

to make the right decision. I didn't show my excitement that he didn't say no, but I was so thankful and decided not to say anything more until morning. Next morning, when I asked my Mom to sign my permission slip, she was quite surprised as that wasn't the decision she wanted.

I volunteered to be first. Scared and excited in my new cotton dress I had made myself I did say a little prayer asking God not to let us crash. That 10 minute flight seemed like a blink. So much to see, so many emotions! After we landed I walked over to a small trailer at the airport. I knew Dr. Bill Brown who was there with another man who introduced himself as Colby, so I asked to use the phone. My Mom's reaction was great when I said "I did it! I'm safe and sound and on the ground". She said "What? You did! It's over? I haven't started to worry!" That was the start of Gloucester Airport being a part of my life. We spent the rest of the day sketching planes, enjoying the sky and sunshine.

In 1968, I married into a family with four pilots [Pappy, Dick, Bob, and Bruce Grow]. David became a pilot in 1971. With five pilots in our family, Gloucester Airport became a bigger part of our life.

Many beautiful afternoons were spent watching David washing and polishing airplanes while our daughter played under the wings. Niki went from baby seat to play pen to having David take her and her friends for their first airplane ride. Picnicking under the wing was a regular thing for us. We made it a social event. Also, many of our friends would fly in, and lunch at Sutton's was a must. Her crab cakes were heavenly. The closest restaurant to the airport was the Cup and Saucer owned by the Kemps, later becoming Michael's, now Damon's.

I loved walking around the airport. It was a fun way to exercise while airplanes landed and took off. Picking up golf balls by the runway filled my pockets. Most airports and golf courses got along well, but not in Gloucester. The golf club played a big part in not having Gloucester County owning and reopening the airport. Through the years David and I helped, supported and did whatever we could do to keep it open and operating. It broke our hearts when Champs, Cubs and Stearman no longer graced the sky above Gloucester Airport.



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## **Memories of Gloucester Airport**

Part II

By Bill Corbett

Gloucester Airport made a big impression on me when I first visited it in 1964. I was 12 years old and had traveled there with my father and two Poquoson friends, David Gettings and Lee Ferguson, for a golf

outing at the adjacent Gloucester Golf Course. Duffers all of us, it was my one and only golfing experience but it launched a career in aviation that I treasure.

I don't recall much about the golf game other than we were awful. David turned one of his clubs into a horseshoe after flinging it in the woods in frustration we were progressing slowly due to our lack of skill and had let several groups play through so we would not hold up their game. I remember approaching the green on one hole when a ball slammed into my back. David ran over, picked up the man's ball, tee'd it up and made a beautiful drive right back at the impatient players. One fairway paralleled the runway, which was separated by a hedge of cedars and pines. That was where I dropped out of the golf game as a Champ and a Super Cruiser in the pattern for runway 20 captivated me. Standing on the edge of the runway near the touchdown zone gave a great view of the taildraggers while they practiced on the beautiful grass runway. Mesmerized with being so close to the action I began to fantasize about the operator of the airport being a benevolent aviation mentor, teaching me to fly for pumping gas, washing airplanes, cutting grass.

A pretty spring Saturday in 1966 found me on the way to Gloucester Airport with that mentor and I learned some dreams do come true. He wasn't the operator, but the mechanic (AI and CFI) for WJ Colby who ran the FBO and his name was James D. Doman or "JD" to his many friends. At that time he was Major Doman to me as I was introduced to him as a cadet in the Peninsula Squadron of the CAP based out of Langley Field. In Major Doman's car were several more CAP cadets, David Lyons, John Sullivan, Willie Hayes, David Allen and our mission for the day was to help "JD" inspect and evaluate a J-3 Cub. Our Squadron CO Charlie Drummond had obtained the ragged out Cub in a horsetrade with an Army flying club and it had just been ferried in. Drummond's plan was to set up a CAP flying club outside the constraints of the National CAP aircraft regs so cadets could solo.

Gloucester Airport in 1966 was a busy place. The runway was paved by then (3500 x 75) with grass taxiways on both sides of the white cone markers. Colby had just received two new C-150's (43J is still in the area) from the factory and when we pulled up both were in the pattern shooting touch and goes. Colby Aviation also had available for rent a new Skyhawk a Citabria, and a Skylane along with two instructors, Mrs. Clay Swertsferger and Gilbert Handy. The Skyhawk was due for a 100 hour inspection and we set about to help JD pull the cowl and panels. Along with the rental fleet about another 10 aircraft were based there including one twin, a Beech Travel-Aire. At one time during the morning I counted six planes in the pattern most of them touch and goes. Before lunch (at the adjacent Dairy Queen) I learned how to operate the gas pumps (80 and 100 octane), had topped off several aircraft at 50 cents a gallon and after lengthy and careful instruction, hand propped a Cub. One fuel customer, a transient with his wife and child in a Tri-Pacer suffered a breakdown when his starter hung up delaying his trip. JD stopped his work on the Hawk came over and spent over an hour repairing the starter. When the old Piper was fixed the pilot asked him "How much do I owe you?" JD waved him off and said, "the next time you get a chance give a young person a ride in your airplane" and sent him on his way. Jimmy went on to say "We all need to promote aviation every chance we get. The only way we can keep flying affordable and airports open is to get more people in the air. He got me in the air for the first time a few minutes later. A Navion owner showed up to fly his bird and found his battery dead and an oleo strut low. JD came to the rescue again to get the dormant plane going and arranged for him to give a ride to two of us cadets. The owner let me try the controls from the right seat and by the time the short local flight was over I was hooked for life. JD inspected the J-3 and pronounced the engine sound, the wings ok, but the fabric on the fuselage was shot. Before we left that afternoon the Cub sat in the tiedown looking barebones naked with the bad fabric cut away and we were all instructed to bring clothes pins and coffee cans the next week.

That first Saturday trip to Gloucester Airport set a pattern for the next several years. It took us 6 weeks worth of Saturdays to cover the Cub fuselage up through silver. That's what the clothes pins were for – to hold the grade-A linen in place on the steel tubing while we glued it with nitrate dope brushed on from the coffee cans. The N-number N98437 was hand brushed yellow zinc-chromate over the silver dope so she wasn't much to look at when we started flying her in June of 66. Despite the bad paint scheme we knew we

were fortunate to be learning to fly in a classic tailwheel airplane and we even celebrated her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in July.

We were learning to fly 30 minutes at a time. JD would crawl in the front seat of the J-3 and the students would take turns in the backseat, swapping out without shutting down until it was time to gas up. Of course the returning student would relate every detail of his lesson to the rest of us waiting our turn. When the Cub was in the pattern shooting touch and goes, the bunch of us budding aviators would walk down near the approach end of the runway to observe every swerve, balloon, and bounce of the training session. With the window off, the door down and the throttle back gliding down over the trees, we could clearly hear JD giving instruction. "This time I want the stick ALL THE WAY BACK and BOSS THIS AIRPLANE AROUND WITH YOUR FEET" was typical of what we could hear while the airplane was still on short final. Free dual instruction we called it, although JD never charged us anything for his time despite saying he needed to charge a dollar an hour to keep the student instructor relationship professional. JD was firm a believer in letting the student learn from his mistakes and was famous for staying off the controls until the last second before disaster. J-3s are known for hangar high bounces if mishandled and that combined with JD's instruction style made for great entertainment. Sharing the adventure of learning to fly with several friends only magnified the thrill. Listening in on one of Handy's student's final briefing before his solo cross-country, I was aware we were witnessing an aviation tradition not changed much from World War 1. In fact some aviators and aircraft from the Great War were still around and regarded with much awe. Our textbooks were "Stick and Rudder", "Wind, Sand, and Stars," and Ernie Gann's "Blaze of Noon" and "Fate is the Hunter". James Nordoff Hall's description of American volunteers learning to fly in France (1916) in "Falcons of France" was one of my favorites.

Clay Swertsferger gave me one dual session in the Cub as payment from Colby for scrubbing the trailer that served as the FBO's office. She had a difficult time controlling her pleated skirt in the drafty cockpit and she squealed with delight so loud when I hit our own wake during a 360 I thought something was wrong. Clay commuted from South Norfolk Airport in a nice SuperCub and was married to an airline pilot.

The old Cub's cruise speed of 68 MPH limited our range for practice cross-country flights but I did get to visit the old Lively airport with David Lyons, a 19 year old private pilot. David liked to practice as an instructor and would cram himself (his nickname was Porkchop) in the front seat of the Cub and let me fly from the back. Lively was one of the 1936 Airport and Airways Act airports and the 30-year lease expired at the end of 1966. Located on the banks of the Rappahanack River with two wide grass runways it was a beautiful sight when we arrived. Several members of the local flying club greeted us and showed us their Cub that was down for repairs. When we were ready to leave, I climbed in the back seat and went through the "switch off" and "contact": routine while David propped the engine. David waved goodbye to our hosts and went to climb in the idling Cub. With both legs still outside the airplane he managed to hit the throttle wide open with his elbow. The plane was gathering speed across the runway headed for the woods with David hanging on and screaming for me to cut the switch. I figured we needed the blast over the rudder to turn the airplane before we hit the trees so I put my 2 hours of flight experience to work and got on the rudder to get us headed down the runway. I finally got the throttle back clear of his elbow and we bounced to a stop. With Porkchop properly in place we turned to taxi for takeoff and could see the entire Lively Flying Club rolling on the ground howling in laughter.

We got in a more dignified visit to the old Williamsburg Airport and met Floyd Clark. He had several Champs for rent all of which were equipped with venturi powered turn and bank instruments. One of his students explained Floyd required his students to demonstrate spin recoveries under the hood. We saw a Cessna 190, Fairchild 24, BT-13 and WACO biplane there although I don't know if they were based there or transients. The well-worn grass runway that we used (7 and 25 maybe) had a good size hump in the runway

right in the touchdown zone. It seems incredible to me today that the same runway is covered with a thick stand of 12-inch diameter pine trees.

Looking back on General Aviation in the sixties it's apparent to me now that more people flew for the pure enjoyment and beauty of flying than for efficient personnel transportation. Flying was more affordable for average people too, as it seemed to be a higher percentage of blue-collar workers owning and renting airplanes. A good Cub or Champ could be bought for \$12-15 an hour and you could rent a new Skyhawk for \$20 an hour. Colby had a Unicom radio on his desk but its function seemed completely different from today. I am sure there were some airport advisories and blind position reporting but mostly its purpose seemed to be for summoning ground transportation or checking on fuel and food availability. Most of the new production Cessna's and Pipers had at least one NavCom but it seemed to me that at least a quarter of the planes we saw had no radios of any kind. A lot of the transient airplanes that showed up at the gas pumps are museum pieces today. I topped off a Funk, a Porterfield, and a Commonwealth in addition to a lot of Stinsons, SuperCubs and Cruisers.

WJ Colby endorsed my Student Pilots License and my logbook for solo flight in the J-3 even though I had never flown with him. "You have been hanging around here long enough, you should know how to fly by now" he told me as he handed both documents back to me. JD had let his CFI expire at the end of 66 and Colby was a huge man in his sixties that could no longer fit in the front seat of the Cub. Colby had complete confidence in JD's judgement of my flying skills so the arrangement was made to make me legal to fly alone at age 16 (June 68). Colby's handwriting was beautiful which was surprising as his hands had a noticeable shake to them. The legend passed on to us fledglings was that Colby had been a promising art student at a prominent University when he was caught in a compromising position with a girl in the library. Dismissed from College, he learned how to fly and made a living giving flight instruction. Too old for service in World War II he proved valuable to Uncle Sam teaching many combat aviators how to fly. He was a pilot examiner when I met him and he ran the FBO at Patrick Henry prior to coming to Gloucester. Shortly after signing me off for solo, Colby was involved in a bad auto accident and the FBO at Gloucester closed. The airport remained open. However, it was unattended with no fuel available.



Bill Corbett departing Runway 2 at Gloucester

I still smile when I think of that summer of 68. Try to imagine being 16 with a classic airplane and airport as your own. My friend and fellow student Willie Hayes (age 18) and I were the only club members flying the Cub and with nobody at the airport to supervise us we had the time of our lives. We would race to the airport after work with two five-gallon cans of gas and fly until dark. We had short field and spot landing contests. We bombed targets with sacks of flower. I can remember leaning out in the slipstream returning from a hedgehopping session over some local farm fields. The warm oil scented smell of the exhaust mixed with the lingering aroma of the dope was almost intoxicating. Most of the time we flew barefooted and shirtless. Willie took his camera out to the centerline of the runway and shot pictures of the Cub taking off over him. We were determined to teach

ourselves spins and read up on the subject. The problem we were having was we were so light (130lbs) and the Cub so well behaved the airplane wanted to spiral out instead of staying in a true spin. After several failed attempts by both of us I reasoned that the power off slow entries we were using wasn't giving us a sharp



photo by Bill Corbett

Runway 2 from the Cub -- Hayes is not in sight anywhere on the centerlines

enough stall. I took off again and climbed to 3000 feet over the Dairy Queen where I knew Willie was ordering hamburgers for us. This time I left the power up at 1500rpm and snatched the stick back before stomping on the rudder. If I had read a little further in the book, I would have known that what I was trying was the technique for snap rolls. The Cub rotated quickly to the inverted position. Thoroughly confused I knew enough that if I held the stick back and the rudder full in eventually the airplane would spin. The roof of the Dairy Queen soon appeared in the windshield rotating rapidly. I was shocked that the pitch attitude seemed to be vertical with the wings rotating around the roll axis. I had anticipated about 60 degrees nose down with more of a yawing motion. After about 3 turns I stomped on full opposite rudder and came off the stop on the stick.

I was so glad the spin stopped I forgot to release the rudder and came down in a vertical sideslip for a while before recovering. When I taxied up to the Dairy Queen Willie was jumping up and down. He had been looking right up the spin axis of the airplane and said it was a fantastic sight. Pappy Grow stopped by the Dairy Queen to talk to us. He had been watching us and gave us some life saving advice. He said to make sure we stayed over the airport with our spins because the 65 hp Cont engine of the Cub was famous for quitting during spins.

And quit it did just a few weeks later. Willie had recovered from a spin over the airport and spiraled down to a spot landing unaware he was deadstick until the prop stopped during the flare. Word of that episode got back to the president of the Peninsula Flying Club, Charlie Drummond about the same time he learned the insurance on the Cub had lapsed. The renewal had fallen through the cracks in the aftermath of Colby's accident. He sold the Cub right away for \$710. What really hurt was I had saved \$800 toward buying the J-3, but I had figured I needed about a \$1000 to buy the airplane.

Charlie Drummond and JD kept us flying though, as it was not long before we carried the freshly covered pieces of a CAPL-16 to Gloucester for assembly. The Saturday pilgrimages continued as we helped JD do annual inspections for Earl Robbins, Lou Smith and other private owners at Gloucester. Drummond worked some political magic on the selection board of the CAP and as a result I was one of two fortunate cadets from Virginia to attend The Private License Encampment in Norman, Ok in July of 1969. Certificate in hand I was able to fly the CAP Champ on practice and search missions to build time for a commercial ticket. There was still no gas at Gloucester so every flight usually ended with a stop at Hummel field for gas to top off before tying the 85 HP Champ down at Gloucester.

In the early Seventies a new FBO was started up by Bud Knight, Harold Wright and Bob Grow with a Citabria dealership featuring aerobatic training. Two fighter pilots from Langley Field taught aerobatic courses and the airport started drawing fans from a wide area every weekend. The FAA approved an aerobatic box adjacent to the airport and it was great fun to watch the students practice their newly learned maneuvers. The airport became popular with the crowd at Virginia Institute of Marine Science and a cookout and party was the

norm on Saturday nights. The new Citabrias were beautiful, flew great and at \$15 an hour a lot of fun for the buck. One problem the operation had was all the instructors preferred to teach aerobatics and nobody wanted to spend time grinding around the pattern to instill good tailwheel technique. The result was some expensive excursions off the runway and into the woods. One pilot, an F-106 pilot from the 48<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron left with a Champ for a two week vacation after a short checkout. We spotted him on downwind returning from his extended trip and a crowd was there to greet his arrival. The Champ made a nice three point and then proceeded to groundloop off the runway right in front of us. Due to the slow speed of the Champ and the luck that no obstacles were in the way no damage was done. The supersonic aviator taxied on in, shut down and climbed out telling us how much he enjoyed his lightplane odyssey. "There is something wrong with this airplane though" he reported. "Every time you land, it goes around in circles".

During this same period, Bill Sewall moved to the airport with his Cessna 140, living in a mobile home situated very close to where Colby's old trailer had been located. I rented a room from him in 1975-76 and was introduced to the magic of being able to walk out the front door of your home and be in the air and on your way in minutes. The FBO folded around 1975 due to the cumulative effect of the crashes and once again it felt like Gloucester was our own private airport.

These days I like to visit the old airport several times a year to walk up and down what's left of the runway. Looking at the familiar tree line and reflecting back to the thousand adventures that began and ended here the experience is like a visit to the cemetery to pay respects to departed family members. Every trip there brings back a flood of memories of the special people who shared a love of this spot. Jimmy Doman, Colby, Willie Hayes, David Lyons, Pappy, Bob, and Bruce Grow all come join me on the centerline.



## Mystery Plane Revealed

Last time's Mystery Plane was a "Boeing T-5" built at the Boeing School of Aeronautics at Oakland Airport, California. NOBODY got the right answer. Several thought it was a Globe *Swift*, one said a Gloster *Goldfinch*, another came up with a Ryan *SC*, or one of the Harlow *PC* variants. Here is the story from the *Aero Digest* for October 1937, page 63.

Aero Digest October 1937



**Boeing students design, build advanced monoplane.**  
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