

**A HOME FOR SLOW AIRPLANES**  
*Saginaw, Texas, Caters to  
the Cub Mystique*  
**By Walt Shiel**

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Everybody likes the Piper Cub. After all, what's not to like? You want comfort? Try getting comfortable in a Cub. You want quiet? Just listen to that rampaging 65-horsepower Continental four-banger. You want speed? Head off on a cross-country in a J-3 with any kind of a headwind. But, hey, the Cub is cute, personable, perky, and for decades it epitomized what the non-flying public meant when they said "light plane." And there's that old Cub Mystique.

The basic J-series Cubs are old, but certainly not forgotten. There are some folks at a little airport in Saginaw, Texas, who like everything about Piper's petite yellow puddle-jumper. People who have slowed down in the midst of hectic careers to turn the local Cub-cultism into a business, a family affair, and a brotherhood of like-minded souls. People who think that cruising at 75 miles-per-hour is just about right.

So, just where is Saginaw?

Saginaw, Texas, the kind of town where word-of-mouth is still the best advertising, is one of a string of compact bedroom communities that wrap around bustling Fort Worth. The Saginaw Airport (F04) is nestled on the north side along the town's main east-west artery, between a city park and a major grocery store, just southeast of the town's water tower.



Acres of grass surround its parallel turf and paved runways and its three rows of T-hangars. The airport huddles precariously almost under the final approach to Fort Worth's Meacham Field, just a stone's throw from Carswell Air Force Base, and just beyond the lateral limits of the control zone for Ross Perot, Jr.'s Alliance Airport.

The main office, home of TMark Aviation, is a one-story brick building with an attached maintenance hangar. Five years ago, Mark Heffley (the energetic thirty-something "Mark" in TMark) was doing some fabric work in that maintenance hangar during his off-hours. He and his gregarious wife, Tara (from whence the "T" in TMark), were busy with careers and family. So when John MacNeill, the airport's retired original owner, asked Mark if he'd like to lease and operate the airport, Mark didn't exactly jump at the opportunity. He remembers with a laugh: "When I went home and told Tara about it, of course the first words out of her mouth were, 'No, no. No.'"

Tara had known the MacNeills since childhood when she and her father would visit the airport to fly. But, as for running an airport, she shakes her head and says, "I was working at Meacham and we had two little kids -- where in our day were we going to do this?" Besides, she continues, "I am always opposed to change, and it seemed like a lot of work, and I wasn't sure that we were ready for all of this."

But Mark and Tara are both CFIs and Mark is an A&P, so they decided to take the chance. It was an opportunity they just could not pass up. Tara quit her job as a flightline hostess for Safety Jet, they formed TMark Aviation, and she started working full-time at TMark while Mark continued his corporate flying career. Despite the hard work and the expected ups-and-downs, she seems to have no regrets now, insisting that "it's been fun for us."

Besides the usual services like hangars, tie downs, and fuel, TMark Aviation's business cards proclaim: "Expert Fabric Covering" and "Piper Cub Restorations." Neither of those claims are mere advertising copy. The Heffleys are serious about flying, about recovering fabric airplanes, and about Piper Cubs. Their love of aviation is obvious, and it has its roots in their upbringings -- both come from flying families.

Mark's father is a retired Delta Airlines pilot, and his mother was a flight attendant until shortly after they married. The family always had airplanes on



their 7.5-acre home, with its 1300-foot grass strip, in Euless, Texas, less than a half-mile from the western boundary of the original DFW Airport. As a kid, Mark thought "that was normal -- everybody had airplanes in their backyards." His folks now have an FBO where they

rent Beechcraft Barons and a Bonanza.

You might expect Mark to have been one of those kids who grew up with a love of airplanes and aviation, the kind who soloed on his fourteenth birthday and earned his license on his sixteenth (like his brothers), but that wasn't the way it was. Mark says he had no real interest in flying "until my dad bought this Cessna 140. I went out to the airport one day to look at it and I thought, this is neat -- I've got to learn to fly this." He was 25.

Although his brothers went to college, Mark wasn't much interested in that either, so when he "discovered" flying, his father agreed to pay for his flight training. At his dad's urging, he also got an A&P license to increase his options. "It's a lot easier getting a job turning wrenches on an airplane with no experience," Mark notes, "than it is *flying* airplanes with no experience."

While broadening his maintenance experience, Mark took advantage of every opportunity to increase his logbook hours. He finagled a lot of simulator time while doing some maintenance work at SimuFlight, time that helped him move up from Cessna 210s and 421s to crew duties on Citations, Falcons, and Gulfstreams. He now flies a Gulfstream G-1 for a company in Denton, Texas, and says he got that job, at least in part, because he "had worked on the Rolls Royce engines on the Gulfstream G-1 and not very many people can say that."

Tara's father, Ralph Fazel, worked as a corporate pilot for oil companies for many years and eventually established Fort Worth Engine Overhaul, Inc., at Meacham Field, a company he stills owns. As a result, Tara grew up around airplanes and jumped at the chance to fly with her father whenever she could. Even though neither her mother nor her sisters were very interested in aviation, Ralph flew the family everywhere. Like kids the world over, though, the desire to be like everyone else was a powerful impulse. When Tara was about ten years old, Ralph says she complained, "When we go on vacation, why can't we be like normal people and drive?"

But Tara had been bitten by the got-to-fly bug, and she started flying in 1976. In 1977, she soloed and went on to earn her private license in 1978 -- all in a Cessna 140. Tara says, "My dad told me if I wanted to learn to fly I had to learn to fly in a real airplane. . . So I made the ground loops and did all those token tailwheel things you're supposed to do."

Most of Tara's CFI experience has been in Cessna 150s, but her experience has been broadened in other ways, such as instructing foreign students from a variety of cultural backgrounds where, sometimes, just being a woman was a handicap. At other times, cultural differences conflicted with scheduling, like the day she walked in for a ground school class to find all her

Middle Eastern students kneeling on the floor, facing east toward Mecca and praying. She had to delay class until they had completed their prayers.

After their first daughter was born, Tara took the job as a flightline hostess because it allowed her to work evenings and weekends, when Mark was available to babysit. As a result, they never had to rely on day care. Now, with the airport, Tara runs things during the day, and the two of them team up on the weekends and evenings, although Mark's corporate job schedule fluctuates quite a bit. Their two little girls seem to enjoy having the run of the airport and fly with their parents regularly.

Whereas the Heffleys have only been running the airport for five years, Saginaw Airport has been around for nearly 50. The McNeills, who still own the airport and lease it to Mark and Tara, built it shortly after World War II -- in fact, the Heffleys still have an old postcard showing the airport sometime around 1950 with vintage autos and airplanes populating the ramp. John MacNeill was a pilot for American Airlines when he started the operation. To build the maintenance hangar, Mrs. MacNeill had to drive all over the state picking up aluminum siding -- aluminum was in such short supply she could only get a small amount at each place. The airport originally had only a grass strip; the 50-foot wide parallel paved runway was added later, and the MacNeills added hangars as they could afford them.



The McNeills owned and operated the airport until the early 1980s when they retired to Eagle Mountain Lake, northwest of Fort Worth. They sold the airport and its 150 acres once, but had to repossess it when the buyer stopped making payments. The buyer had paid cash for a 40-acre portion and had sold that to the grocery store chain, so today's Saginaw Airport is 40 acres smaller. MacNeill knew Mark's father and Tara's family and had observed Mark's

meticulous work so, naturally, he thought of them when he was looking for someone to take over the daily operations.

The erstwhile first buyer, however, had not kept things up very well, leaving trash all over the property and even oil dumped here and there. The Heffleys had to keep a large dumpster on the property for almost two years until all the junk was finally removed. Clean-up was slow, and Tara says there are still a lot of things they would like to do to spruce up the place. But, for now, the facilities are adequate and the genial camaraderie more than makes up for any minor cosmetic deficiencies.

Mark's first experience with aircraft restoration was unexpected, at least for Tara. Without warning her, he bought a project Piper Cub for her birthday and brought it home while she was out. "I came home and opened the garage door and there was this airplane in the garage!," she recalls. "So we had a fuselage in the garage and the wings hanging from the dining room walls. It was kind of a slow project, but that's actually how [we] got started."

After finishing Tara's Cub, which they have since sold, the word got around. Next came some fabric work on a BT-13, then recovering a Cub for a friend of theirs. After they opened TMark Aviation, they got a job doing the elevator on a B-17. Then a sizable job came along. Mark heard about some



F-3F Little Cats that Herb Tischler of the Texas Airplane Factory at Meacham Field was restoring. Tischler agreed to give them the job of redoing the wing panels and control surfaces for all four F-3Fs. They had to drive to Meacham, pick up the parts, and bring

them back to Saginaw to work on them. Of the four aircraft, Tischler still flies one of the F-3Fs in airshows and it was on the cover of a recent issue of

*Kitplanes* magazine. Another is in a museum in California, and the remaining two belong to Cinema Air. Watch for them in the movies!

After that, Tara says, "We were pros!"

She was called on recently to do some repairs on Tischler's F-3F after its appearance at the Breckinridge Memorial Day airshow. An area of negative pressure where the flying wires come together had caused the tape to pull away from the fabric -- "it just sucked the paint off and then everything else started coming with it," she says.

The F-3F work may have been a high point to date, but business has been steady. A friend of Mark's drove an Aeronca Chief into a hangar, so they recovered the wings for him. And then there were the tailfeathers for a Canadian Harvard that won some awards at the Experimental Aircraft Association confab at Oshkosh. Mark is cautious, careful, and thorough when it comes to working on antiques: "They're getting so old now. We don't cover anything that we don't tear down. It's got to be sandblasted and epoxy primed -- so we know it's going to last as long as the fabric does."

They have learned this lesson through experience. A woman asked them to redo one of the wings on her Cub -- the other had already been done -- so she could finish the airplane and get it flying again.

Mark says, "We looked at the wing that was already covered and the fabric was real loose. . . We cut the fabric off of it and we pulled out some parts on that airplane. . . it was just frightening -- the strut attach fittings were [very close] to just coming completely apart." The owner had no idea of the real condition of her Cub, which is why Mark now insists, "It is so important to know what is underneath."



To underscore his point, Mark recalled an accident from about a year ago when a Cub crashed near Addison, Texas, killing both on board. Apparently,

somebody had put new fabric on a rusty elevator. It failed in flight. Mark and Tara are not going to let that happen to their customers.

TMark Aviation also rents a Cub for its owner, Bob Wetherall, an engineer at Lockheed Fort Worth Company. Last fall, they decided the Cub needed a few repairs and new fabric, so they started to work. As evidence of their care and attention to detail, they set out just to recover it but Mark notes that they "ended up cutting about half the tail section out and replacing it. [Corrosion] was halfway up the fuselage. It had been recovered in 1979 -- it should have been caught then."

While his Cub was down for the structural and fabric work, Wetherall



decided to have the engine rebuilt. Flying and airplanes are a real family affair at Saginaw, so guess who got the engine job?

Tara's father, Ralph Fazel, and his now one-man shop, of course. (It used to be a bigger operation back when he was specializing in the old radial engines but now he works

exclusively on the small engines like the Cub's Continental A-65.)

The rental Cub was rolled out for the first time on Wednesday, June 22. I went out to the airport to observe. This was an "extended family" affair, including Mark and Ralph and Bob and the CFI who handles most of their checkouts, as well as a few others who stopped by to see how it was going. Ralph and Mark brought out a sheet of paper with the "break-in" instructions and went over them carefully with Bob Wetherall to make sure he had no questions. Ralph explained, "Don't lug the engine with low power and steep climbs. Keep it at high power and shallow climbs."

This bit of wisdom, however sound, brought some chuckles among the assemblage as we wondered if, in a J-3, there was really any difference between low power and low speeds and high power and high speeds.

Ralph carefully pulled the prop through a few times, listening and feeling for that "just right" sound and feel of a newly rebuilt engine ready for action.



Satisfied that the engine was fit for fuel and air, Ralph, with Mark at the controls and the brakes, called, "Switch on!" and spun it for real. There was a cough and a sputter, then silence. One more spin and it caught, settling into a silky, throaty idle.

Mark eased it up to 1400 rpm and let it run for a couple of minutes then, following Ralph's directions, he shut it down to let it cool off before running it again. With the switch off, Ralph pulled several blades through gently, listening and feeling again. He turned to us and smiled. The reborn Cub was ready to fly.

Only a minor fuel leak and an IA sign-off kept it from flying that evening.

The next day, the fuel leak was repaired and the IA signed the Cub's paperwork. Mark flew the first flight -- it was flawless and smooth. Nothing like keeping the project in the family. . .at least when the family is as capable as the Heffleys and Fazels.

I've made five trips to visit Mark and Tara at TMark Aviation over the past month or so, and it's clear that their reputation for quality work is keeping that maintenance hangar full. I have seen three J-3s, a Super Cub, and a Tri-Pacer in the hangar at the same time for work varying from an annual to a complete rebuild.

The "extended family" atmosphere permeates the entire Saginaw Airport-TMark Aviation experience. If you hang out in the office, with its pool table and soda machine and card table, you'll eventually meet a wide variety of folks whose main interest is airplanes. . .mostly small, slow airplanes. Or at least taildraggers. Besides an assortment of Cubs, a very nice Cessna 170 owned by Ralph Fazel and a big radial-engined 195 call Saginaw home. I suspect most of the Saginaw crowd prefers the turf runway to the paved one. As Mark puts it, "The best part about this airport. . .is that everybody out here knows everybody."

Looking back on the past five years, does Tara still think they made the right decision? Well, she insists that, despite a fair share of headaches, "The fun has outweighed the headaches."

The maintenance hangar is busy, the Thangars are full, and airplanes come and go on a regular basis. The spirit of aviation is alive and well at Saginaw. On the wall of the office is hung one of a limited run of T-shirts, with TMark Aviation across the back. On the front is a Texas map, a yellow (what else?) Cub, and the proud proclamation that the Saginaw Airport is "The Best Little Airport in Texas" and the "Home of Slow Airplanes." There are times when slow is good.



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