

WHAT MAKES CAESAR CREEK TICK?

by Jim Hurst

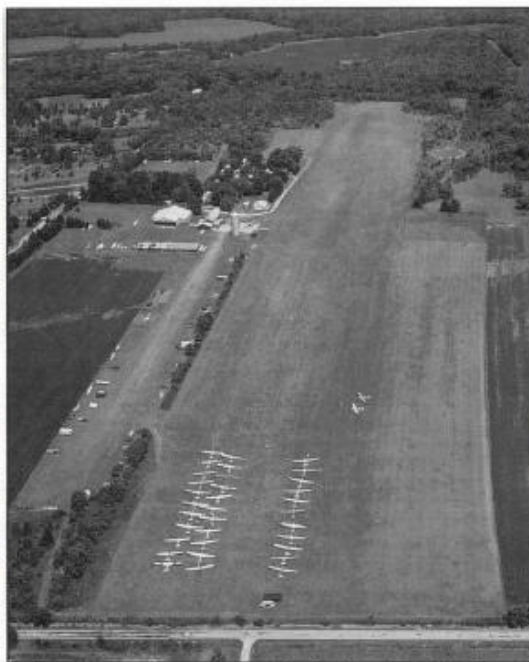
The Caesar Creek Soaring Club (CCSC) of Waynesville, Ohio is regarded as one of the most successful "club" operations in the United States. It has boasted 150 to 200 members for the last 25 or so years, operates 3 tow planes and seven club gliders from its own gliderport, and has the lowest rates for tows, instruction and ship rental we know of. In 1991, CCSC held its 43rd Annual Wright Memorial Glider Meet, its 9th Region 6 Championship, and its 4th 1-26 Championship. How do we do it?

The story begins in Dayton, Ohio in 1946 when a young man named Marv Frost bought a used glider, an LK-10. Marv had taken a little glider instruction in Michigan in 1941, but had not yet soloed.

Then Marv looked up Floyd Sweet who was a glider flight instructor, and who was stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Floyd and a friend, Larry Ealy found another LK-10, and Paul Birk, also working at Wright-Patterson, located a TG-3, and they all assembled at the South Dayton Airport.

It was 1948 before they started operating after having once recovered the wings on Marv's LK-10 which were punctured severely by a hail storm, and getting the owner of a BT-13 to put a tow hitch on his plane. Sometime thereafter, the Soaring Society of Dayton (SSD) was formed. One of the earliest stated goals of SSD was to some day have its own gliderport. It was an ambitious goal for such a small group of young men, but one which was never totally out of their minds, even at times when the idea seemed ridiculous.

Over the years the management of SSD always seemed to be far enough ahead of the game to have the equipment necessary to satisfy the membership increases. In their third year of operation, they bought their first tow



A view of Caesar Creek Gliderport showing the grid during the 1991 1-26 Championships. Photography by Jim Walasek.

plane, a Stinson L-5 N61578.

George Stillwagon, the maintenance chief for many years, bird-dogged *Trade-A-Plane* for engines, jugs, wheels and whatever. We even had an extra set of wings which could be recovered whenever it became apparent that the set in use would likely fail next year's punch test. "Old Faithful" performed well for over thirty years before she was finally retired.

SSD was badly shaken when the South Dayton Airport closed in 1954. A housing development began to surround the airport and the homeowners complained about airplane noise. Finally, the airport was closed after a Bonanza hit a house.

The SSD board went shopping for a nearby airport where gliders could operate and rather quickly discovered a

WWII practice/emergency landing field which had been adopted by the city of Richmond, Indiana as the Richmond Municipal Airport. There were three 5000 foot or so runways, taxiways and a few "T" hangars. SSD flew their L-5 and their newly acquired 2-22 to Richmond and staked their claim on tiedown space. It was almost a fifty mile drive from Dayton, but nobody seemed to mind.

The first 2-22 was N91847 which had an open back seat. She was later affectionately called "Old Yellow." We acquired a brand new 2-22C in 1958, N3909A, towed from Elmira by Tom Holloran in the L-5 with Pat Close flying the 2-22C. This provided a new trainer with a closed rear cockpit so that "Old Yellow" was available for the solo students.

By this time a crew schedule had been developed for each weekend day of the month. There was a tow pilot for each day (with some pilots doubling up) but only four instructors were on the schedule.

Something happened in the early 60's. Joe Bearden from Cincinnati became a member, got his commercial license and began instructing. When he gave rides to visitors, he would give them the stick and no matter how sloppily they flew, he would charm them with his Alabama accent, "Are you sure you ain't never flown before?" Joe won prizes several years in a row for recruiting new members, mostly from Cincinnati, and a new market was tapped.

Word of the club's activities spread rapidly: "Glider flying at Richmond Airport. Only \$4.00 a tow. Instruction FREE!" The second L-5, N69892, intended as a spare to be used when "Old Faithful" was laid up, began to be used almost every day when a second tow pilot was available. As the club grew we finally had two tow pilots scheduled

every day, and at least one instructor, sometimes two. For the first 10 to 12 years of operation, the club averaged 700 to 800 tows a year. Then in the '60's, 2000 tows, 2500 tows, 3000 tows!

Soaring took off as a popular sport all over the country, so the initial growth wasn't all our doing. But now that we were on a roll, we had to make the most of our good fortune. We had to supply the equipment necessary to satisfy our expanded membership and we had the opportunity to think anew about the long range goal of having our own gliderport.

In 1966, we realized that as a non-profit organization, we could never generate the money necessary to buy the land for our own gliderport. Therefore, we incorporated for profit in 1966 and authorized the sale of 2000 shares of stock at a price of \$100 a share. Members were allowed to buy one share of stock for each year they were in the club.

The previous year we had sold the idea of a higher performance two-place glider (Ka-7) to be financed by an "extra level" membership at \$100 a per-



George Stillwagon (left) and Marv Frost, two of SSD's founding fathers, splicing a manila rope before the days of polypropylene. Circa 1960.

son. We didn't know how the idea would go over, but to our surprise, 57 people plunked down their \$100, and the Ka-7

was all but paid for.

Our membership is primarily drawn from the industrial areas of Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio and includes many members from a number of prominent local employers such as Procter and Gamble, National Cash Register, General Electric and Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Our membership also includes doctors, lawyers, dentists, architects, accountants, college professors, and engineers of all sorts. We felt that our membership had the wherewithal to finance the gliderport when the time came.

In 1967, after investigating a few private landing strips, we discovered "the farm." It was a reasonably level piece of ground near Waynesville, Ohio, conveniently located between our major centers of population. It was planted in beans and corn. The owner worked a full time job in Dayton. He barely had time to tend his crops and cattle, so the place had weeds. I mean lots of weeds.

After a thorough investigation of the property, and the mood of the local zoning authorities, it looked like this was the place. The SSD Board of Directors, with the permission of the owner, invited the members to come and inspect. Then a pitch was made explain-



Jim Hurst, the author, getting ready for a day of towing in SSD's second L-5, N69892. Circa 1967.

ing that \$20,000 was needed for a down payment, and now was the time to get serious about investing in SSD stock. As with the Ka-7, the money rolled in and we soon had the down payment in hand.



It looks like Harley Shafer (center) is receiving two trophies at an early Wright Memorial Glider Meet from Julian Allen (left) and an unidentified meet official.

We took possession in 1968.

We bought a tractor and a mower. We paid to have the bean field graded. The State of Ohio provided free seed for ground cover. They also supplied hundreds of evergreen seedlings which now line the road and provide the wind breaks around the property. The result is a 2800 foot east/west runway, 600 feet wide at the busy east end, and 300

feet wide at the other. We started a limited operation at the farm, with private tows only, keeping the training operation at Richmond. In 1972, we left Richmond, and started operating full time at Waynesville.

The "farm" was financed by voluntary stock sales in the beginning. Now each member is required to buy 10 shares of stock (\$1000) which can be bought immediately (hardly anybody does) or on a \$10 a month installment plan.

Shares are redeemable at \$100 each when a member leaves the club.

A modest income from the flying operation, plus stock sales, has allowed us to make all the necessary improvements on the property and update flying equipment. We paid off the mortgage in late 1991. The flying equipment

now includes two Pawnees, an L-19 (a Korean war veteran), three 2-33's, two 1-26's, one 2-22C and a Grob 103. Our first 2-22, "Old Yellow" was sold to a nearby commercial operation at Waynesville Airport and is still flying.

Not counting the runway, we probably have 25 acres of grass where the weeds were waist high 25 years ago. This includes space for tiedowns, parking, picnicking and camping. We have 25 permanent camp sites with concrete patios (with electrical service provided, now big enough to handle microwaves) and space for 15 to 20 transient campers.

The picnic shelter which will seat about 100 people has a spit big enough to roast an ox (which it has on many occasions) plus a large grill and a couple



Bruce Helvie holding a silver cup won in a Wright Memorial Glider Meet in the late 1960's.

of refrigerators for liquid refreshment.

Tow planes are stored in the remains of the original barn which has been remodelled for the purpose. The barn also houses the tractor, lawn mowers, ground handling equipment, spare parts, tool shed, and our equipment van.

We recently completed construction of a new hangar large enough to house all the club gliders plus a few more, plus space for a heated workshop and an office. The hangar was financed by borrowing from the members, and all the loans were paid off in less than a year. A pole barn (roof only) is available for storage of privately owned gliders and trailers.

The Caesar Creek Soaring Club was organized as a separate organization a few years back to spread the work load, so that now the Soaring Society of Dayton owns all the equipment, buildings and grounds and maintains the real estate, while CCSC runs the glider operation and maintains the flying equipment.

Our charges are modest. A 2000 foot tow is \$12.00. Use of a club glider is \$2.50 per flight (\$10.00 for the Grob) with a one hour limit. Our fees are also reasonable for aircraft or trailer storage and permanent or temporary camp sites.

What's the secret to success? As with every organization which uses volunteer help, there has always been a cadre of dedicated people who have worked tirelessly for the club.

Julian Allen was one of those whose influence and energies were felt in the club for 25 years until he retired and left

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the area. He served many years as secretary and his basement was "club headquarters" where the tow sheets were assembled and supplied to the treasurer for billing, the newsletter was published and the club records were kept. Julian and a few other members were at the field almost every Saturday, rain or shine. If we couldn't fly, there was always some chore that needed to be done.

The late Walt Hermann was instrumental in finding the gliderport, negotiating with the owner and dealing with the local zoning commission to get the property approved for use as a gliderport. Walt was a past president and a long time member of the Board of Directors, who took an active interest in the management of the gliderport.

George Stillwagon, the most experienced tow pilot in the club, has not counted how many tows he has made in the last 40 or so years, but I hear he has about 700 hours of towing time. He has a machine shop in his basement where he has made all manner of parts for airplanes, gliders, tow vehicles, lawn mowers and who knows what all.

Gloria Dalton is at the gliderport most weekends. She edits and assembles the monthly newsletter, handles the crew schedule and can supply any sort of piece of paper you need, such as tow tickets, membership applications, pre-solo written tests, training record forms and whatnot.

Henry Meyerrose, a cabinetmaker by trade, designed and supervised the building of many of the facilities on the gliderport, such as the giant picnic shelter, the crow's nest (an elevated meet communications center) and the clubhouse. He gets involved in plumbing, electrical work and all sorts of repairs. He is the one who keeps an eye on the condition of the buildings and lets us know when we fail to notice that something needs attention. He taught many of us to hold a hammer by the end of the handle.

Pat DeNaples, erstwhile navy pilot and retired concrete expert, and his wife Mary, live in the original farm house. Pat is the club business manager, long-time treasurer, and by his very presence gets involved in almost everything the club does. Pat gets criticized for two things: (1) assuming too much authority in the running of the gliderport, and (2) not assuming enough authority in the running of the gliderport. It sounds like he does it about right.

Bruce Helvie soloed a glider in 1930 from a bungee launch off a hill in Akron, Ohio which later became the site of the Soapbox Derby. In 1932, he had a six-



Communications headquarters at a 15-Meter Class championship at Springfield, Ohio in the early 1970's. Left to right: Unidentified with the mike, Steve Lindenbaum, Bob Ettinger on the ladder, Bob Phillips and Bob Hawley.

hour flight on a ridge in Elmira. The next day somebody had a seven hour flight. He has a 1932 soaring license signed by the then-president of the Soaring Society of America, Orville Wright. He was a civilian glider flight instructor for the Army in World War II. He has been one of the club's most ardent supporters and workers. He was our chief flight instructor for many years. He is still an active pilot, owning pieces of two sailplanes.

The club has no employees. Crew chiefs, tow pilots, instructors and ground crew are all club member volunteers who agree to work one day a month. In exchange, a member gets a \$5 per tow discount. All students are required to work on crew until they get their rating.

When you get 150 to 200 professional people together, you've got a big collection of talent. Everything which we can do to repair/maintain/improve the grounds and equipment we do ourselves. We hire work done only when we have to, which is remarkably seldom.

Many people are on temporary assignments in this area and consequently, there is an ongoing turnover of professional people. This has helped to provide a constant stream of new students in the past thirty years, and the student training program is the backbone of the operation.

I have always felt that the best feature about CCSC is that anyone interested in flying can get as much out of the club as he wants to put into it. I joined in 1962 with some power time and no license. The club helped me get a private glider rating in 1963, and I spent the next year

riding passengers (over 200 flights) when I wasn't flying my 1-23. The commercial rating and CFI soon followed. Glider time, including glider cross-country time contributed to my requisites for a power rating which came in 1965. As soon as I had 200 hours of flying time, I was checked out to tow. Since then, about 80% of my flying has been free, and I haven't been stealing. Many of our instructors and tow pilots have done it the same way. The students get low cost tows and free instruction and everybody is happy. What a great arrangement!

We are very fortunate that the Soaring Society of Dayton and its offspring, The Caesar Creek Soaring Club were conceived by the right people, at the right time and in the right place. Some of the right people have been credited above, but there are too many to mention.

The right time was before land values were inflated to the point that our piece of ground would be unaffordable. The right place is a primarily agricultural area, where a reasonably level piece of ground was available, surrounded by neighbors most of whom are remarkably tolerant of airplane noise, with a population of over 1.5 million people within a 50 mile radius.

Having taken advantage of this lovely set of circumstances, the management of CCSC focuses its attention exclusively on activities related to glider flying and promotion of camaraderie among glider pilots, serving well the needs of its own members while strongly supporting regional and national soaring activities. An organization like this may never happen again. ■