

O-O-P-S! They aren't really old, obsolete

An informal group of pilots, former and present, meet for conversation and coffee once a week at Elmer's near the El Paso International Airport. They are all members of OOPS which, they say, stands for Old, Obsolete Pilots.

THEY DON'T LOOK old, certainly not obsolete and their conversation sparkles from references to early aircraft and aviation to the latest.

There's Jim Peterson, for instance, who started flying in 1924 when surplus World War I aircraft supplied a lot of training planes.

"There were some European aircraft," he said. "Money was tight in those days. Flight training cost \$20 an hour. We'd get maybe 15 minutes training one time, 20 minutes another, sometimes a half an hour."

"**NO ONE EVER** flew for an hour," chimed in Bill Thompson, who was assistant manager of the airport before he retired.

How did OOPS get started? "Wayne Champney was our founding father," said Warren Pullen, who was an aircraft salesman before he retired. He doesn't fly now. He adds with a grin, "After flying for 35 years,



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I found flying is dangerous. The skies are too crowded."

Champney owns his own plane and does a lot of flying.

Pullen soloed in 1935 in a Kinner Bird, a five cylinder craft which hasn't been manufactured since 1928.

THERE'S SWEDE Johnson. He probably has more flying hours than anyone. He started the air transportation department for El Paso Natural Gas Co. "He talked them into buying their first airplane," said Thompson. Swede estimates he has about 15,000 hours plus. "I didn't really keep count," he said.

Joe Holcomb looked around the table. "I'd say this group represents about 150,000 hours of flying time, added up."

"At least," agreed Pullen.

"I'm the amateur of the group," Holcomb continued. "I have only about 1,000 hours."

DICK METTLER, airport manager, smoked a cigar and kept members at his corner of the table enthralled with stories. He was airport manager from 1959 until 1968, then returned as manager in July of last year. He's not old enough to be an OOPS, said Pullen. So he's an associate member. Others who stroll in to join OOPS are Howard "Doc" Cole, Charlie Cook, Fred Saunders and John Maguire, who has a collection of World War II planes on his ranch near Fabens. "Howard's not really a doctor, he's just an operator," ventured a member.

Cole, Champney, Maguire and Saunders fly often so they can't be considered "obsolete." Other members acknowledge this, but are reluctant to make any changes. "Old, obsolete pilots" has a nice ring to it.

ALL OF THEM, except Holcomb, are members of Q.B. That stands for Quiet Birdmen. All Q.B.'s must attend 12 consecutive meetings before they are eligible to join. "I was invited to join but I could never make the 12 consecutive meetings," Holcomb said. The Q.B. meet at the Del Camino Motor Hotel monthly.

Pullen is a past governor of Quiet Birdmen. "The Q.B. started after World War I, about 1921, as mostly a social organization for pilots," he ex-

plained. "A prospective member had to be invited by a member and there are certain qualifications. There are about 21,000 members in the world. We all had ID cards of metal so that if you crashed and burned, the body could be identified."

The group got its name when a number of pilots got together. "They hollered and raised a lot of ruckus," said Peterson. "A newspaperman wrote about the meeting, calling them the 'Quiet Birdmen.' The name stuck." He's a past governor too.

PETERSON SOLOED in an Avroce (A.V. Roe, name of the manufacturer) and did a lot of barnstorming — about 12 years of it — in the early days. The craft was open and pilots and passengers wore helmets and goggles. One day he made six forced landings, each with a passenger. The next day he had a seventh. That's when he found the crankshaft of his Eaglerock plane was cracked which caused it to smoke and vibrate. Another old plane was WACO, named for Weaver Aircraft and pronounced "walk-o." The Ford tri-motor came in for discussion. It was made in the 1930s.

OOPS ought to get together and write a book.

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