Oliver Springs Airport: The people are what this review has come down to for me… part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 16, 2026)

Some time ago I asked Charlie Hensley to consider writing the history of the Oliver Springs Airport. He readily agreed it should be done and he would like to do it. Over the time since we first discussed this project, Charlie has given a lot of thought to how he wanted to document the history of the airport from his perspective.

What Charlie has provided here is more than a mere history of the airport, it is an in-depth review of the important people with whom he has associated himself with over the years. I think Charlie has done an outstanding documentation of the importance of people in his life associated with the Oliver Springs Airport.

Enjoy the read along with Charlie as he becomes acquainted with flying and the people who make it happen in Oliver Springs.

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Discovering the histories of local airports, past and present, has been very interesting for the writer and can probably reinforce any current or past local pilot's connections to the aviation pioneers who handed down their legacies, stories, and facilities to current general aviation enthusiasts. It is difficult to include all the notable persons associated with aviation around Oak Ridge and surrounding communities.

In the rest of this narrative, I will describe the notable persons who were connected to my experiences and love of aviation. To those who I may have omitted, I apologize. Through the following narrative, I hope to give the reader a flavor for the legacy-connections a pilot feels from being handed down the skills and the joy associated with flying.

The most notable of all my aviation connections was Guy M. Jones. Guy began flying in the 1920's per his book, "The Last Barnstormer". If the reader can find a copy somewhere, I highly recommend it as a good afternoon read.

Some quotes from Guy in his autobiography…

"I went to Lunken Airport in Cincinnati where I soloed a Waco 9. Although I had only one hour total instruction time, that given to me a few months previous by Homer Farris. Jiggs Huffman finished my instructions in three days and soloed me."

"The days are gone when a fellow repaired his airplane with baling wire and spit, and when a man who hadn't had a forced landing was a man who hadn't been flying for more than a week."

"It was here that I have to admit I learned to fly for reasons that went beyond just love of flying. My immediate reason for learning to fly was to get rich hauling plane loads of illegal liquor into this country from Canada."

"…moonshine whisky made me the money I needed to start to fly, and I had messed with it long enough to make some grand plans for all the money I was going to make."

After purchasing a Waco 10 and flying it home from Cincinnati to his home in Danville KY, Guy later wrote, "That first day, with slightly over six hours for flying time to my credit, I took thirty-five people for rides and made three dollars per person. "

"On the following Saturday and Sunday I cleared more money hauling people on short hops than I had ever cleared in any week from moonshine. I guess that was really when I became a barnstormer and

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stopped being a moonshiner. I have never hauled a drop of liquor in my airplane---unless it was in the pocket of a passenger."

Guy Jones flew for over 50 years in surrounding areas of Kentucky and Tennessee, giving lessons, managing airports, and spreading his love of flying. During his flying career in the 1930's he managed the Clinton Airport, (aka, "Guy Jones Airport", located at the current location of Eagle Bend Industrial Park), gave lessons and served as contracted civilian instructor to future military pilots at the beginning of World War II at McGee Tyson, when military instructors were in short supply. In approximately the late 1940's Guy constructed a private airport in Claxton near his home on Old Edgemoor Rd.

The airport was located in the area of the larger oval and his home, per his son who still lives there, is a Frank Lloyd Wright original. A small structure built by Guy, buried in trees and underbrush, still exists near the East end of the former runway. If you drive by the home, by no surprise you'll note, it resembles an older style airport control tower.

Guy also gave lessons at the Oliver Springs Airport and Powell Airport during the late 1940's and early 1950's. Milus Skidmore (who co-founded the Oliver Springs Airport) and including other long-time Oak Ridgers, such as Percy Statts, Tony Krakoviak, and Bill Harmon, took lessons from Guy at Oliver Springs…along with many, many others.

There is a small plaque on the windsock at Oliver Springs that said, "This windsock dedicated to Guy M. Jones, without whom most of us wouldn't need it." In the '60's and early '70's Guy became the manager (Fixed Base Operator) at the Dayton TN airport and this is where I met him for the first time.

My flying began in 1969 when a co-worker, Mr. J.C. Salyers, took me for a flight in a 1947 Aeronca Champ at Oliver Springs. "The Champ" is a tandem-seat, "tail-dragger", two-passenger, fabric-covered, high-wing airplane with 65hp that you start by hand-turning the propeller (the Armstrong Starter).

The plane cruises at 85mph and it is a joy to fly on a warm day with your elbow sticking out the left side sliding window. The Champ is still flying at Oliver Springs Airport and still owned by the Oak Ridge Flyers…a long-time flying club at the airport…and which I had joined shortly after my first flight.

Mr. Richard Hobson, of Clinton, was my first instructor and a member of the Club, and also being good friends with Guy Jones. Dick had been a P-40 pilot in World War II and shared a few stories of these experiences but did not enjoy talking about the war. He told me once that "those who like to talk about the war weren't there."

My first approximately nine hours of instruction was in the Aeronca Champ with me in the pilot seat and Dick Hobson in the rear seat. Among several unique "features" the Champ had an inoperative Model-A fuel gage on the top of the instrument panel, the gas tank being immediately under the panel. The operating fuel gage was a cork with a wire protruding out of the top for the tank filler cap and immediately in front of the windshield. Student pilots were warned not to fill the tank to the top because the gage would leak gasoline into the cockpit.

It was not unusual to have gasoline dripping off the instrument panel while Dick opened the door and flipped his cigarette ashes out. Thank goodness for the numerous air leaks into and out of the cockpit in addition to a sliding window where the pilot could rest his elbow when opened. After about nine hours of instruction in the Champ, Dick deemed me ready for my first solo flight.

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To get verified and "signed off to solo" in my pilots log book, we flew to Dayton where Guy Jones was the Fixed Base Operator and flight instructor. Dick Hobson said, "This fellow is ready to solo". I paid Guy $10 and he rode in the back while I took off, flew around the traffic pattern, and landed at Dayton several times, thus verifying that I had the needed skills to at least takeoff and land on a calm day. Guy then signed my logbook and Dick and I flew back to Oliver Springs where I later soloed on July 17, 1970.

During my first solo flight around the pattern at Oliver Springs in the Champ, with my white knuckles gripping the control stick and throttle, one rain-drop hit the windshield and I was sure it was all over…! But it all worked out.

Dick Hobson had kept putting off my paying him for the well over nine hours of instruction. Now I needed to and insisted on settling up. Dick said, "Aw, just bring me a fifth of Jack Daniels". So in total I obtained my solo-certification for $10, a fifth of Jack Daniels, and about 10 hours of club-airplane costs at $4.50 per hour including fuel…total about $70.

Dick Hobson was a very honorable fellow and also set a good example for many of my flying friends, in addition to myself. He taught several lesson by just being himself. I noted once that he very reluctantly ever said anything negative about anyone and was very much respected by others. That was a significant life-lesson in itself from this good aviation friend. He also said, "There are two kinds of pilots, old pilots and bold pilots, but no old bold ones." Dick passed away in 1981.

After Milus Skidmore departed the Oliver Springs Airport around 1964, a non-profit corporation was established and various individuals have been and are involved in managing the lease arrangement and airport facilities, with board oversight. Hal Paine, Dick Hobson, Paul Hatmaker, Boyd King, Steve Hamel, O. M. Vermillion, Steve Moore, and Ron Poore are names that come to mind. The pilots themselves have always been, and continue to be, the heart of soul of the operations and provide much volunteer labor, materials, and direction.

Evelyn "Mama Bird" Johnson is the next local pioneer I want to include. After my solo flight, I began my basic instrument, navigation, radio work, night flying, and cross-country instruction from Mr. Marlon Johnson. The airplane used was a Piper Tri-Pacer that was also part of the Oak Ridge Flyers Club.

After this work over a period of about a year, Marlon determined I was ready for my flight review. I've always told student pilots to not get in a hurry. The most flying fun they'll have is during learning. Marlan and I flew to Morristown, TN to get "Mama Bird" to do my private pilot check-ride. The following is from Wikipedia and pretty much summarizes Col. Johnson's flying career

Evelyn Stone Bryan Johnson (November 4, 1909 – May 10, 2012), nicknamed "**Mama Bird**", was the female pilot with the most number of flying hours in the world. She was a colonel in the Civil Air Patrol and a founding member of the Morristown, Tennessee Civil Air Patrol squadron.[1]

She married Wyatt Jennings "W.J." Bryan and learned to fly in 1944, while he was serving in the Army Air Corps and the couple was living in Jefferson City, Tennessee.[4] She logged 57,635.4 flying hours, and was the oldest flight instructor in the world. She trained more pilots and gave more FAA exams than any other pilot. She was named in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as having the most flying hours of any woman and the most of any living person.[5] Johnson was inducted into the Women in Aviation Pioneers Hall of Fame, the Tennessee and Kentucky aviation halls of fame and others. She was awarded a bronze Carnegie Medal for rescuing a helicopter pilot after he crashed.[6]

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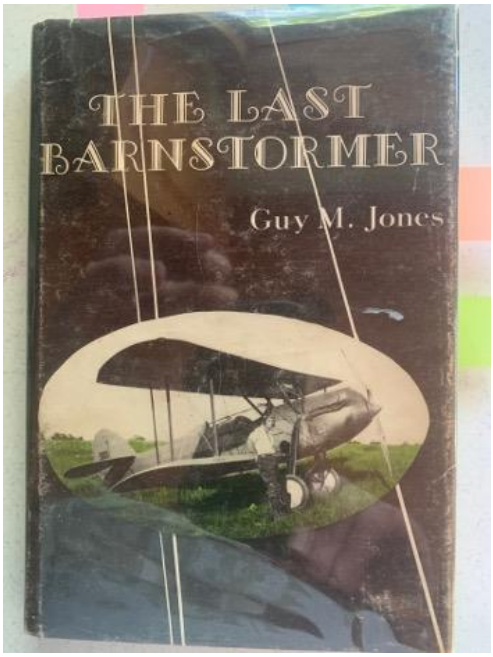
Johnson became manager of the Moore-Murrell Airport in Morristown, Tennessee, in 1953.[7] She flew into her 90s despite developing eyesight problems and only quit at 96 after a car accident on September 10, 2006 resulted in her undergoing a leg amputation. Even after that, she continued to manage the airport.[5]

On July 21, 2007, Johnson was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio,[8] alongside astronaut Sally Ride and adventurer Steve Fossett, among others. The induction was her sixth such honor.

What an honor it was to have "Mama Bird" do my check-ride.

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Thank you, Charlie, you are bringing the history of the Oliver Springs Airport to life! Charlie will continue in a second part of this series highlighting the people who have been his associates in the world of flying and especially those at the Oliver Springs Airport.



Guy Jones autobiography (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)

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Guy Jones airport that was near his home in Claxton (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)



Oliver Springs Airport in approximately 1970, viewed from the Champ (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)

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The Champs control panel with the (leaky) Model A gage location on top of the panel (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)



Mama Bird and Guy Jones at Dayton about 1972 (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)