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SC Breakfast Club flying high after 74 years

By **SHELBY LIVINGSTON** | contributor

Every two weeks, a hodgepodge of aviation enthusiasts and pilots fly in to a pre-chosen South Carolina airport to fraternize over an ordinary breakfast.

Ordinary, however, is one thing this club is not.

As the largest, oldest club of its kind in the nation, the South Carolina Breakfast Club also boasts the most quirks. There are no dues, no bylaws and lifetime membership is earned simply by showing up. It operates under one critical rule: safety first.

The South Carolina Breakfast Club is a family 8,000 members deep, each harboring a shared interest for all things plane-related. It is frequented by a diverse group: commercial, business and recreational flyers along with aircraft lovers and those who simply want a place to socialize over planes, bacon and eggs. Attendance sometimes reaches between 300 and 400, with aircraft totaling 100.

The Breakfast Club has acted as the prototype for many flying clubs in the nation, but none have seen such success.

Begun in 1938 by Orangeburg jeweler Thomas S. Summers, biweekly Sunday meetings have ceased only once, during World War II when restrictions were placed on aviation fuel. The Breakfast Club provided a way for friends to get together and practice flying.

Since then, the club has become so much more than a social date. It is a wealth of history and tradition that has persevered even in the face of rising gas prices, war, dwindling attendance counts and the deaths of aging members.

The reason for its longevity is in its nature, said Breakfast Club president Gerald Ballard. "The Breakfast Club doesn't belong to anybody. It belongs only to the people. There's nothing like it."

Ballard, a resident of Twin Lakes, S.C., has been president and spokesperson for the Breakfast Club since 1979. "My job is to promote the safety aspect of flying," he said. "(Attendees) have to make good landings; they have to check the weather."

Stoney Truett, a regular attendee for 25 years, insists the social aspect is just one side of the Breakfast Club. "The excuse is to get together with >



Planes belonging to members of the South Carolina Breakfast Club are parked at the Greenville Downtown Airport.

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> friends, but the reality is the more you fly, the safer it becomes. (Members) will practice with different environments and surfaces.”

Ballard agrees: “It keeps you current. If you fly every two weeks, you won’t be rusty.”

Sunday mornings with the Breakfast Club are chock full of traditions. The notorious “bouncy ball” carried in Ballard’s bowling bag inspires the most excitement. At each meeting, the attendee with the worst landing must add his signature to the ball’s collection.

Hank Brown, owner of Greenville Jet Center, attended his first meeting in 1962 and was awarded the ball on the same day. Peculiarly enough, he drove his car to the meeting due to bad weather. “I must’ve parked really badly,” he said.

Members also relate the story of the couple from Broxton Bridge that flew their plane straight into the trees, bending the wings in the process, but who still came in for breakfast. Needless to say, the ball was theirs by unanimous decision.

The Breakfast Club’s success is as unique as South Carolinian priorities. Ballard attempted to create a similar club in both North Carolina and Geor-

gia, but neither took off.

“Nobody wants to lose money except people in South Carolina,” he said. “In South Carolina, they’d rather socialize and make friends. They don’t care about no money.”

The club visited Greenville’s Downtown Airport in late September and is scheduled to return there on Dec. 9.

The Breakfast Club shows no signs of

slowing down. New members are added every other Sunday, and it’s a wonder membership counts don’t show higher numbers than they do. But as one grinning regular, Larry Cayce, pointed out, “We do die off, now. Here, we call that going south.”

Contact Shelby Livingston at slivingston@greenvillejournal.com.



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Members of the South Carolina Breakfast Club talk with one another during their fly-in to the Greenville Downtown Airport.