

The Time Portal



Left: Mid-morning, before the peak (photo: Kevin Tanner). Above: Cessna 170.



by **John Loughmiller**
photo, opening spread: **Kevin Tanner**

It's early autumn and the southern Indiana night air is cool. Mist is forming and at the western tree line a single coyote surveys the scene, his eyes briefly illuminated by stray light from lanterns. He quickly retreats into the woods lest he be discovered by these strange newcomers.

Soon the eastern sky begins to betray the night with the first tentative streaks heralding the sun's return and as the light grows and strengthens, the mist thickens and then lifts to meet the new day.

An early rising observer shakes off the night's slumber and becomes aware of something at the extreme range of his senses: something first sensed, then heard, and finally felt. Can it be? Is that a rotary engine? Can there be any doubt about the nuanced, cadence-driven song that it's singing? Is there any other sound like that sound?

Through the haze over the river, as though materializing, a biplane appears—the first of dozens of old airplanes that will arrive today.

Soon the baritone of the biplane's big rotary engine is joined by the softer music of approaching Aeronca Champs, Luscombes and old Cessnas.

It's a sweet symphony that drifts down to the ear and



A classic Stearman takes off.



Half Mile Row of classics and antiques.



Cessna 140.



announces that a miracle has happened: time has been reversed. The Golden Age of Aviation has somehow flickered, faded in and out a few times, and then emerged from the rising mist.

Like a time portal opening, it isn't the 21st century anymore. It's the late 1940s once again and aerial ghosts from the 20th century are appearing in the sky above.

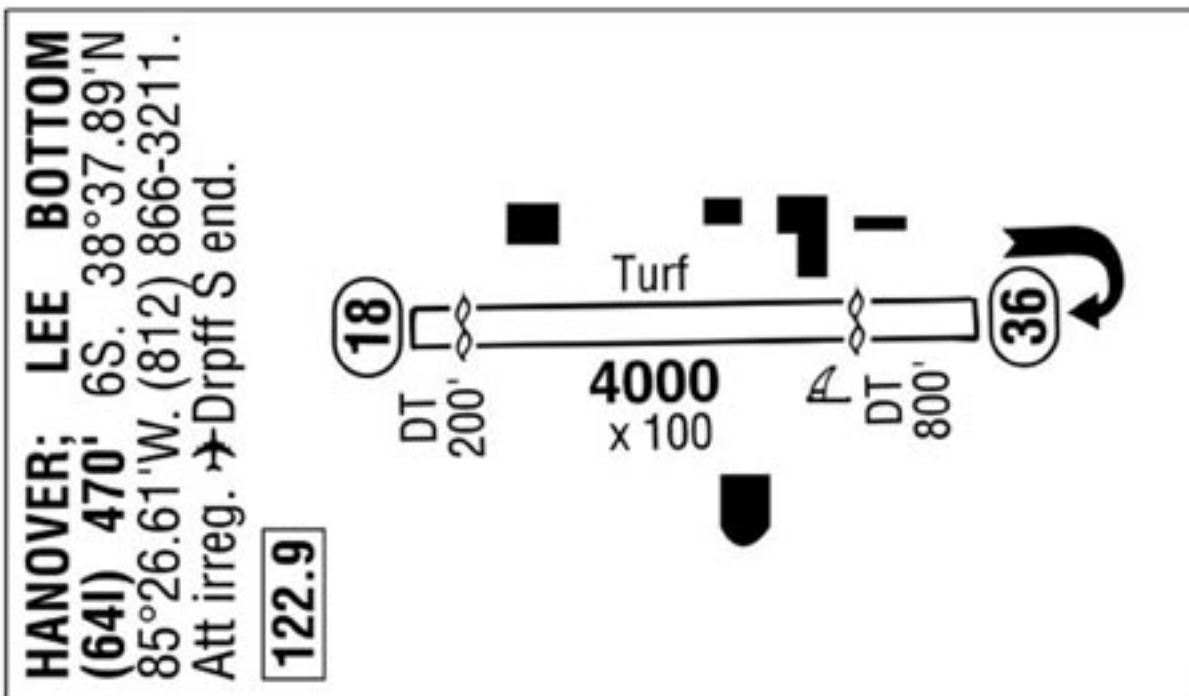
All along the 4,000-foot grass strip, the early arrivals crawl from their sleeping bags, rub their eyes and watch as first one, then another airplane clears the trees at the end of the runway and touches down, barely disturbing the grass. Awakened by the commotion, aviation enthusiasts open the doors of their travel trailers and stare in wonder at a sight that fills their whole field of vision. Scores of classic and antique airplanes have come to call.

It's the last Saturday in September at Lee Bottom Flying Field (641) near Hanover, Ind., and the great gathering of wood, fabric and tailwheel airplanes has begun. For those who still remember how it used to be—for the small boys and girls that live in their souls—this is a return to days of their youth.

For the rest of us, it is like being a kid in a toy store. We want to see everything and touch everything all at once. We ogle



1946 Cessna 140.



Map was enlarged to fit available space.

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the airplanes and talk to their pilots—some our age, some younger. And then we see those that grow fewer in number each year: those pilots whose “Total Time Since New” is nearly the same as the airplanes they fly.

The stories these elder statesmen tell are dear to us. The lines in their faces speak of days spent flying and working on the older airplanes—airplanes that had only the most basic of instruments and would bite if not respected. These pilots have an aura. They did it right and learned to fly when “IFR” meant “I Follow Roads.” They flew low and slow and they knew how to hold a course precisely because to do otherwise was to become “Temporarily Disoriented,” a situation very similar to being lost.

And when you talk to the owners of these machines, especially the old-timers, the conversation often goes like this:

“Do you mind if I take a closer look at your airplane?”

“Sure, go ahead. Say, have you ever

been up in one of these before?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to, though.”

“Well, c’mon. I’ll take you up.”

Once aloft, you’re given the controls and you feel you’ve gone to heaven without enduring the inconvenience of dying. You feel the “need for speed” slipping away. You decide that fancy navigation gadgets are actually an annoyance.

Before, you were an airplane driver. Now you’re a pilot.

Dating back to the 1930s, Lee Bottom Flying Field, hard by the Ohio River, has always been a private strip. Now owned by Rich and Ginger Davidson, it’s still private—but it’s also open to the public.

Rich is an airline captain and Ginger is a pilot and Rich’s “Registered Owner,” a term that is “Rich-speak” for “wife.” The Davidsons use their own resources to maintain the runway and grounds. They accept no funds from any governmental agency because with government funds comes government control.

In the summer, one Sunday each month, they host fly-ins called “Sinful Sundaes” because of the incredibly rich ice cream that’s served until it runs out. And everyone that sets foot on the field instantly becomes a member of their extended family.

But it’s the yearly September gathering that draws so many airplanes, pilots and aviation enthusiasts to the Davidsons’ “Haven for Old Airplanes.” Until you experience the camaraderie firsthand, you cannot appreciate it. Even if you’ve never flown a taildragger before or donned a leather helmet and goggles to go waltzing through the sky in an open cockpit, you’re welcomed into the group.

Rich and Ginger, plus the volunteers that help them with the Wood, Fabric and Tailwheel Fly-in, are nothing like some of the people you find at the large, commercialized events. These are folks who love flying, love to talk to those who love flying, and cannot help themselves when it comes to being friendly. It’s the kind of place where you’d base your airplane if you could. It feels like home.

So you inspect the rows of airplanes that run over a half-mile on both sides

of the runway. You find a place where your cell phone will work and try to describe what you’re seeing to a loved one, but words fail you. And you take pictures—lots of pictures—so you can relive what you’ve experienced when winter has come.

If ever there was a day that you didn’t want to end, it is this day. But all too soon, the sun, occasionally obscured by mid-level clouds, passes its zenith and starts downhill toward the bluffs that define the western edge of the valley where the flying field sits. As the



Rich and Ginger Davidson, owners of Lee Bottom Flying Field.

shadows lengthen, the light takes on that unbelievable sweetness that only September brings. And you watch as the pilots lift off, one by one.

The clouds break ever so slightly and allow the reds and purples and delicate colors that have no name to briefly overtake the sky while you listen to the last of the engine sounds fade and disappear. In the stillness, you strive to think of a word to describe what you’ve seen today. You think for a while and the word finally comes to you: “perfect.” The word is Perfect. You were part of an enchantment today and the experience was perfect.

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Cessna 195.