

**ONE OF THE** great fortunes in life comes with finding the right partner. It can be the partnership of a marriage, a business or the ownership of aircraft. Steve and Suzanne Oliver have succeeded with all of these.

Suzanne's from a small town in Oregon; Steve's from an even smaller town in Missouri. Both took to flying early, children of fathers who became pilots and paved the way. Taking lessons the same time as her father, Suzanne soloed a sailplane before she was old enough to drive. When Steve was 12, the two swaths he helped his Dad cut in the hayfield behind their farmhouse became a 14-foot-wide, 1400-foot-long runway for their Piper Vagabond. Looking back, it was pretty obvious where these two kids were heading in life.

She remembers her dad coming home one day and offering her sailplane lessons at North Plains Glider Port. He remembers being "scared to death" as a 4-year-old, when his father held him up to the tail end of a military jet at an air show, afraid that the jet would start. Their aviation memories and experiences began early, and even then, their paths began to converge. It would take years, and each would already have lived the life of a professional pilot, when old biplanes and fast horses would bring them together.

### **Steve's Story**

Victor Airway 3 passed directly over the Oliver family farm, and in the back-yard, close enough that you could "throw a rock and hit it," was one of the airway rotating beacons of the era. Steve remembers being 6 or 7: "I would run out in the yard and holler, 'Hello, TWA,' when DC-3s would fly right overhead...but I didn't get in any airplane, much as I wanted to, until I was 12."

That was when his dad got a job as a rural mail carrier. And, with his regular income, he joined the Missouri Flying Farmers, then got his license. Soon afterward, Steve's dad brought the Piper Vagabond home to the farm, and the boy's fascination with flight became a near obsession.

After graduating from his high school senior class of 13 students, he was off to the big city-Kansas City-to Aero Mechanics School at the old downtown airport. There began the lifelong Oliver routine of cramming more than what seems possible into a 24-hour day. He added a fulltime job as a line boy at another nearby airport to his full-time schedule as a student. At the same time, he began to take lessons from a pilot on the field who ran a banner-towing service with a Waco UPF7 and a Cessna 140.

"Eleven months from the day I had my first official lesson, I had a commercial instructor rating. At age 18, I was working, flying air shows, towing banners and teaching people to fly, and I was still going to school fulltime and working fulltime. I didn't do anything else, seven days a week, 24 hours a day."

There followed a stint of owning his own little flight school in northeastern Missouri. That was cut short when duty called, and Steve was off to Vietnam, not as a pilot; well, at least, not officially. He worked there as an air traffic controller, but after watching too many comedic episodes of former jet jockeys trying to transition to L-19 taildraggers, the young enlisted man with 90 percent of his flight time in taildraggers started giving the officers dual in the art of crosswind landings.

Coming home from the war, he began years of mail-hauling, airs how performances, flight instructing and banner-towing. It would be banners and thoroughbreds that would bring him and his future wife together. But first ...

### ***Suzanne's Story***

She was Suzanne Asbury then, and after she and her dad completed their sailplane training, they began powered flight training in Hillsboro, Oregon. For her, the training regimen was intensive, and in an experience that parallels that of her husband, within a year, she had earned all her ratings.

There was time as a flight instructor, soon followed by ferry flights moving new Pipers from Florida to the Piper dealer in Hillsboro, Oregon. Suzanne thought that the long cross-countries would be good experience for the corporate flying she had set as her career goal. Those diagonal paths from coast to coast did turn out to be beneficial, just not in the way she had envisioned.

Because she liked the idea, she qualified in a Taylorcraft on her home field and occasionally instructed in it. There were also a few hours in a Great Lakes biplane based there, but that was the extent of her still-meager tailwheel experience. Then, opportunity knocked in the form of a classic biplane designed to intentionally spew a lot of smoke, and her life was changed.

### ***Words of Smoke***

This part of Suzanne's story begins in the early '70s, when a Pepsi corporate pilot named Jack Strayer reacted to an inquiry from the marketing department. It wanted to know if there was a skywriter around that could be used to help commemorate a company anniversary .It seems that many years before, Pepsi had used a Travel Air as a sky- writer. It wasn't long before Strayer had not only found a Travel Air, he had found *the* Travel Air. It was the actual airplane that had flown for Pepsi since 1932, and all those years later, it was still equipped for skywriting.

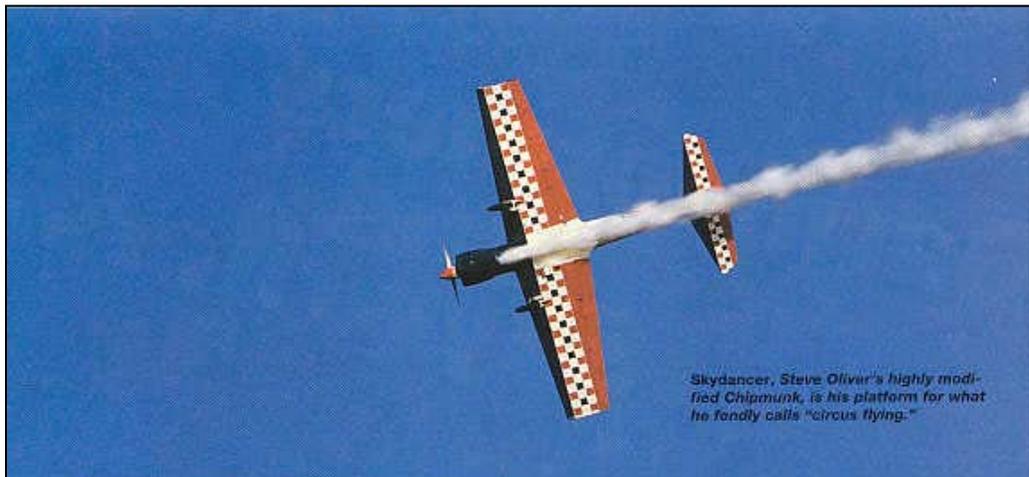
What was intended to be a one-time skywriting event snowballed into a full-time aerial promotional tool as Strayer began to get appearance requests from Pepsi bottlers throughout the country. The old Travel Air was barnstorming again.

By the late '70s, cross-country travel in the open-cockpit biplane was beginning to take its toll on Strayer, and he advertised for help. There were several "assistants" who ferried the big bird, with one even moving on to Pepsi's corporate travel department herself. But, around 1980, the position was open once again. And, as it happened, there was a young flight instructor/charter/ferry pilot who was having trouble finding a corporate flying job. Someone told her about Strayer's ad, and she sent him a resume. After a short but exciting checkout-and to her surprise-Strayer selected Suzanne.

Just over a year after Suzanne began to fly for Pepsi, Strayer was approaching retirement and began to turn over more of the responsibilities to the fresh- faced girl barely out of her teens. He began to teach her the art of skywriting.

Over the next few months, she slowly honed her skills. Mostly, it was practicing the four letters that made up her employer's name and ferrying the Travel Air from engagement to engagement. Then, still short of his planned retirement, Strayer fell ill with pneumonia and passed away. Pepsi called Suzanne and asked her to come to New York.

There, faced with a string of commitments, the company offered her the opportunity to run the Pepsi Skywriter promotional program. Pepsi was in a jam, and she was more than a bit nervous about what it all meant, but she took the job. Her first public appearance was to be in the sky over Churchill Downs in Louisville during the Kentucky Derby. It was there that she would be introduced to another gypsy pilot, a guy towing banners with a Stearman-Steve Oliver.



*Skydancer, Steve Oliver's highly modified Chipmunk, is his platform for what he fondly calls "circus flying."*

***RIGHT:*** With a serious cross-country panel and seating modified by Oregon Aero, Sky Magic is easily capable of the up-to-eight-hour-long ferry flights needed to position it for the next performance.

***FAR RIGHT:*** The list of manufacturers providing product support for Sky Magic reads like a "who's-who" of the aviation industry.

***BELOW:*** Just before a climb to nearly 10,000 feet for creating words with smoke, Suzanne Oliver prepares the cockpit of Sky Magic.



## ***Meeting the "Biplane-Flying Girl"***

In 1981, two airplanes were competing for the attention of the tens of thousands of fans at horse racing's premier event. Up high, Suzanne Asbury was now completely on her own in the Travel Air, and, down low, Steve Oliver was now an old hand at snagging banners off poles and dragging them around with a throaty Stearman.

It took the intervention of a young girl, the daughter of one of Steve's friends, to bring the two together. Rushing up to him, she informed him that she'd found a "biplane-flying girl that he had to meet." True to his nature, he said he wanted to "see the plane first," and then, he'd meet the girl. Life changed for both Steve and Suzanne that day.

Then began what he recalls as a year of "maxing-out his credit cards, chasing her around the country in a Cessna 150" (and throwing in a little ferry time for her in the Travel Air). By the next February, they were married, and soon afterward, Steve became part of the Pepsi "team."

## ***The Pepsi Team Begins***

The Pepsi bottlers who loved Suzanne's skywriting soon began to ask Steve to revive his air show career by adding a second airplane to the team. He was more than happy to oblige. In 1986, they bought a stock 1956 Canadian de Havilland Chipmunk, and with the advice of people who had worked on the famed Art Scholl's plane, began to take it apart down to the last nut and bolt. They drilled the skins off the Chipmunk and installed thicker skins to handle the requirements of a heavier powerplant. More than two years and 3000 hours of labor went into the airplane before Steve deemed it ready to fly.

Steve calls his routine "old-style circus" flying. It's a tight, right-in-front-of-the-crowd performance that can work a 3000-foot runway. He describes the Chipmunk's capabilities: "By today's standards, its performance doesn't come close to that of the Extras and Sukhois. On my initial run-in, I dive in at 220 to 230 mph and do a 6-G pull to vertical. I get one rollout of it, and I have to start changing directions, or it's going to back up because there's nothing left. An Extra can pull up from cruise flight, do four vertical rolls, then push over and flyaway."

With less power to manage, Steve has to squeeze what he can get out of the Chipmunk without the crowd being aware that's what they're seeing. And it's the mark of a pilot who flies his plane beautifully and that's what Steve Oliver does.



***LEFT: Designed by Steve Wolf, Sky Magic's tail section incorporates support wires above and below.***

***RIGHT: Sky Magic's main gear is 9 inches longer than a Super Cub's to provide clearance for the 90-inch prop.***

## ***The New Kid on the Block***

The long-lived team, now known as the Pepsi Aerial Entertainers, recently saw another opportunity to grow its stable when overseas bottlers began requesting appearances. There was no way to economically crate and ship the Travel Air - especially the Chipmunk - so Steve and Suzanne hit on the

idea of a new plane based on a proven design. It would have to be a do-it-all aircraft capable of skywriting and air show work, including night pyro performances. But most of all, it would have to come apart easily, be capable of being shipped in a standard 40-foot container, and then come back together quickly at the destination. Thus was born *Sky Magic* (see accompanying article).

### ***The Constant Companions***

As if their life on the air show circuit isn't busy enough, the Olivers also have a ridehopping business known as Beagle Air Tours, and that brings us to the other great love in their lives: dogs. When Suzanne and Steve met in 1981, he already had a steady traveling pal, a "beagle-mix mutt" named Charlie Brown. Over the years, Charlie Brown became a familiar face to air show crowds around the country.

On the taxi out for takeoff, she would position herself up on the fuselage just ahead of the small windshield of the open cockpit biplane. As soon as the power came up for takeoff, down she would jump into the seat. On arrival, as the tail came down and the power came off, she would leap back up and lean against the windshield to better greet the crowds.

It was, in the true Oliver approach to life, a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week partnership. Sadly, it ended in 1991, and the couple was devastated. It would take the Olivers six years to get over the loss of their dog and decide that the time had come for a new canine companion.

They were in Salisbury, Maryland, for a show when they talked themselves into a trip to the local pound. There, they found her; another mixed breed, this time, probably part terrier and part dachshund. They called her Pax. The Olivers claim that if a dog can come back as another dog, more than a little of Charlie Brown lives in Pax.

She is within sight of at least one Oliver at nearly all times. She flies in their planes, and, small enough to fit in a duffel bag, she's a carry-on on airliners. Pax is extremely friendly and eager to mix with air show crowds (especially the children); she's earned the nickname, "the Pepsi Pup," and is an accomplished "meeter and greeter" when the Olivers mix with their fans. But, with her eyes always on her human family, there's no doubt where her loyalties lie. And, for anyone who knows anything about dogs, that reveals something valuable about Steve and Suzanne Oliver.

It's been said that you can tell a lot about people by the passion with which they approach their work. You can also tell a lot about people by whom they've chosen for their friends-and who has chosen them. And there are volumes to be said about a couple by the way they treat each other. Here are two people who obviously consider themselves fortunate to have found each other. The way they go about their lives benefits friends, fans all over the country and yes, a little black dog.