



Gary Canazzi set up a view camera to photograph Olson's Curtiss Jenny in the 1990s. "I looked up and he had walked into the frame. I managed to take two pictures, looked up and then he was gone. I thought, 'Well, I hope I got it.'" Gary Canazzi
www.canazzipho.com



A photograph of the Jenny, displayed at the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center near Stevenson, was used for the image at the top of the page. Gary Canazzi
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Final flight

By Thomas Ryll, Columbian staff writer

As Evergreen Airport prepares to close forever, its departing pilots recall Wally Olson, the man behind the flying machines

Years ago, Wally Olson was flying his Curtiss JN-4 Jenny to an air show at the Hillsboro, Ore., airport when important parts landed quite a bit earlier than the rest of the biplane. As he banked for his approach, the left wheel fell off. When he turned in the other direction, the right wheel and its axle slid away from the plane and went in search of terra firma.

Olson had no way of knowing that the Jenny was missing pieces considered crucial to the execution of a landing that a pilot can walk away from. "There he was, flying in there, fat, dumb and happy," said Vancouver resident Dale DeTour, a longtime pilot. "He landed that Jenny just fine, and all these people came up, and Wally was holding his cap, shaking it by the bill, which he did when he was irritated. All he said was, 'I don't want to talk about it.'"

DeTour's story captures the essence of Wally Olson: his love of old airplanes, his skill as a pilot, the barometer of his state of mind as measured by cap-shaking. Olson was the heart, soul, propeller and wings of Vancouver's Evergreen Airport. He died of cancer in 1997 at age 86, but as plans are laid for the airport's final hours this week, it is as if he is again being eulogized and laid to rest, this time beside the dusty field that was his life's work.

Olson will have died nine years and one day before the airport officially succumbs to the development pressure that has changed its corner of the county forever. Pilots have been told to vacate their hangars. Tenants have left the field's weather-beaten pale-green buildings.

The Evergreen Flying Service hangar where Olson spent his days either there or in the air is eerily empty, save for a few relics that no one has laid claim to or spirited away: a couple pair of antlers, a set of aluminum wing ribs, a vertical stabilizer from a Cessna Skyhawk. Rain-soaked ceiling tiles barely hang on in the adjacent office, now dark, dusty, musty and lifeless. It is home, for now, for "the bench," which once sat outside and is said to be where Charles Lindbergh rested during a 1960s visit to Evergreen. "He sat on that bench, right over there; that's why I've never moved it," Olson told a Flying magazine columnist in 1994. (The celebrity of his appearance in a national magazine was dimmed somewhat when his name was misspelled as Olsen.) But the bench will soon move. After 61 years, all but a few months of it under Olson family ownership, Evergreen Airport is going the way of the 973 airports that have closed nationwide since 1981.

Few people expected Evergreen to outlive Olson. Those same people would have been surprised to see the airport close before he was gone. Life force Olson was the life force

and personality behind Evergreen. To talk to the airport's longtime pilots today is to imagine that his memory has been in a holding pattern for the nine years since his death; every pilot has his or her Wally story. "I don't think he realized how many lives he touched," said Carmen Eastman.

At Evergreen, no special status was accorded the owners of the newest and shiniest aircraft, what few there were. Fabric wings and wooden fuselages were venerated; fancy radios and state-of-the-art radar systems were not. Olson saw communication equipment as a useless impediment to flying, which he preferred to enjoy in its purest form, at the controls of his ancient Jenny. "You're not going to learn to really fly until you fly a tail-dragger," he told Eastman.

Reporters, but apparently not many other people, judged him gruff, impatient and downright rude. In the 1970s, he chased a Columbian photographer around a car when he tried to get pictures of a crashed plane. This reporter interviewed him only once, in the early 1990s on the occasion of a forced landing of his old Jenny. It was in the days leading to the annual summer air show; the plane stalled on takeoff and Olson brought it down, unharmed, on what was then grass at the end of the runway.

It wasn't his idea to talk to the press. Olson was famously camera shy, and even less inclined to smile on the few occasions in which he was cajoled into posing. Elsewhere in today's paper is a thank-you advertisement, purchased by the Olson family, with a grinning, waving Wally. Even before daughter Cheryl Olson saw the photographer's name, "I knew it was a female, because he was smiling and cooperating, and he would never do that for a man," she said.

Wally Olson's reluctance to be photographed or quoted was a response not reserved only for the media. Even people in his trust had little luck convincing him to be their subject. "One time I tried to get him to let me videotape him for a history of Evergreen," said Eastman, a pilot who kept her Cessna 172 at the airport for years. "He said, 'There's nothing to say here. This is just an old dirt field, nothing special.'" Evergreen's pilots disagree.

"I think the world really needs another shopping mall or subdivision," said Cliff Schrock, sarcastically referring to planned redevelopment of Evergreen. (See related story on page A8.) Schrock, a 59-year-old Portland resident who has been flying since he was 17, called the closure "a tragedy." "It's unbelievable," he said. Like others, he allows that Evergreen, caught in suburbia's grip, was an increasingly uncomfortable place to fly. Fields that once were escape routes are long gone.

Launched in 1944

It wasn't that way when Roy Sugg was given the county's permission to build the airport in 1944, on a site then seven miles east of Vancouver. The next year, as World War II was coming to a close, Wally Olson bought the field.

The war exposed thousands of farm boys and loggers to airplanes. Returning airmen expanded the country's peacetime private-pilot ranks as never before, fueling visions of a postwar society settled in airport subdivisions with a turnpike cruiser in every garage and an airplane in every hangar.

Americans embraced the automobile like never before. But the idea that the airplane would be the personal flying automobile of the future proved optimistic. Until Congress passed liability-limiting legislation in the 1990s, general aviation was in decline. Huge jury verdicts in plane crashes, some of them involving decades-old aircraft, virtually shut down the light-plane manufacturing industry.

Light aircraft are now being sold as fast as they can be built, if only to replace aging machines. But while there are bright spots, the pilot population continues to decline. At the end of 2005, there were 610,000 pilots in the United States. The high-water mark was 1980, with 827,071. Since then, with the exception of a couple of minor upticks, the population has declined steadily to the current number, the lowest since 1966. And that was when the U.S. population was roughly 200 million, as opposed to nearly 300 million today.

Evergreen falls in the vulnerable category of privately owned, public-use airport, said Bill Dunn, an official with the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association in Frederick, Md. Nationwide, there are about 14,000 private-use-only airports, some of them merely grass strips surrounded by hangar-outfitted homes. An additional 5,300 airports are open for public use; 60 percent are publicly owned, among them the city of Vancouver's Pearson Field.

The 2,000 or so privately owned, public-use airports are at the whim of public officials who want to tinker with zoning, or owners who sell out to developers. "It's folks like Wally who were so passionate about aviation that got them started," Dunn said. After the postwar boom, Olson flew against head winds to keep his airport alive. The one-time country field was slowly squeezed by Vancouver's expansion on the west and Camas' a bit farther east.

Inevitably, some newcomers decided that they didn't like the airplanes that had been landing and taking off daily since 1945. Among the many thousands of aircraft operations, there were a few crashes. Most were dutifully reported in the press, at times proving that a fender-bender aircraft accident merits the same attention as a fatal car wreck. Yet Olson persevered. He immersed his wife, Eleanor, now 81, and daughters Cheryl and Lee Anne in the never-ending work of running an airport.

Looking for investors

Pilots credit the Olsons with trying desperately to keep Evergreen open by looking for aviation-oriented investors or trying to find a public agency to operate the field. With minimal cash flow and increasing taxes and insurance costs, the family finally gave up. "It was Wally's dream. They've really gone above and beyond that," said one pilot.

The Olson girls grew up in a world where airplanes and air transport were everyday occurrences, no more remarkable than a drive into Vancouver in the family car. For a time, the Olsons lived in an apartment above an airport building, barely out of range of the smell of aviation gasoline and the propeller wash of taxiing planes.

Yet the Olson daughters weren't necessarily inclined to follow in their father's footsteps. As a young girl, Cheryl went for a "familiarization flight" in "202," the blue-and-white 1940s Taylorcraft that Evergreen habitués know by those last three digits of its

identification number. "Being a 14-year-old spoiled brat and looking at aviation as old hat, when we landed and he said, 'Whatcha think?' I said, 'It was OK,'" recalled Cheryl. "He said, 'Don't do it, then.'" Lee Anne, on the other hand, wanted to learn to fly. As for whether Wally might have wanted a son, "He got one," she quipped. "Me. I was such a tomboy."

In its halcyon days, Evergreen bustled with more than 200 airplanes and the summer fly-in, which drew thousands of spectators and a fleet of historic aircraft. Students and pilots, lured by prices for fuel, hangar rentals and lessons that were a fraction of those at many local airports, flocked to the field. Wally Olson fixed planes, gave lessons and generated the tales that made him a legend even before his death.

Nature's airplanes

Olson had a fondness for nature's airplanes. He built birdhouses for the sparrows that came and went from the family's apartment. When ground-nesting killdeer would set up shop in perilous locations, he put up marker cones and told pilots to steer clear. One fine day, he asked Carmen Eastman why she wasn't flying. "There's a bird's nest in the tail of my plane, and I can't fly until the eggs have hatched," she told him. "He loved that," she said.

Evergreen's female pilots say the skies above the field were an equal-opportunity zone. "Wally was so proud of the women," said Beth Christian. "He thought it was great. But he still had his expectations." As a little girl who viewed the world through "Coke-bottle glasses," Christian watched military jets rocket over her home in California in the 1950s. "You can't fly, because you can't see," her mother told her. That didn't stop her. When "a midlife crisis" hit at age 40, she abandoned other plans and learned to fly. Her proudest moment came when officials at the famed Oshkosh, Wis., air show, rating the landings of incoming visitors, handed her a perfect 10. "They were landing three planes at a time," she said. "I was terrified. I sent Wally a postcard. It said, 'Thanks to you and the people at Evergreen, I made a 10-point landing.'"

Soloing at 16 Pilot Jason Robinson, who has flown professionally in Alaska and the Caribbean, has described himself as "the kid on the bicycle at the end of the runway," longing for the chance to fly. He took lessons and was dying to achieve aviation's ultimate rite of passage, soloing on his 16th birthday. But what he hoped would be his final check ride with Olson was a disappointing sloppy-landing disaster. Crestfallen, he expected Olson to order more rounds of practice, making him miss his 16th-birthday goal. Instead, Olson told the stunned Robinson, "You're good to go. Can't get any worse than that." Later, Robinson told friends, "That actually gave me a kind of confidence."

For a few pilots, Evergreen was a stop on the way to a dream, a place to learn to fly or work as an instructor before joining the ranks of the elite. So it was for Marcel Jolley. He graduated from Oregon State University in 1993 with a journalism degree, but his mind was set on a career in aviation. Jolley learned to fly at the Troutdale, Ore., airport but worked two years as a part-time instructor at Evergreen. Six months ago, he got his big break, hiring on as a Boeing 737 pilot for Alaska Airlines. Jolley sees Evergreen as an oasis of aviation, a place frozen in time while every inch of surrounding land has been transformed from fields to pharmacies, grocery stores, sporting goods outlets, real estate offices, fast-food stands and gas stations. "The airport is the same. Everything around it

has changed," he said. At the same time, the airport society "was like a family." "A dysfunctional family at times, but always interesting," he said.

Jolley observed that Olson's love of flying was so undiluted that he marked major events by which plane he was flying at the time. "If you asked him what he was doing when such-and-such happened, he almost always said, 'I was in the pattern,'" Jolley said. "In the pattern" is pilot lingo for flying big rectangles above the field, often during the touch-and-go landings that are the hallmark of learning the art and science of airplane handling. And so it was on May 18, 1980, when Mount St. Helens erupted. Wally Olson was in the pattern. "I asked him, 'So, did you fly up to the mountain?'" recalled Jolley. Olson's response: "No! The kid needed to work on his landings."

Evergreen Airport through the years

August 1944: Roy C. Sugg is granted a "special conditional permit" by the county planning commission for an airport on Mill Plain Road "seven miles east of Vancouver."

1945: Wally Olson buys the airport.

April 1968: The county approves a plan for Olson's 88-lot, 42.2-acre Evergreen Airpark subdivision for residents with "take home" planes that are taxied from the airport's main runways.

April 1973: The state's aeronautics director predicts a bleak future for Evergreen Airport, saying it may not be able to stave off higher taxes and development pressure.

June 1973: Evergreen has grown to nine hangars and 140 planes, about half its capacity.

December 1977: Olson tells county commissioners that plans to extend 136th Avenue would kill chances for Evergreen's expansion. The avenue was extended.

July 5, 1988: Lightning strikes the airport, hitting about 40 feet from a gas pump. Sparks fly off the hands of an instructor examining an airplane, but no one is injured.

July 17, 1997: Olson dies of cancer at age 86, one day shy of nine years before the airport will close.

October 1997: The North-South Airpark Association, consisting of homes along a grass strip north of and connected to the airport, wins a four-year legal battle when the state Court of Appeals concurs with a local judge's ruling that residents can use the area for takeoffs and landings. The private airstrip will remain open after Evergreen closes.

April 1998: After hearing a storm of opposition, the Vancouver Planning Commission unanimously votes to recommend against rezoning for apartments a piece of land that had been part of Evergreen's north-south runway.

June 2001: The same day that Port of Vancouver officials announce they will not buy the airport, the Olson family puts the 56.8-acre property up for sale, saying, "The well has now run dry."

November 2001: The Olsons file an application with the city, proposing development of the airport into commercial, light-industrial and office uses.

April 2002: Four years after buying 17 acres of the airport's north-south runway from the Olson family, developer Walt Musa gains the city's OK to rezone the property.

August 2002: The Northwest Antique Airplane Club's 43rd and final Evergreen event takes place.

July 18, 2006: Evergreen is scheduled to close for good.

- *Photo Captions: OLSON FAMILY - Wally Olson was a stateside pilot instructor in World War II. Olson family - A pilot's oasis in unblemished countryside, Evergreen Airport in the mid-1940s was miles from the city that would eventually surround and suffocate the field. DAVE OLSON/The Columbian - The well-worn instrument panel from "202," the 1940s Taylorcraft that helped Olson teach hundreds of student pilots, sits on a table at the Evergreen Airport office. Portlander Cliff Schrock is rebuilding the plane, mangled in a 1995 crash.*