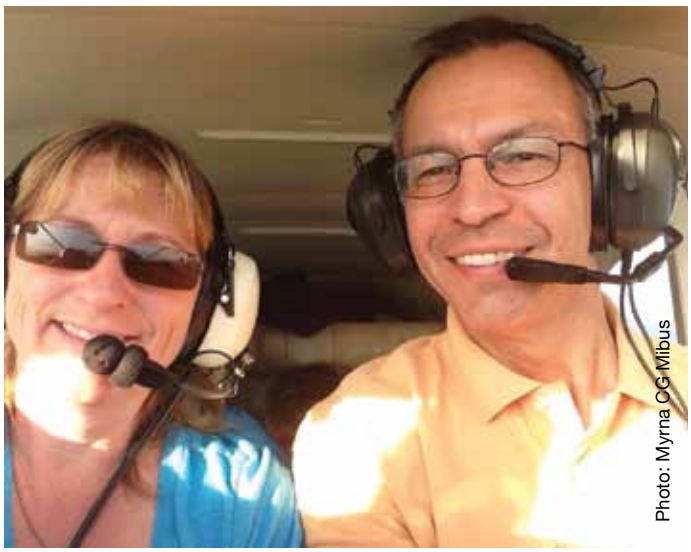


Photo: Myrna CG Mibus

Above Left: Rose, age four, and Ryan, age one, are ready to depart on a magic carpet ride.

Above Right: As Rose and Ryan get older, Myrna and Owen are already planning to use the Pacer to visit them in college.

Left: Myrna and Owen Mibus, both pilots, share flying duties in the Pacer.

Right: Even as a toddler, Rose helped take care of Miss Angela.

Below: After two days of flying, Miss Angela *is tied down in the grass in Kingston, Ontario, Canada in 2006.*

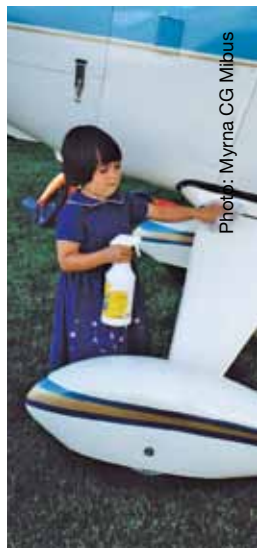


Photo: Myrna CG Mibus

After a few months of looking, I found a beautiful PA-22/20 that had been restored from the ground up…

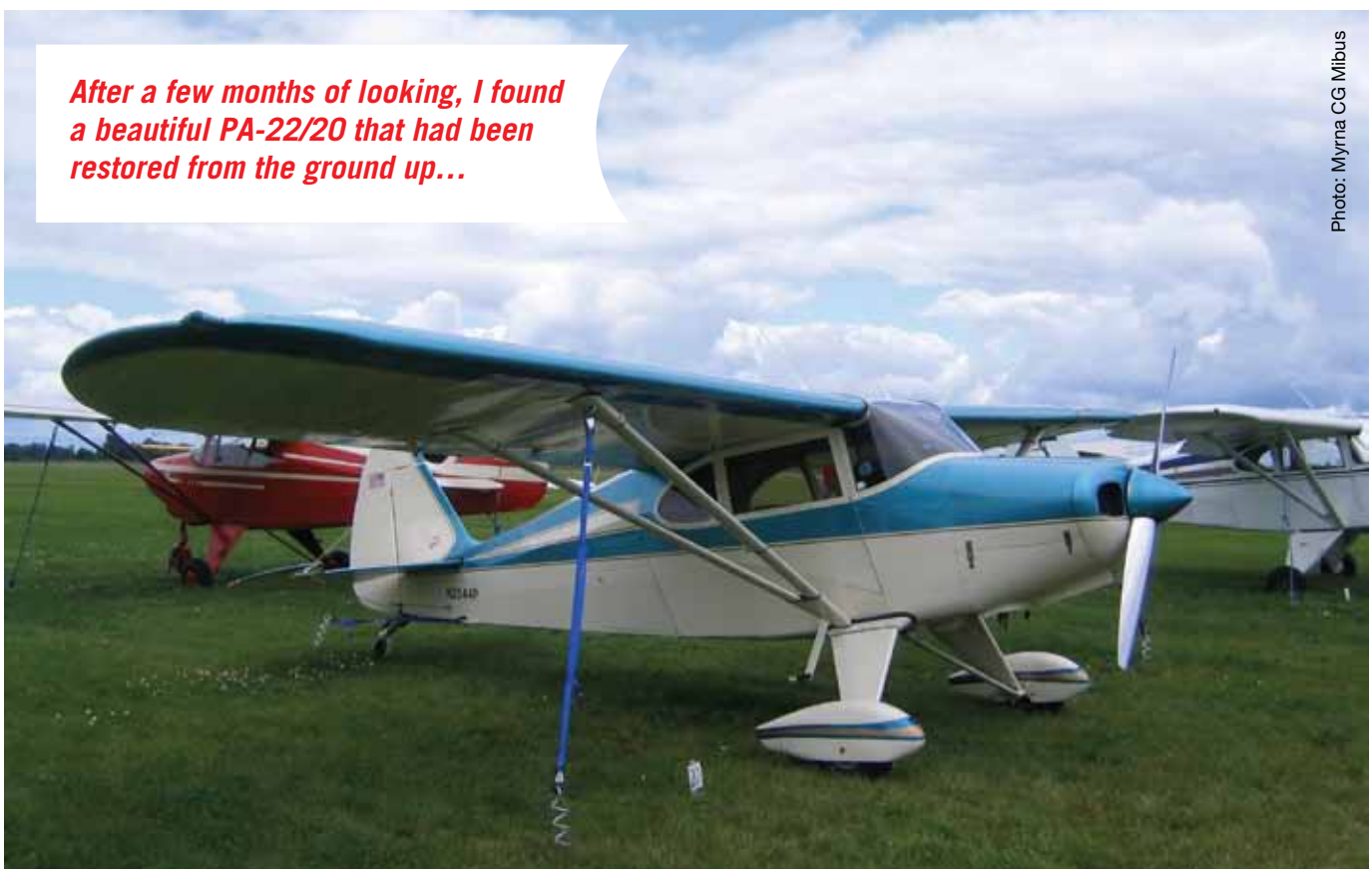


Photo: Myrna CG Mibus

A good seller back in the day

Inspired by the four-place 115 hp PA-16 Clipper, Piper introduced the Pacer in 1950 and offered buyers a choice of 115 hp, 125 hp and 135 hp engines. Prices started at just $3,295, and according to print ads of the day, Pacers outsold all other four-place airplanes in 1950.

A total of 1,120 PA-20s were built between 1950 and 1954. Piper touted the lightweight, tube-and-fabric PA-20 as swift, economical and comfortable for cross-country flights. The company advertised that operating costs were far less than other four-place airplanes, and only slightly more than for two-place planes.

My Pacer's must-haves

In the interest of safety (after all, I'd be strapping my two little kids in the backseat and flying across the sky in this plane) and lower maintenance costs long-term, I decided I'd look for a plane that was recently restored, essentially a plane that was like-new.

I also wanted a Pacer with a 150 or 160 hp Lycoming O-320 for its better performance and parts availability. (Univair is a good source of parts for O-320 engines; Pacers with a Lycoming O-290-D are a little harder to find parts for.)

After a few months of looking, I found a beautiful PA-22/20 that had been restored from the ground up in 1994 and sported a 160 hp O-320 Lycoming with just 189 hours since overhaul.

At $32,000, this Pacer was on the high end of what was available back in 2002, but after some negotiation, we struck a deal.

I rationalized the higher-than-average price by deciding to drive old cars. And the price was still far less than that of a brand-new sport utility vehicle most of the moms of little kids I knew were driving.

Miss Angela

Owen flew the plane home from Texas to Minnesota in October of 2002 and soon thereafter, we loaded up our family of four and headed out for our first flight in the plane we named *Miss Angela*.

Ryan was four months old when he had his first flight in *Miss Angela*, and Rose was just three. Many weekend mornings found us with Rose yelling "clear prop" from the backseat as we started up our Pacer and headed to a nearby grass strip to attend a fly-in breakfast or buy a bottle of pop from an old-fashioned machine.

Instead of taking road trips to our neighbor's cabin or my parents' hobby farm, we loaded up the Pacer for our family day or weekend trips. Best of all, each summer we packed our bags and flew

Miss Angela on long cross-countries that took us from Minnesota all the way west to Washington state and as far northeast as Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

Whether flying over mountains or across the plains, Rose and Ryan took to flying in the Pacer well and found the flights just about as normal as going for a ride in our minivan. Owen and I found that our Pacer performed above and beyond our original expectations—on both short trips and long ones.

Performance and features

The 160 hp engine gives our Pacer plenty of get-up-and-go and great climb performance flying off our grass strip. Controls are light and responsive, and *Miss Angela* trims out to fly hands-off. As with any taildragger, ground handling requires diligence and care.

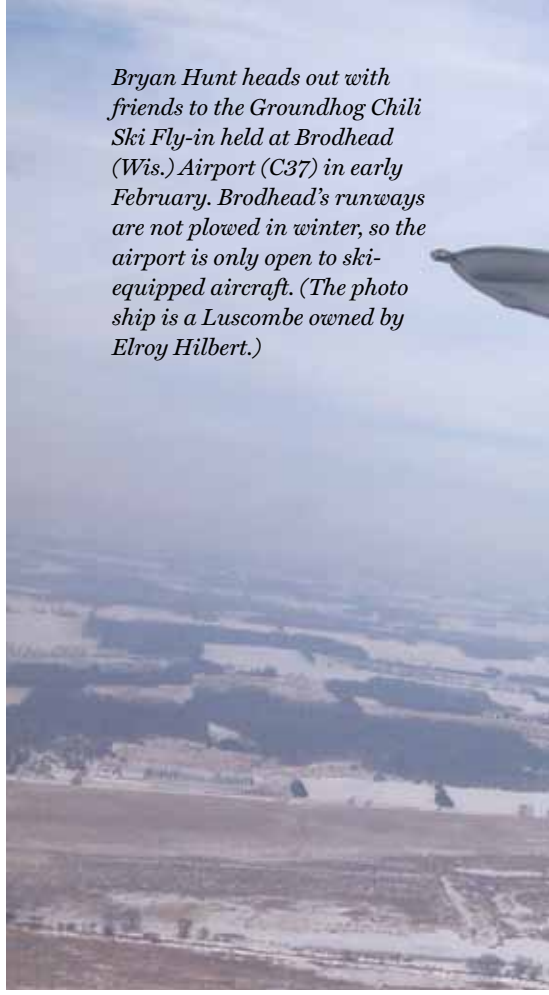
With a cruise speed of 123 mph (107 knots) running at about 60 percent power and leaned to just rich of peak, we burn 7.5 gph. With two 18-gallon wing tanks, we could fly for four hours with VFR reserves but we have found that the humans in the plane need a break long before then and tend to fly legs of about two to three hours. Useful load in our Pacer is 835 pounds; 100 of that can go in the baggage compartment.

Compared to a Cessna 172, the Pacer's interior is smaller overall—the C172 is wider and has more headroom—but we've managed to fit fine. Owen, at six feet, has just a couple of inches to spare from the top of his headset to the ceiling. I, on the other hand, am 5-foot-3 and have plenty of headroom, but even with the seat moved forward I find I need a cushion behind me to reach the rudder pedals comfortably. In the backseat, Rose and Ryan have always had enough room. That said, the fit is cozy—so it's nice they get along as well as they do.

Pacer lovers

In our travels across the United States and Canada, we've met many other Pacer owners and each one we've met likes their Pacer as much as we do. Most of our Pacer-loving friends use their handy little planes in much the same way we do, and they, too, cite the plane's nice looks, performance and versatility as reasons for buying one.

Mark Ohlau and his wife Melissa most frequently use their Pacer for short flights from their home airport to meet up with other flying friends, but they also enjoy exploring backcountry destinations. In addition to the great performance, Ohlau



Bryan Hunt heads out with friends to the Groundhog Chili Ski Fly-in held at Brodhead (Wis.) Airport (C37) in early February. Brodhead's runways are not plowed in winter, so the airport is only open to ski-equipped aircraft. (The photo ship is a Luscombe owned by Elroy Hilbert.)

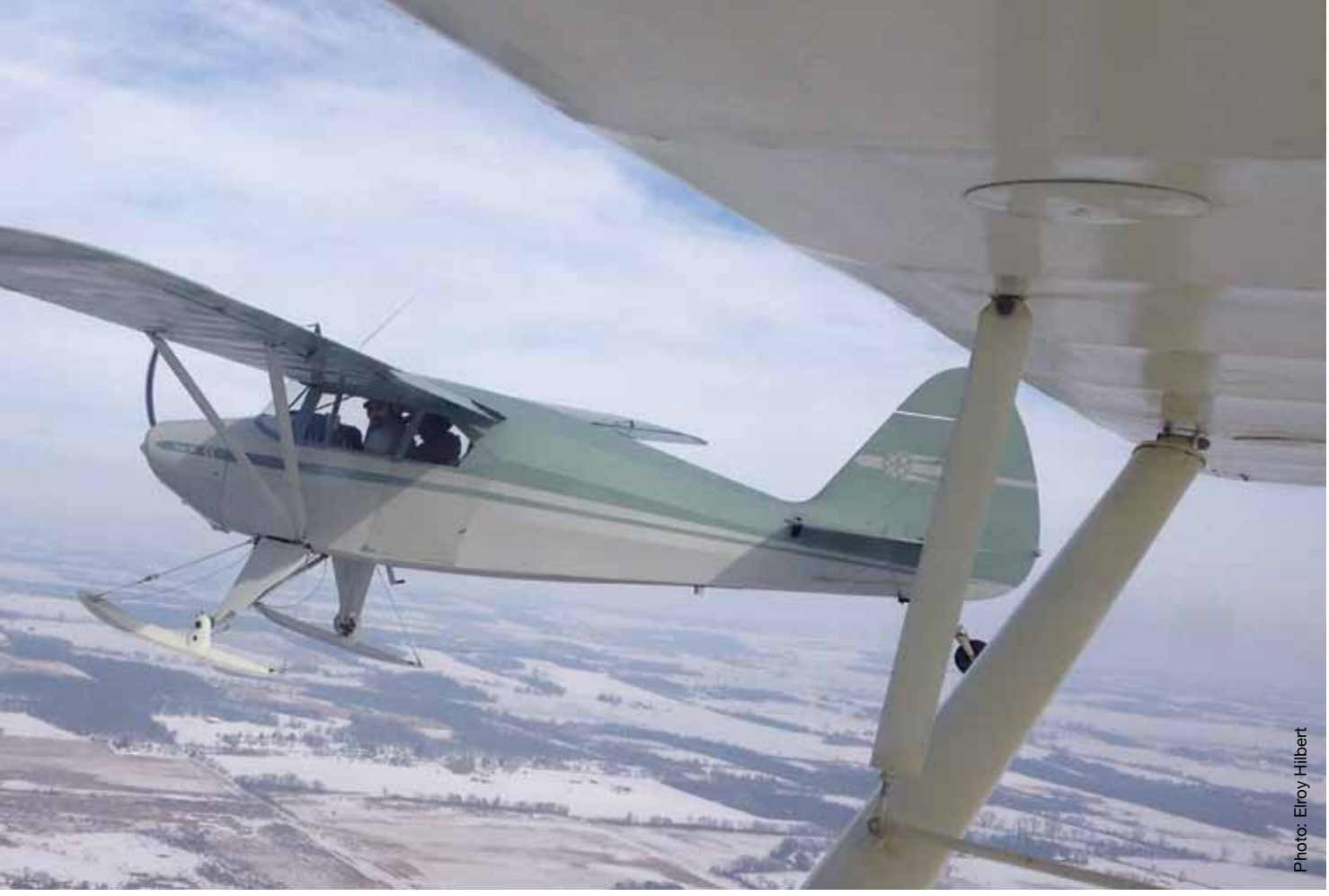


Photo: Elroy Hilbert

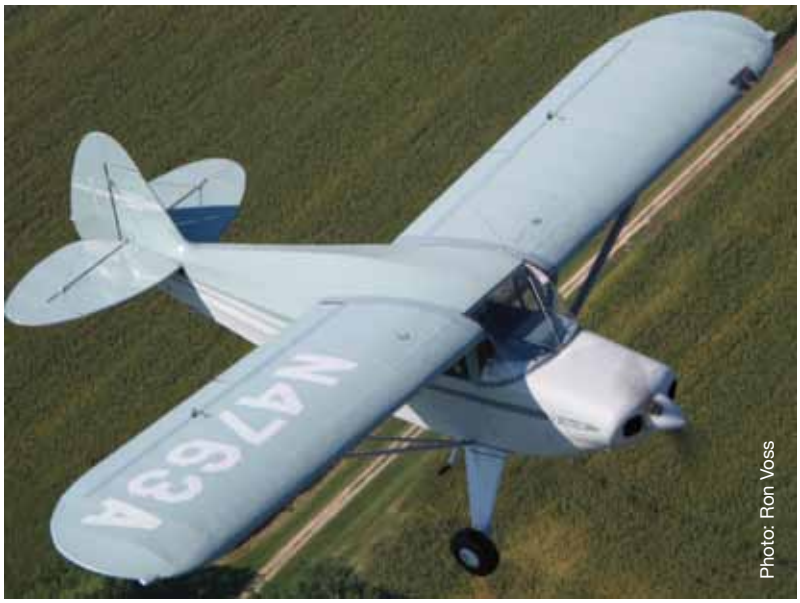


Photo: Ron Voss


Photo: Mark E. Loper

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notes that he can remove his backseat, making the Pacer more utilitarian in order to carry bags, bicycles, camping gear, "or even a truck transmission, as I did a few months ago!" he told me.

To make their Pacers more versatile, some owners, like Bryan Hunt of Rockford, Ill., have installed skis for north-country winter flying. Others modernize their instrument panels, and some can even accommodate light IFR flying.

To improve short field performance, Pacer owners can modify the wings, or switch out the standard tires for bigger ones, or—in the case of Steve Pierce of Graham, Tex., who put 29-inch bushwheels on his Pacer—*really* big tires.

Owen and I have even seen a few Pacers on floats and others with 180 hp engines.

In the last decade and a half, we've made friends who fly Pacers in Australia, Europe and Canada, and they handily manage whatever airport and conditions come their way.

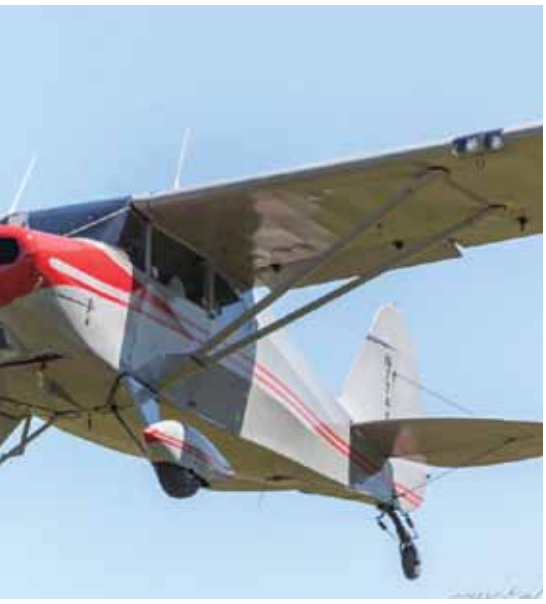
Of the 437 PA-20s registered today in the United States, 84 call Alaska home—more than in any other state—showing that the handy little Pacer can keep up with bushplanes as well as transport a family like ours around the Lower 48.

We'll keep it

Back when they were little, our kids didn't have much say in whether they went for a flight with us, we just loaded them up and told them we were going for a ride on our magic carpet to a new adventure.

Time has passed, and we sold the Eagle years ago, and now as Rose and Ryan have grown, we as a family have gotten busier with non-flying activities. With commitments on the weekends and a daughter who has her learner's permit, we don't get to as many fly-in breakfasts as we used to. It's been a couple of years since we've been on a super-long cross-country trip.

Instead, we've taken to using the Pacer to fly the kids to and from summer camp



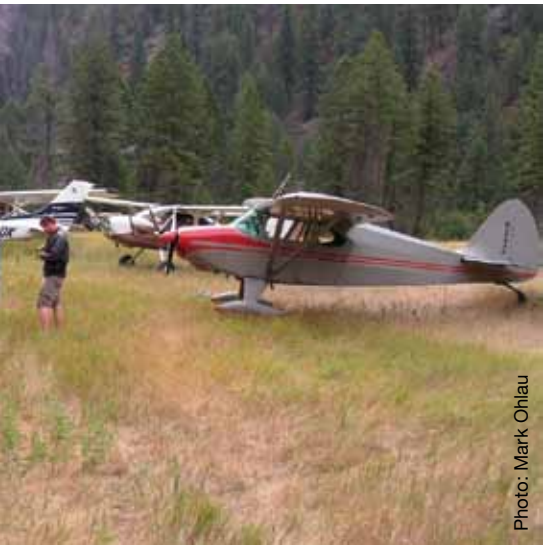


Photo: Mark Ohlau

in a fraction of the time that it would take to drive them. And as Rose and Ryan get closer to college age, we're already planning to use the Pacer as a vehicle to visit the kids in college.

At one point, we thought we would sell our handy little Pacer and get a larger, faster airplane to make those college visits quicker.

But as I, too, get older, I'm more and more taken with nostalgia and the memories of all of the flights in our *Miss Angela*.

Of the people we've met along the way.

Of the sights we've seen.

And, for some reason, getting places fast just doesn't seem that important.

I've come to conclude that *Miss Angela* can do everything we need her to do. Looking back, it's clear to me that we bought the perfect plane for our family—our practical little Piper Pacer—and we're content to keep on flying her.

Myrna CG Mibus is a freelance writer as well as a pilot, artist, gardener and bicyclist. She specializes in writing about aviation, and her articles and essays have appeared in General Aviation News, Minnesota Flyer, Sport Aerobatics, *and several other regional and national publications. She and her pilot husband, Owen, live on a residential airport near Webster, Minn. and fly a 1955 Piper Pacer. Send questions or comments to editor@piperflyer.org.*

THE MAKING OF A PA-22/20

With just 437 PA-20s registered in the United States of the 1,120 originally built, Piper Pacers are getting harder to come by.

An alternative to the PA-20 is a conventional gear conversion of the more readily available PA-22 Tri-Pacer (7,629 were built; about 3,100 are currently registered with the FAA). Converted PA-22 Tri-Pacers are referred to as PA-22/20s. *(PA-22/20 aircraft are categorized by the FAA as PA-22s. —Ed.)*

Univair Aircraft Corp., seller of the most popular conversion kit, estimates that about 1,000 conversions have been completed since the kit was first offered in the mid-1970s. They continue to sell about one conversion kit per month.

Univair's Basic Kit (L2200-01) retails for $3,396.94 and includes the landing gear, tailwheel, fittings, hardware and STC. Other kits are available to upgrade to Cleveland brakes and to install toe brakes on one or both rudder pedal assemblies.

The conversion process involves removing the existing nosewheel and main gear, welding new attachment points for the new main gear and tailwheel, installing new main gear and tailwheel, recovering and repainting.

The process takes 50 or more hours, about one-third of which is spent repairing and painting the fabric. Most do the conversion as part of a recover or restoration. The work must be performed by an A&P and, once finished, a new weight and balance and STC paperwork need to be completed.

Benefits of the conversion include better performance, faster speeds and greater capability on unimproved and soft runways. People also simply like the look of a taildragger. All other things being equal, the overall value increases moderately as well.

Sources: FAA Registry (registry.faa.gov), Univair Aircraft Corp. (univair.com) and Steve Pierce (ShortWingPipers.org).