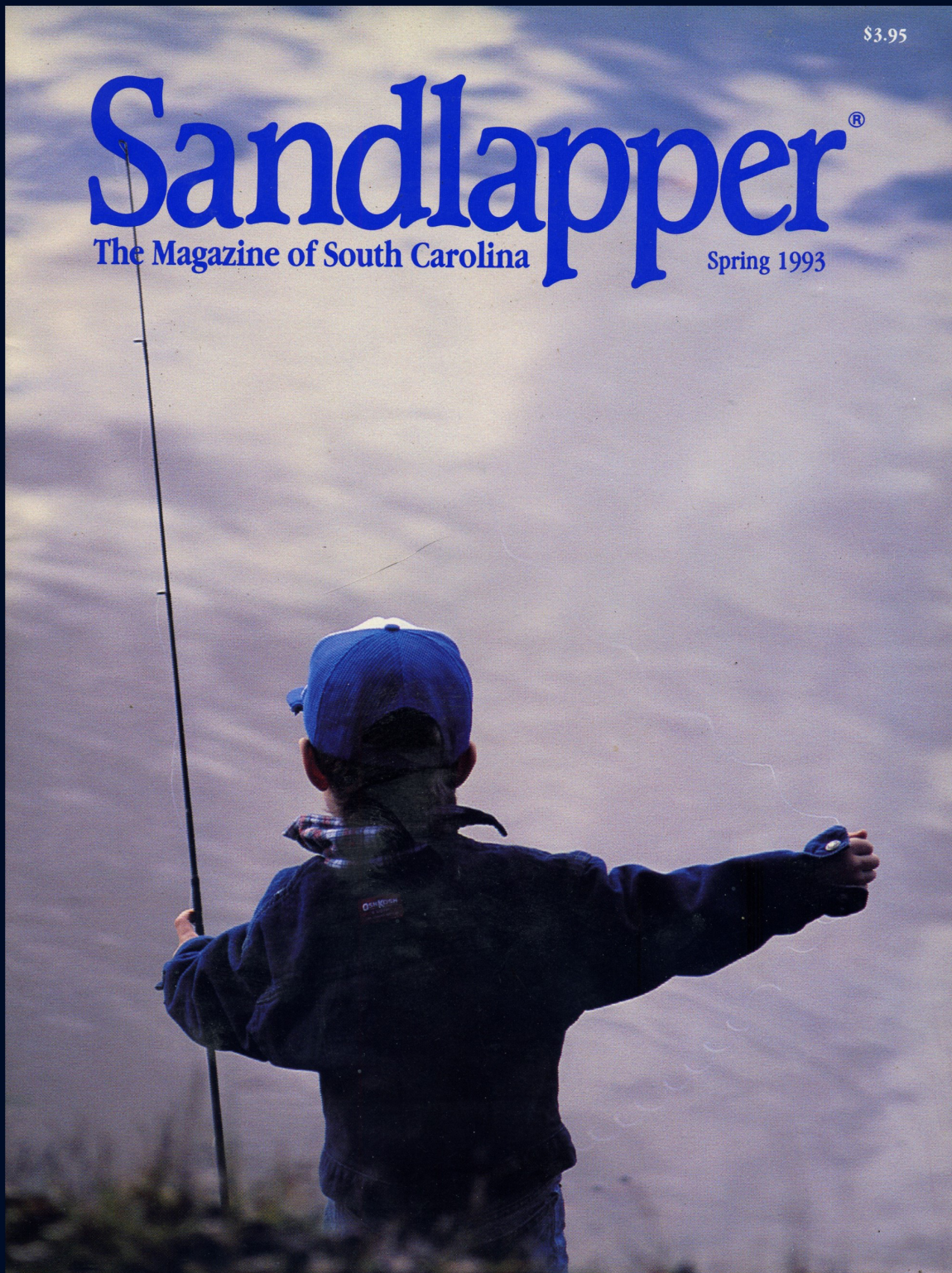


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Yawin' & Jawin'

The Pilots Breakfast Club

Article by Aida Rogers ♦ Photos by Patrick Wright

If you listen hard enough, you can hear music in anything. At the Newberry County Airport on a Sunday morning, the low whine of small airplanes makes music against a steady rhythm of eggs being cracked. There are lyrics here, too. Today, they're in the form of questions from the

curious uninformed and answers from the thankfully enlightened. Crack go the eggs.

"What's more fun," asks the uninformed as the eggs go crack, "flying, eating or cooking?" The enlightened, a he-man named Billye West, growls his answer. "The cookin'," he says. He talks and cracks, talks and cracks.

"Why's that?" comes the question.

"Flying is work," comes the answer.

"Is it?" comes the question.

The eggs quit cracking. The enlightened looks up. "What in the world you think it is?"

The uninformed feels dumb. The enlightened laughs big. And then he explains.

"A lot of things you do as work is fun, you agree? And some things are less stressful and fun. And a lot of things will take the stress away, you agree? Flying is stressful while you do it but it makes you forget all your problems."

The uninformed begins to get enlightened. People like to fly because it forces them to concentrate on the huge problem in the air instead of worrying about several small ones below.

"Right," says the enlightened with a nod and grin. Egg cracking resumes, even as a metronome.

"Cooking's not like that," reasons the newly enlightened uninformed, catching on to the rhythm of the eggs and the thinking of the pilots.

"No, you can run your mouth and cook," he says, and laughs. "And talk to beautiful ladies."

The eggs crack on.

Eggs have been cracking at different airports in South Carolina for more than 50 years, attracting pilots around the state for breakfast every other Sunday. They're members of the South Carolina Breakfast Club, and they say

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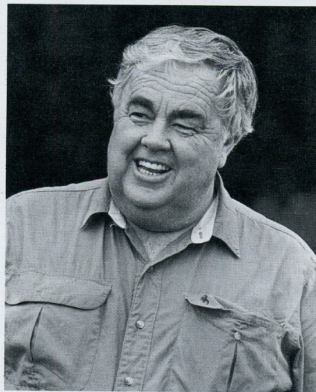
their group is the oldest and biggest in the country.

But maybe it *has* to be the biggest: One of the rules is that if you come once, you're a member for life. The other rule is that you can't be kicked out. No dues, no dress code, no reason not to enjoy it. Bring your sense of fun and you'll fit right in.

"If you come to these things enough, you'll never be a stranger in the state of South Carolina," says Gerald Ballard, president of the group for 12 years. "Everywhere you go, you'll be done been there before."

Ballard is from North Augusta, and he can tell you the name of every airport in the state. There are airports in tiny towns — Pelion, for instance, and Estill — and a breakfast club committee at each to put on a feed when it's their turn to be host.

Usually breakfast is served in the hangars, but sometimes — in Greenville, for instance — you might walk across the street to the Holiday Inn. Newberry always gets a big crowd because they serve



Breakfast Club regulars include Billye West (above), Woody Wilson and P.D. Johnson (below, l-r).



more than just eggs. They serve *steak* and eggs.

"Hot grits, jelly, butter, bread, eggs and grilled steak," says Billye West, loud and proud. "Ribeye." He's an electrical contractor for work and a pilot for play, and when it's Newberry's turn to have the Breakfast Club, he takes care of the cooking.

His support staff — Harvey Kinard and John B. West — lend willing hands, but they aren't pilots. They don't want to be. You have to wonder how Billye gets them to help.

"Threats," says one. "Bodily harm," says another. Billye explains: "They've all been up to no good, and I know about it, see. And if they don't come out here and help, their wives are going to find out."

Their wives probably wouldn't mind. Women are usually present at The Breakfast Club, laughing at the jokes and stories, understanding the language. They can talk about ceilings and cloud covers; they know what IFR, ADF and NDB stand for.

They know, and they'll tell you, that their husbands "would rather fly than eat." The only other thing that comes close is talking to people who feel the same way.

"You just feel you've got the bull by the horns when you're up there flying by yourself," says Woody Wilson of Columbia. "You get it in your blood and it's there from then on."

Wilson, 77, stopped flying three years ago when his eyesight began to fail. He's not ashamed to say how much he misses it. Had he not become a pilot, he jokes, he might have ended up in the penitentiary. He's had five airplanes over the years; his late wife was afraid of them and didn't know about the last one until two years after he bought it. But that was awhile back. Now he drives to Breakfast Club meetings with John Nance, another pilot from Columbia.

He'd rather fly.

A charter member of the Breakfast Club, Wilson remembers its first meeting in 1938. It wasn't steak and eggs. It was bacon and eggs from a little grocery store near the airport in Orangeburg. Only six or seven airplanes were there. "Wasn't nothing but a wooden shed as far as the hangar was concerned," he says. "Didn't have no frying pan; we used an old tomato can or something. I think they had to build a little old fire on the ground."

The Breakfast Club has been meeting ever since, taking time out only for two years during World War II. Today, it's a bit more sophisticated. There's a flower fund for members who get sick, a club historian, out-of-state trips for fun and "The Ball," a Breakfast Club institution since 1946. Now a purply-blue color, The Ball is a volleyball inked over by signatures of pilots who made the worst landing at each meeting. The pilot who signs it at one meeting is supposed to keep it until the next one. A lot of balls have been lost.

"Landing's what it's really all about," Ballard says, gamely signing today's ball. The sky was blue in Augusta when he took off earlier, but 20 minutes later, in Newberry, the fog was thick. It took him longer than usual to land, and when he did, it wasn't smooth.

"But I really don't care. If I get on the ground, who cares?"

What Ballard and other Breakfast Club members will tell you is the more you fly, the better you'll fly. And that's why regular members urge those who aren't to come more often. "This is a good way to get pilots out," says Stoney Truett, a West Columbia pilot and flight instructor. "If you don't fly regularly, you lose a little bit of edge. It's like practicing the piano. And the safety factor goes along with it."

You don't have to be a pilot to visit the Breakfast Club. At meetings, people who live near the airport come, and a local dignitary — the sheriff, mayor or school superintendent — will greet the members. "It's designed for people who love airplanes, whether you fly or not," Truett explains. "We want people to come out to the airport and eat lunch and watch airplanes. The Breakfast Club is one way to do that."

Most of the airplanes are small, vintage craft: Cessna 120s and 140s, GA Cheetahs and Piper Apaches, Comanches and Cherokees. Some are homebuilt. "It's hard to say what kind will show up," says Mike Kullenberg, a Columbia pilot. "It's mostly everything there is to fly."

Meanwhile, back at the egg cracking table, Billye West is talking about how much he likes to fly and Harvey Kinard is talking about how much he doesn't. "The closest I get off the ground is when I jump up," Harvey says.

Billye can only tell him what he's missing. To him, there's no better way to see the world than from the air. The view from a car can't compare.

"Just think, if you was a thousand foot up, you could see hundreds of thousands of trees, thousands of homes and swimming pools and you can dive down and look at what else you wanted to," he says. "You can see people. You can see all the idiots driving up and down the road, and you up there all alone just flying. They got stop signs. We don't have stop signs."

He pauses for the final attraction: "We can fly over the nudist camps."

Harvey says he'll go when they do that. ♦

