

STILL FLYING

Aero Estates is thriving after 60 years, but owners use their personal hangars for more than airplanes

BY BILL BIRD
Naperville Sun

Even by California's sometimes eccentric standards, Jim Carey's neighbors in Long Beach probably thought him a bit odd devoting countless hours to building a light airplane in his home's garage.

But a work-related move to the Naperville area nearly six years ago put Carey in the company of kindred spirits, and in October he made his maiden flight in his Vans RV10 airplane from the Naper Aero Club/Aero Estates subdivision.

The club is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, and its 105 equity members are a more eclectic group than one might think. While dozens of homeowners still regularly fly their small, single-engine aircraft from the airport that anchors their community near 83rd Street and Route 59, others are using their personal airplane hangars to house col-

lections of boats, classic cars and, in one case, antique tractors.

There are about 625 private residential airpark communities throughout the United States, 18 of them in Illinois, according to the online Living With Your Plane Association. Naper Aero Club/Aero Estates traces its ancestry to the 1950s and three couples: Alvin and Viola Beidelman, Vern and Mary Kathryn Finzer and Harold and Eva White, the latter of whom founded the Naperville Sun.

"They are the ones who bought the farmland and established Naper Aero (Club), and we then had Unit Numbers One and Two built on the old original Aero Drive" circa 1956, said Suzette Selig, a veteran pilot, flight instructor, nurse and senior member of the club, who serves as their unofficial historian.

Vern Finzer and the Whites were pilots, and the home the

Whites built in Aero Estates stands to this day, Selig said.

Developers Harold Moser and Ralph Smykal bought the Feeney family farm across the street in the 1980s and added Chandelle, Skylane and Stearman drives, the subdivision's three other main streets, Selig said. Most of the homes in Aero Estates were built after 1987, according to the Naperville Heritage Society.

A mother of three now-grown daughters, Selig learned to fly more than 50 years ago while attending high school in Evanston. She is a member of The Ninety-Nines, an international organization of women pilots.

In 2013, she and her late husband, Nick, received Master Pilot awards from the Federal Aviation Administration. They bought their home in Aero Estates in 1967.

"There are two grass run-

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Airpark subdivision still flying at 60

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ways and one paved runway out here," said Selig, who flies a classic airplane and has worked for 38 years as a registered nurse at Edward Hospital in Naperville. Houses and hangars are linked to the runways by taxiways, she said.

About 50 percent of the current homeowners don't fly, Selig said. "The people that don't fly came out here because of the size of the lots and because it has a rural feel. We just want to make sure that the airport remains as an airport for airplanes, (and as) an aviation community."

Homeowner and pilot Mike Pastore is a mechanical engineer with a consulting business, and president of the club's board of directors. He, like Selig, is passionate about the community and its laid-back, tranquil way of life.

"The first thing is, the aviation lifestyle is great," said Pastore, a transplant from Wheaton who has flown out of Aero Estates for 20 years and lived there for the past eight. "But Naper Aero also represents what is known as grass-roots aviation, which has been part of the culture of our country for over 100 years."

"I and a lot of people use (our) aircraft for business and for pleasure flights," said Pastore, who flies an antique 1947 Cessna 140. "This is a close-knit community with almost a rural lifestyle, which we all enjoy."

"The airport is functioning the same way it was 40 or 50 years ago," he said. "These are still all small aircraft that fly in and out of here, nothing large."

But things have changed as well, he added.

"Now we do have a lot of newer, more advanced aircraft (on the grounds), and a lot of people like to (use their hangars) for boats or RVs or car collections," Pastore said. "We also have a number of biplanes, including a 1945 Stearman and a T-34" used by the Lima Lima Flight Team, he said.

One homeowner keeps a helicopter on his premises, he said, "and we even have a couple of power parachutists," flyers who outfit their parachutes with small engines.

Carey's position with Toyota Financial Services brought him, his wife Sara and their children to Naperville from California. They were not strangers to the area.



NAPER AERO CLUB

A recent aerial view of the main hangar, far left, that serves the Naper Aero Club/Aero Estates flight community off Route 59 in Naperville.



STEVEN SMITH

The Naper Aero Club/Aero Estates area as it looked in 1971.

having visited the club several times prior to moving.

"It's so unique," Carey said of Aero Estates. "A lot of airparks are out in the countryside, and this is in a nice kind of a suburban setting."

Carey's handmade Vans RV10 is a high-performance, single-engine plane that can carry four people. It took him eight years to complete.

"The thing that appeals to me most of all, even if you're doing something as strange as building an airplane in your garage, is that it's just nice to be with like-minded people who share the same passion for aviation as I do," he said.

Two organizations for pilots —

the Naperville Flying Club and the BFC Flying Club — are affiliated with Aero Estates. Some club members live in the subdivision, while others, like Naperville Flying Club insurance officer Bill Seith, live elsewhere, in his case Hinsdale.

"Ours is an equity fund club" and limited by corporate charter to 50 members, Seith said. Each member owns a share in all four of the club's single-engine planes that are housed at Aero Estates, he said.

"Our club is as old as the airport," Seith said. "Basically, we have a system online" for reserving use of any of the planes, "and we

provide flight instruction (exclusively) for our members, from basic training for getting your pilot's license all the way to more advanced ratings."

Aero Estates has proven to be a remarkably safe place. Selig recalled one accident occurring when a pilot "took off westbound and wound up in a willow tree," in the 1970s and another when a flyer "went off the runway and went nose-first" into the foundation of an under-construction house in the 1980s.

The most serious mishap occurred on Oct. 6, 2010, as residents Lloyd and Maureen McKee were flying their Piper PA-32R-300 to Pittsburgh. Lloyd McKee, who was behind the controls, could not gain sufficient altitude, causing the plane to slam into a tower at the XSport Fitness health center southeast of 75th Street and Route 59, in the plane's flightpath.

The McKees were seriously hurt but ultimately recovered from their injuries. No one at the health club was injured.

Aero Estates resident Tom Priz, received his pilot's license in 1970 while flying at the club. He said he flew 152, 172 and 182 Cessnas over the years from the club's main hangar.

His wife, Roberta Becker Priz, had her heart so set on living in Aero Estates that when an acquaintance announced he was selling his house there, she bought it without consulting her husband. "We've lived there now for 16 years," Tom Priz said.

Priz said his passion has shifted from flying to collecting and preserving antique and classic cars, several of which he keeps in his hangar. His prizes include a 1953 Chevrolet Bel Air, a 1959 Chevrolet El Camino, a 1962 Chevrolet Corvette and a 1963 Chevrolet Corvair convertible.

His is not even the most exotic collection of vehicles to be found in the area. Priz's friend, Richard Benck, is a collector of antique tractors.

Benck, a former pilot who restored commercial aircraft, has restored an early 1950s-era Allis-Chalmers WD45 tractor and plow. The equipment will eventually be on display at Naper Settlement as part of an agrarian exhibit.

While location and having elbow room figured into the decision to buy a home at Aero Estates, Priz said he often takes some of the best benefits for granted.

"You can see sunsets and sunrises where we live," he said.