Oliver Springs Airport: The people are what this review has come down to for me… part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 28, 2026)

Charlie Hensley continues his review of the people in his life that are part of a group of individuals associated with the Oliver Springs Airport. He is bringing us the history of this airport in an unusual but most effective manner…the people.

I have had the privilege to be a passenger in Charlie's airplane and have made aerial photos of the Oak Ridge area. Some of the best images I have to show what our area looks like from above. I have used the images in presentations and to better understand just how the Oak Ridge area is laid out and utilized for housing, commercial structures, and industrial facilities.

The perspective from the air is clarifying and gives good representation of where things are located. Sometimes the proximity from one site to another is amazingly close, even with the abundance of land in the Oak Ridge area. I hasten to add that not all the land is suitable for development and much of it is protected natural areas, which is good.

Yet with the coming (actually some already here) nuclear renaissance all the available and suitable land should be fully utilized if we are to meet expectations of Manhattan Project 2.0, as challenged by Chris Wright, Department of Energy Secretary.

Enjoy the conclusion of Charlie's excellent history of the Oliver Springs Airport through the people he recalls who made the airport the fine facility it is today.

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Mr. Joe Cooper of Oliver Springs is my next person to describe. Joe was a resident of Oliver Springs and lived, with wife Cora, on Old Harriman Highway outside the main community. Joe was probably the most skilled and meticulous craftsman I have ever met or worked with. He earned his main income servicing Walls and Coker Coal mining equipment, building and painting equipment, repairing just about anything mechanical and rebuilding fabric airplanes and engines.

Mr. Hal Payne, the "official mechanic" at Oliver Springs Airport in 1960's-1970's contracted much of the aircraft maintenance to Joe Cooper. Joe had stated he recovered 26 fabric airplanes for flyers at Oliver Springs Airport. Mine was number 27 and his last.

Getting Joe to work on your airplane often took begging, trading favors, and a great deal of patience, but in reality the reason he liked working on airplanes is guys like my friends and I would come to his shop and "help" him while listening to his many interesting, hilarious, and sometimes unbelievable stories.

The reason "help" is in quotes is because he was so meticulous that seldom could you do the quality of work he wanted to produce. One particular story of note was his claiming that his first job was painting the private parts on the bull on a Bull-Durham billboard along Illinois Avenue/Route 62.

Among his many aircraft recovering jobs, Joe recovered "The Champ" at least twice, a Piper Tri-Pacer in the Oak Ridge Flyers shortly prior to my membership, another Aeronca Champ that my friends and I purchased in about 1978, and the American Champion Citabria that I currently fly.

Getting Joe to agree to work on The Champ in 1974 involved members of the Oak Ridge Flyers building an extension on his work shop in Oliver Springs. The workshop is still visible from the air and the newer part is clearly distinguishable.

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Two articles appeared in The Oak Ridger featuring Joe Cooper. My favorite article in The Oak Ridger about Joe, written by Jeff Salyers and son of J.C. Salyers who took me for my first Champ flight, was published on Sept. 19, 1986, and shows Joe working on the second Champ my partners and I owned.

The article covers a short summary of Joe's life. In the last paragraph of the article he is quoted, "I don't think I'd like to go back and retrace myself; it's been too hard." God bless him, he passed away about 2005. I miss him greatly.

The note behind the windshield is a tease of Tony Krakoviak…."Krako, do not fly…no wings."

My good friend, Steve Moore, in 1990 agreed to look for a Champion Citabria ("aerobatic" spelled backwards and wrong) to share. A Citabria is basically an Aeronca Champ with a much bigger engine and structurally reinforced for aerobatic maneuvers…"a Champ on steroids", as some say.

Steve was the kind of friend who never said "no" to an adventure, so of course we began our search. Using the popular airplane locating publication called Trade-a-Plane (published since the 1930's in Crossville, Tn). We were looking for a flyable but rebuildable Citabria that we could get Joe Cooper to recover with us, and we found a reasonable sounding one in Ontario California that appeared to be suitable.

We traveled commercial carrier one-way to California to purchase the airplane. and flew it all the way back to Tennessee…over Death Valley, Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, Ship Rock, and across the Mississippi to Tennessee. The airplane clearly had "issues" since a piece fell off over the Grand Canyon and we had to secure some loose fairings with duct-tape…noncritical, gratefully. When we presented or prize to Joe Cooper to get his assessment, he said, "You boys should have put this thing on a train!".

We eventually took in more flying partner-spots including, at various times, Tony Krakoviak, Jerry Boser, and Tom Roseberry.

Any work Joe did on the airplane continues to be trouble free and the airplane still is a pleasure to fly. Joe passed away about 2000 and Steve passed away in 2007.

Many stories and adventures have originated or occurred at the Oliver Springs Airport and flying continues to be my favorite activity, although my friend, Kathy Fahey, says, "there are more wandering BS'ers at the airport than anywhere she has ever been." To this, I cannot disagree. We call it "hanger flying".

I hope that this write-up and collection of recollections have helped to give the flavor of flying in the local area to those aviation enthusiasts who are interested. If I have inadvertently missed someone please accept my apologies. Also, feel free to contact me if you wish to provide more information or further details.

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Thank you, Charlie, you have provided an exceptional look into the history of flying in the Oak Ridge area focused on the Oliver Springs Airport. And you did it without even mentioning the cross winds that often are a part of landing when a pilot crosses Walden's Ridge in a gap where Poplar Creek flows out of Frost Bottom. The southern path is often met with winds from the west just as the final approach is being taken.

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Your approach to the history through the people who lived it is remarkably effective communication of that history from the eyes of those who were there when it happened. The Champ is obviously an important part of your flying years.

If anyone has additional information they would like to share with Charlie, please send it to him at chuck188@comcast.net.



Perry Hundley, Tony Krakoviak, and Joe Cooper…taking a break at Joe's shop (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)



The photo above shows Joe's shop addition being built by the Oak Ridge Flyers (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)

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Three members of Oak Ridge Flyers, Gary Giles, Perry Hundley, and Charlie Hensley taking a break from disassembly of the Champ to prepare if for moving it to Joe Cooper's shop for recovering (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)



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The wings of Champ as they were transported (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)



The assembly pieces were attached making Champ a completed airplane (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)

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Photo of the completed Champ with color scheme selected by Oak Ridge Flyers. Left to Right: Earl Nall, Gary Giles, and Charlie Hensley (Courtesy of Charlie Hensley)