



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of SHERMAN LUTZ



Compiled, Transcribed & Edited by SS (01/2003), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

Career:

- Started building model airplanes at age 11
 - Began learning to fly full-sized planes in the early to mid-1920s
 - Spent a year barnstorming in 1926 at age 22
 - Taught engine building and radio engineering at Beckley College in 1928 and 1929
 - Organized his airport in 1929 – the Boalsburg airport
 - Started teaching others how to fly after his airport was organized
 - Served as a flight instructor for Pennsylvania State University’s Civilian Pilot Training program
 - Taught 476 people how to fly at his airport
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The following information on Sherman Lutz ran in the December 1987 issue of Town and Gown magazine – a magazine for published for the State College and Penn State area in Pennsylvania.

Solo

By Elizabeth Bergstein

Visitors to Centre County (Pennsylvania) often arrive by commuter plane or private aircraft, and the scenery coming in has changed but little over the years. The small planes sweep low across the mountain range, cast a momentary shadow on the wide farm fields, barns, and silos and set down. It is the very first view air travelers have of State College and Penn State. The aerodrome and terminal are new but still small in comparison to city facilities. Across from the present airport and slightly to the west, sloping away toward the low blue mountains, are two farms. Sherm Lutz, aviator, grew up on one; Robert Ishler, retired owner of Ishler’s Furniture, grew up on the other.

Bob Ishler has been a flyer all his life, and his love of flying began with Sherm Lutz, with the romance that Sherm personified to his young neighbor. “I was only a farm boy, remember, and my father died when I was young.” The dashing pilot became Bob’s hero. “He was very handsome,” Bob says, and anyone meeting Sherm today can well believe it. “Then just imagine him in his flying jacket, jodhpurs, slick high boots, the helmet, and the long white silk scarf. He was just wonderful.” To a boy whose horizons were limited to the farm and farm chores, “the sight of Sherm, circling carefully, dipping down across the edge of the mountain, setting his plane onto the field, was wonderful beyond anything.”

Sherm was generous to Bob, often taking him skyward for a ride. “I had hitched up our team one day,” Bob remembers. “It was after my father’s death and I had all his responsibilities. My mother had asked me to take the team and go out to roll the mow-ground. Sherm was in the next field, warming up for take-off. He called to me: ‘Gotta fly to Harrisburg and back. The film for

the movie theater didn't come in. Want to go?' I climbed aboard without one moment's thought. When we were well aloft, I looked down. There were my horses where I'd simply left them, tethered to a tree!

"Well, I was just a kid, about 15, and I was enthralled with Sherm, with what he could do. I'd help him around the plane, whatever needed doing. He was very careful about his engine, always tinkering, repairing. Most of this work was done in winter when there wasn't so much labor on the farm. We'd haul the engine into his folks' house. Right into the living room – that's where Sherm worked on it. We'd crouch over the engine by the Greenwood stove, and Sherm'd work on the cylinders. I was the 'go-fer,' and glad to be. I'd run out to fetch tools, parts, the oilcan. My payment for all that I could do was the whole world – Sherm taught me to fly."

Sherm was, perhaps, just passing along the favor.



Sherm Lutz was 11-years-old when he began to work toward a career as an aviator. He grew up in a hard-working farm family in Centre County at a time – the early 1900s – when most families in the area made their living on the farm. "My people," Sherm refers to them with pride. Rooted solidly to the land, people like Charles and Bessie Lutz, with their sons, Morris, Sherman and Lee and foster daughter, Ella, expected no other vista of the blue mountain range to the west but the view from behind a plow. The Lutzes were third-generation farmers; no one suspected a flyer in their midst! Except that when Sherm wasn't helping with chores, he was building model airplanes.

In the early 1920s, Henry Noll, a Pleasant Gap garage owner, automobile mechanic and pilot, built an airstrip for his airplane – a World War I JN4-D (the famed "Jenny") – east of Pleasant Gap, about where the stone quarry is now. Sherm went to work for Mr. Noll, the grubbiest kind of work, feet on the ground but eyes on the sky. "I'd go out to the field as often as I could. It was seven miles and I'd run the entire way." Once there he'd perform any task Mr. Noll gave him, "wiping down the grease from the planes, filling the radiators, anything." Sherm's hard-working father took a dim view of this; his son was needed for farm chores. "But my mother let me go. If it mattered to me, she wanted me to have it."

He wished he could read up on aviation, "but there weren't any books. So, I just learned." Flying lessons cost a vast sum at that time – \$50 – which Sherm didn't have. The most money that could be spared for fun in those days was a dime at a time. ("My father always gave each of us a dime when there was a special fair at our church.") So, Henry Noll gave his avid, diligent helper lessons free. Sherm would race through chores at home, then make the seven-mile sprint to the airfield at Pleasant Gap, put in hours of grimy work and run back home before dark. That's how he "just learned."

In time, Sherm was able to buy a plane of his own, a Challenger OX-5, and kept it on his parents' farm. As Bob Ishler says, "Regulations were almost non-existent in the 1920s, so he could keep the plane right in their field."

Then in May of 1927, the face of aviation changed for all time; Lindbergh flew the Atlantic alone. He was 25. It's a source of local pride that the famed aviator later touched down more than once at the airfield in Bellefonte. Sherm recalls, "Dr. David Dale used to go out to the field with hot coffee for pilots like Lindbergh and for some of those early air-mail flyers. Lindbergh himself would be on some flight or other – Chicago to New York perhaps – and get grounded in Bellefonte by weather."

When Sherm was 22 in 1926, he went off for a year of barnstorming. Shelly Charles, a World War I pilot, and his brother Paul owned a flying service in Gettysburg; Sherm joined them to travel to Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas. "I did everything on our barnstorming tour; flew people up, took tickets, wiped down the plane." For a while after that, in 1928 and 1929, Sherm taught engine building and radio engineering at the now-defunct Beckley College in Harrisburg. He worked in the Washington, D.C./Arlington, Virginia, area as well and finally returned to Centre County for good to pursue his dream of an airfield of his own.

Sherm's very first airport included a reasonably flat "runway" along a wide field in Boalsburg; a tall tree known as the Old Indian Pine was its famous landmark. "Prior to that," he says, "all we had to land on were fields – College Field [site of Beaver Stadium], Bathgate's field, Thompson field." He felt strongly that there was a need for air transportation to and from State College, and he had for some time tried to interest the small community and the college in an airport. Almost no one saw the need or shared his foresight. And having foresight was one thing; raising money was another. "Bankers didn't want to loan money to flyers. They believed you wouldn't live long."

Finally, with financial backing from Aikens, Kennard and Mateer, Inc., owners of the Centre Daily Times newspaper and Hotel State College, Sherm's airport was organized in 1929. It was the year that ended with the stock market crash; the nation's economy hit rock bottom and Sherm's father admonished him, "Don't mortgage your life away." Nonetheless, the Boalsburg airport came into being. An early airmail depot was established, airport services were offered for pilots of the day – and Sherm began teaching others to fly.



As a boy, Charles Neyhart, Penn State 1949, rode his bike from State College to the Boalsburg airfield whenever he could. Model airplanes – of balsa wood and glue – were his childhood joy in the 1930s, and his fascination for the science of aerodynamics stayed with him his whole life. "I'd ride out to the field where Sherm maintained his planes, and I'd pump gas, wipe windshields, anything. On Sundays, I'd get up at 5:30 to ride my bike to Sherm's apartment at the Glennland Building. We'd tune in to a radio station out of Philipsburg." Everything depended on weather and weather came from Philipsburg "with an hour to spare. If the forecast was decent, we'd go buy the Philadelphia Inquirer, roll it up, go out to the field, and put the plane into the air. From the airport we'd fly out over the farm where Sherm's parents lived and drop the newspaper onto their lawn!"

Charlie gas-pumped and windshield-wiped his way into serious pilot training. Sherm's rigorous instruction toward licensing cost \$75, and parental approval was required. "Everyone thought my parents were crazy for allowing me to go up, but I soloed the day after my birthday, just waiting out the weather to do it. I was 16."

Another young student of Sherm's, Bob Ishler, had soloed in 1934 in a Fleet trainer; in 1938 he, like Sherm, became a flight instructor for Penn State in the Civilian Pilot Training program, a government program set up in colleges all over the country. Pearl Harbor brought most of these new pilots into immediate service with the suddenly crucial Air Corps. Sherm trained 90 pilots a year for three years in addition to his regular civilian students. At the peak of the government program, Sherm and four other flight instructors had 140 trainees putting in a minimum of 40 flying hours a piece in a single year. Bob Ishler remembers, "It was terribly hard work, the CPT. We instructors taught seven days a week – and they were 15-hour days. They'd never do that now. It was Sherm's teaching that made it possible for me to train so well. He was always careful, always making us think, always making us experience the unexpected." With war, Bob entered the Gulf Coast Training Command, later transferring to the Air Transport Command. In November 1945, he bought his first plane, a Stinson. "I hangared with Sherm, of course."

When the war started, Charlie Neyhart was still in high school, too young for CPT, but upon entering the service in 1943 – headed for Air Corps basic training – he had already logged 180 flying hours with Sherm Lutz. "I wanted to fly, of course, but they almost made me a bombardier. I was so disappointed I went to see the major at our base in Nashville, who was chief of classification. I'd known him at Penn State before my college career got interrupted for the service and I thought he'd help me." Thanks to Sherm's training in everything from maps to stick control, Charlie had scored a perfect 111 to qualify for pilot, navigator and bombardier. "Bombardier?" roared the major. "Well, I'll fix that," and young Charlie got his classification changed to pilot. The helpful officer was William Lepley, later to become a noted professor of psychology at Penn State.

Charles Neyhart met all the qualifications for special assignment and volunteered for the intensive British flight training school – there were five such bases in the U.S. – and won his Royal Air Force wings along with the Air Corps' first-lieutenant's bars and several medals. He completed his Penn State degree after the war and remained with the Air Force until retirement, a career that included five years of teaching at the Air Force Academy. He's survived being hit by lightning, having his engine blow up, being shot at over Korea and losing an engine to vapor lock en route to the Yalta conference in 1945 ("with 32 'stars' aboard!"), but his most memorable survival was a spectacular crash in 1940 when he was just 16.

"It was an Aeronca, and Sherm had us practicing chandelles, a fighter tactic and coordination exercise. The stick froze on us. We were sure to head straight into a nosedive. Sherm cut the power instantly, throttled back and took us into a shallow plunge, a long spiral toward the ground." They headed toward an apple orchard where the Gordon Kissinger farm is now. "We'd have been all right, but our right wing caught on an apple tree. At 60 miles an hour, we really slammed into the ground. The gas tanks split in half – they were located above us – but Sherm

had had the great presence of mind to switch off the engines – dead off. Otherwise, we’d have burst into flames. We were both drenched with volatile 100-octane gasoline.”

Charlie spent four months in the hospital with a badly broken leg – it plagues him to this day – but with a very wide grin on his face much of the time, the object of considerable attention. Sixteen pilots had already been killed in this aircraft, but no one knew what was wrong. Following the accident federal aviation representatives came to look over the Aeronca, or what was left of it, and to talk with the first survivors of a crash. Their flight check was thorough; the crash could not have been avoided because of a control-system failure.

Sherm Lutz, with 32 broken bones, was unconscious for six weeks and was a year recovering. The physician who treated him was Dr. Richards Hoffman from the little town of Howard. Sherm had taught Dr. Hoffman, a Penn State graduate, to fly, and they became fast friends. A fair exchange, perhaps: Sherm trained him to be a pilot in his usual careful, painstaking way, and after the crash, Dr. Hoffman saved Sherm’s life. He flew a specialist in from New York – time and time again – to consult with him on behalf of his patient and friend. Richards Hoffman went on to become a flight surgeon in the Air Corps.

And Sherm’s hospital expenses? “The Aeronautical Corporation of America, out of Middleton, Ohio, paid every cent. The company never built another Aeronca without correcting the fault in the plane’s structure,” a defect that had already cost too many unfortunate pilots their lives. Major Charlie Neyhart today avows, “They didn’t have Sherm at the stick. It’s very hard to think when you are heading into a crash. Sherm did.”

“All I thought about in the hospital,” Sherm says, “was that I wished I could be back up.” He also experienced considerable distress over the injuries to young Charlie. But Charlie’s parents had the courage to allow him back in the air when he’d recovered; their faith in Sherm’s training undaunted.

Amos Neyhart, 1921, director emeritus of the Institute of Public Safety at Penn State and professor emeritus of engineering, explains it simply enough. “We always trusted Sherm. We knew the accident wasn’t his fault, and our friendship with him has last 47 years.”



Torsten Bjalme immigrated to Centre County from Sweden in 1931; his father settled the family in Bellefonte, where he’d been hired to set up the instrumentation for a match factory. Young Torsten later took 20 hours of flying with Henry Noll, readying himself to be a pilot.

“In the 1930s, no one had money. A lot of us young would-be flyers spent time at Sherm’s airport in Boalsburg just for the love of the planes. I remember Al Reeser, a Penn State undergraduate. He hung around the airfield, no money, maybe not even enough to stay in school. But Sherm found ways to help him and he graduated. He learned to fly, too, soloed and got his license. Reeser became chief pilot with American Airlines and went on to become its vice president.” Airline pilots’ tests are rigorous. Many skilled airline captains originally trained with

Sherm; any graduate pilot of his had a strong recommendation going for him among senior aviators.

“Sherm was exceptionally receptive to young people who wanted to learn to fly,” Torsten says. “He’d help them save up a little money, 50-cents a week, then he’d give them a lesson, then another.” There were others like Al Reeser. Harold Archer, a Penn State student from Connecticut – he and his brother were both Sherm’s students. Harold became a test pilot during World War II, flying B-17s and B-29s. He went on from there to a position with Pratt and Whitney.

Torsten Bjalme himself spent over three years with Bendix Aviation, beginning in 1941, working in an experimental “tool room” on early versions of radar. He was drafted into military service in 1944. When war ended, he returned to Penn State, eventually becoming building superintendent and supervisor of technical services for Earth and Mineral Sciences. Not content with a quiet professional life, he bought a plane from Sherm in 1966 – a Cessna 172.

“In the 1920s Sherm flew a lot of aerobatics, but he was always a very safe pilot. One thing he taught would-be pilots may have saved a lot of our lives. Just prior to landing, he’d have his students go into an intentional spin, a stall. You learned how to pull out. And you never forgot.” Torsten is one of a small group of Sherm’s friends today who meet early on Saturday and Sunday mornings for pancakes and coffee – in Hanover, York, Reading, Harrisburg, Wellsboro or at the Corner Room downtown if weather conditions prevent taking to the air.

Safety is always a pilot’s first consideration. Harry Alexander, a retired vice president for Cerro Metal Products, once asked Sherm about early aviators’ famed long white silk scarves. Sherm’s answer contained no drama: “Oh, you just wore it to wipe off your goggles.”

Harry became a young Navy pilot in 1939 and has flown “everything from the smallest planes to 747s.” Moving to State College some years ago, he hangared his Cherokee with Sherm. “No one is more safety-minded than Sherm,” he says. “Everyone has the greatest respect for him and his years of successful instructing. He’s logged more accident-free flying hours than any trainer there is. Moreover, he may now be the oldest active trainer-instructor in the country.” According to Harry, Sherm gives student pilots his fullest attention, zeroing in on every possible problem. “Watch for carbonation,” Harry recites, “watch for icing conditions, watch for mountain waves...

“Sherm is a great instructor because he remembers everything he’s ever learned himself – where he’s been, what the terrain is. People say you could blindfold Sherm, set him down anywhere in all of Pennsylvania, and he’d know exactly where he was!” Harry, too, enjoys joining Sherm and other flyers early on weekend mornings out at the airfield, “even if the weather is very bad and we can’t fly. Then we just sit around with Sherm and do hangar flying.”



In 1945, Sherm bought three farms west of State College in Pine Hall and established a new airfield. He says with certainty that he'd never have had that land except for Bill Keeler, who was a bookstore owner and an area property holder. "Bill was co-mortgagee, helping me to finance things the whole way. He seemed to believe in me."

Virginia Keeler Smith recalls that her father genuinely believed in State College as a community that could grow. He was a strong supporter of Sherm's. More than once Bill had asked Sherm to fly to Ithaca to fetch Ginny home from Cornell on holidays. "I'd take a local taxi out to a farm field outside Ithaca and then just sit down on my suitcase and wait," Ginny says. "After a while, I'd hear Sherm's motor; he'd set his plane down just long enough for me to climb aboard and to help me with my luggage. It would be dark by the time we arrived over the old field in Boalsburg. My father and a few of his friends would be there waiting, the headlights of their cars lighting up the runway for us." And Sherm never forgot his debt of gratitude to Bill Keeler.

Extensive grading went into the new airfield project in 1946 to provide a level, smooth runway, and an air depot was built. All American Airways, flying DC-3s began to deliver mail and passengers to State College on a regular basis. In later years, and despite the opening of Mid-State Airport, Sherm continued to provide student flight training, charter service, hangar facilities, stopover services – and a gathering place for pilots on Saturdays and Sundays.



A framed photo of a handsome, beribboned Air Corps officer stands behind Penn State aerospace engineer "Skip" Smith's desk: "My father," he says with pride and warmth. Charles Smith was dean of Beckley College in Harrisburg in the 1920s; the school offered a unique agenda of business and engineering. With some foresight, they later added an aeronautics program. Dean Smith hired Sherm Lutz in 1928 to teach engine building and some radio engineering; later he taught flying as well. Skip Smith's distinguished father decided to learn to fly and put himself in Sherm's capable hands. Charles Smith went on to officers' training school, receiving a direct commission in World War II; later he served in Japan, retiring in 1952 as a full colonel.

Skip Smith entered the Air Force in time for the Korean War, although not as a pilot. Eventually he achieved his flyer's training and has since owned five planes. A graduate of Penn State (1959 and 1967), he now teaches in the College of Engineering. He says that after he had received a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in systems engineering, "There was a government program just starting here at Penn State; that's why I came back. The Army wanted to do some systems experiments. I got to be test pilot!"

Skip hangared his own planes with Sherm for years. "Sometimes I might fly back to Centre County very late in the evening; he would know that I was still out because my hangar door stood open. I'd put down in the dark, taxi in and there'd be Sherm, waiting by the hangar. I'd say to him, 'You didn't have to wait so late.' Sherm would always answer simply, 'That's part of the job.'"

Skip likes to tell the story of a time years ago when his father stood with a friend watching a small plane touch down on the landing strip in Harrisburg. Dean Smith observed, "That's Sherm Lutz." His companion said, "Why, how would you know that?" Skip smiles at his father's reply: "Oh, no one can land an airplane like Sherm."

Skip also likes to tell about Sherm's famous airport blackboard. "Sometimes men and women who had been students of Sherm's years before would set down a plane at his airfield. If he wasn't there when they landed, on his return he'd find a greeting on his blackboard: 'Hi, Sherm...' and a name. He remembered every name, every student."

Skip recalls the same thing happening from the air. "Small airports that don't have control towers have routine air-to-ground communication frequency. At one time, there was only *one* frequency. Some regularly scheduled commercial plane would pass over Centre County, the pilot someone whom Sherm had trained years ago. Then you'd hear their call on the receiver: 'Hi, Sherm! You still down there?'"

Flying with those friends, his many pilot-trainees, some dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, means more to Sherm than "name-dropping" about some of his more renowned passengers. For instance, when asked about piloting the famed Bob Prince, Sherm says only that Prince always let him do his job and never interfered.

Many Pennsylvanians well remember radio broadcasts of Penn State football games, in addition to Pittsburgh Steelers and Pirates games, by the late Bob Prince. His skillful statistician for these games was a Central Intelligence Agency employee, Ernie Berkaw, Penn State class of 1940.

"I recall working with Prince on a Penn State football game in the early 1950s," Ernie writes. "He was obligated through other sponsors to do the broadcast of the Pittsburgh Steelers against the Eagles that same night in Philadelphia. He asked Sherm to fly us from State College to Philadelphia and return, to make both games. Thirty-five years ago that wasn't quite as routine as it is now."

They left Beaver Field early in the fourth quarter of the Penn State game "with Bob dramatically turning over the play-by-play to his color-analyst, Mickey Bergstein, and we proceeded uneventfully to Philadelphia. Following the pro game, Sherm flew us on the first leg of the trip back to Centre County. Because of our low-altitude flight and increasing ground fog, we landed in Harrisburg where Sherm used a pay phone to call his airfield and instruct an aide to light some smudge pots around his landing strip. No sophisticated lights and control towers at the secondary strip in those days! Just Sherm's great experience and ability.

"But Prince couldn't leave well enough alone and presumed to ask Sherm what our general route back to State College would be. I'll never forget his answer: 'Well, generally we'll fly north along the Susquehanna until we get to Sunbury, where, if we can see it, we'll turn left.' With that, he turned over a chart to Prince to follow the route. It was an Esso road map. And, as usual, Sherm's navigation was perfect."

Ernie remembers the official opening of Sherm's field to commercial service. "The landing strip was a beautiful greensward, hardly distinguishable from the surrounding farms. I can remember being aboard All American Airways' maiden flight from Pittsburgh to New York. This was about 1949 and I had an assignment in State College. Since it was the first commercial airline flight into Centre County, there were local officials, spectators and a segment of the State College High School band awaiting the flight. While the plane circled Sherm's airstrip – what was ostensibly pasture land – the worldly Manhattan businessman sitting next to me muttered, 'Well, I can see the people and I can see the band, but where in heck is the airport?'"

Thinking back to when he first met Sherm, in late 1945, Ernie recalls, "There was a group who always lunched together at the 'round table' in the back room of the Corner Room [now part of Bostonian Ltd.]. Some of the regulars included John Truby, Tom Dale, Guy Mills, Charley Stewart, Bill Neiman, Bob Bernreuter, Lou Bell, Lynne Hoffman, Bob Tschan, George Leetch and Bob Galbraith. Sherm was an occasional visitor. He was distinctive because he was a good listener at a table given to good talkers. Occasionally when a declamation of one of the diners nettled him, he could look up, peer over his glasses and put an end to the rhetoric with one succinct, cogent remark."

Other distinguished company Sherm has kept included Penn State presidents he's flown to various destinations. Milton Eisenhower was one, but it happened almost by accident. Dr. Eisenhower was scheduled for a holiday in the Caribbean with the president of the United States, his brother Ike. President Eisenhower sent a twin-engine Cessna for Milton from Washington. It set down at Sherm's field in the evening; its pilots spent the night at the Nittany Lion Inn. "I got up about five the next morning," Sherm recalls, "and I knew we were probably in for trouble. It was eight-degrees outside, a bitter December morning. I went out to my field and warmed up the office and waited." The government pilots struggled out of their warm beds and arrived at the field with Milton Eisenhower in the early light. "Wouldn't you know it? In the stinging cold, they could not get the engines of their Aero-Commander to turn over, tried too hard, over primed it and developed ice in the spark plugs. I waited inside the office. I didn't want to interfere. You could see the disappointment on Dr. Eisenhower's face."

In the end, it was Sherm himself, and alone, who flew Milton to Washington. "I could just imagine what those pilots were thinking. They didn't know me, and they could see my little 'cow pasture' field." The single engine of Sherm's 170-Cessna turned over at once, and he patiently warmed it up. Then, with Milton's luggage and fishing gear stowed in the back of the four-seater airplane, they made the flight with ease. North of Gettysburg, Milton Eisenhower asked Sherm to put through a radio call to the White House; they were on their way to National Airport. "They radioed back that Ike's four-engine Lockheed, The Columbine, would be waiting. As we approached the capital I radioed for landing instructions, told them who I was." Sherm's official flight identification's last digits are "55-Charlie." The message from ground crew in Washington startled him considerably. "You are cleared for landing, 55-Charlie. We have closed down National Airport to every other aircraft in the area. It's all yours!" When asked if he managed a perfect landing, Sherm doesn't recall. "I just landed it." When ground personnel unloaded Milton's luggage and transferred it to The Columbine, Sherm's hat went with it. He never got it back.



With both feet on the ground, Edward “Ned” Minshall has never flown with Sherm, but he boasts a lofty distinction nonetheless: three generations of men in his family were students of Sherm’s. Ned’s father, the late Robert Minshall, was a professor of civil engineering at Penn State. In the college pilot-training program, aeronautical engineering set up a course in basic airplane construction, assigning Professor Minshall to teach it. “My father didn’t know *anything* about basic airplane construction,” Ned says. “He went to Sherm in 1942 and he learned to fly a plane and even soloed.”

In addition, Ned’s brother, William, was trained by Sherm in 1939 and became a Navy pilot in 1942. He flew for TWA from 1947 to 1981. His son, Robert, Ned’s nephew, took a degree from MIT but spent summers learning to fly. His instructor: Sherm Lutz. “So Sherm’s been a friend of my family for 50 years. He was just tops as a teacher – he taught the fundamentals of good flying, of good judgment. Often flight trainers will sell a package deal, so it behooves them to get their students soloed just as soon as possible. But, Sherm sticks with a student pilot until he knows with absolute certainty that he or she is, beyond any question, ready to fly. This sometimes cut into his profit, but he believed it anyhow.” Ned Minshall, 1952, was head of publication and of the advertising agency for the Commonwealth Education System.



Henry Yeagley, sale representative with Leitzinger Imports, Inc., was 10-years-old when he rode his bicycle out to Sherm’s State College airport from his house in College Heights. He’d seen an aunt arrive on the first scheduled flight Allegheny ever made; she stepped out of the plane onto the high grass of the “arrival area.” Hank has been enamored with flying ever since.

“My friend and I biked out that summer day and there were those wonderful planes. There was Sherm.” Could they have a ride? “Sherm said he’d take us both up for two bits a piece.” The view of his town from the air proved wondrous – a wonder Hank never forgot.

“The excitement of it was stupefying.” That was in the mid-1950s. In 1969, Hank took instruction from Sherm, followed his teacher’s guidance to the letter and soloed that spring in the same Aeronca that had served so many students over the years. “It was an old tandem-seater with a one-way intercom. Sherm sat behind you giving instructions and you couldn’t talk back. If you made a mistake, he would get quite animated. You held the control stick, but he had one, too, and if you were in serious error, he’d shake his control stick violently. You knew what it meant!

“He was a tremendous pilot. If you paid attention, he had a lot to teach. His Aeronca was almost a classic even then, an old reliable plane with none of the modern technology. His way of teaching was applicable to other airplanes, but learning basic flight dynamics has stood his students in good stead. In modern planes there’s always a chance the sophisticated technical equipment can break down; then you have Sherm’s basics to fall back on.”

Hank lives near Spring Mills “where I can maintain a runway in my backyard.” He often flies to work in State College in his own Piper Cherokee. It’s been nearly 20 years since he soloed, feeling the same wondrous excitement as on his first view of the world from the sky. And today he says, “It’s still just as exciting. Every flight.”

Sherm’s long career in flying has been full of that excitement – and some unusual experiences, too.

“I remember Hank Yeagley’s grandfather,” he says. “He was a well-known professor of physics at Penn State. I used to follow his ducks for him.” In the air!

“Oh, yes, it’s quite true,” Dr. Yeagley avows. “In the 1940s many scientists, including ornithologists, still believed that birds just flew in circles and then sort of stumbled onto the right path to hone in on their home ground. I was certain that it wasn’t true.” For a great number of experiments, he kept mallard ducks as well as pigeons, drove them to Hollidaysburg and set them loose. “Sherm would take off at the same time. It was the only means I knew of at the time to determine what the ducks did. I thought if they flew straight back to their loft on the Penn State campus, it would corroborate my theory that they were, indeed, truly navigating.

“We’d set them loose, Sherm would take off, and I’d dash back to Centre County in the truck to see what he’d observed. There were the birds, home in their loft.”

“They circled for a few moments,” Sherm says, “and then they flew straight back home. Right in a straight line. I had to be careful, though. If I trailed too closely, they’d go into a nose dive and I’d lose them for a few minutes.”



Before Mountainview Hospital was completed in 1972, thousands of central Pennsylvania families had to seek emergency care or supplies from distant large-city hospitals. Sherm Lutz’s phone rang more than once in the middle of the night. “Sometimes it would be the hospital people over in Bellefonte needing whole blood. I’d go over to the field and fly to the medical center in Johnstown, getting the blood back to my airport as fast as I could. The hospital would have someone waiting to take it to Bellefonte.” Other times it might be a desperately sick child. Once it was a newly born infant, Sherm rushed the baby and his father to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. The baby survived. Then Sherm would make the dark, lonely flight back to Centre County alone. “Night landings were a little tricky,” he says in something of an understatement, “because I wasn’t in position to afford a lighted field. But it wasn’t a problem for me. There was a small red light atop the water tower,” – one of many such water towers – “and I’d leave the light on in my office. I could recognize the office from the air.” The nobody-can-land-a-plane-like-Sherm perfect landings were accomplished by his simply knowing every rut and every hump along the field. “I’d begin my glide and my landing lights would pick up the strip. Then I could just recognize the path.”



When Penn State senior Jill Lucas decided on a career in aviation, her father, Robert Lucas, looked for a teacher whose record and ability were unimpeachable. The choice was obvious: Sherm Lutz. Jill began, as did so many hundreds of other students, with little or no knowledge of flying but with great determination to learn. And learn she did. The weeks of lessons turned into months and the months into a year and a half. Jill logged over 70 hours of flying time and soloed on October 29, 1985.

Along the way, Jill and Sherm became fast friends. She carried a full schedule of classes, studied and worked at Gatsby's. "It's hard work – much harder than anyone imagines. Skip Smith taught me a lot about aerodynamics and I took ground school with Paul Hornack. He was a good instructor; there was a lot of study." But the main "study" was flying with Sherm; landings, takeoffs, instruments, again and again. All for the sake of safety. "I learned so much from him in the way of judgment. It changed my whole approach to college life, bringing discernment into that, too. Sometimes friends would want me to party late on Saturday nights. Quietly leaving, I'd say, 'I have to fly tomorrow.' I'm not sure they understood, but I kept thinking over and over to myself: 'I'm just so lucky!'"

The lessons frequently extended beyond the airstrip, with Jill and Sherm taking many meals together during which they discussed flight routines. And Jill became a part of Centre County's "Old Boy" network of pilots, as Sherm's friends included her in social gatherings in their homes.

Jill Lucas took her Penn State bachelor's degree with the June 1987 class, receiving her pilot's license the same month. Niece of Penn State's quarterback great Richie Lucas, she returned home to western Pennsylvania with a great distinction of her own: she is Sherm's last student, number 476 in his entry book, wherein are noted the name of every student pilot and the day he or she soloed. Jill remains the final entry. The lessons are over; the friendship is for life.



On Saturday, May 9, 1987, Sherm closed down his airfield and sold the property to developers; vestiges of the old depot went on the auction block in Ferguson Township. It quite astonished Sherm that someone would bid \$370 for the original wooden propeller from his WACO F-2, bought new in 1933.

After the sale, Sherm hangared his old trainer, the Aeronca Champion, at a field in Centre Hall until he sold it as well. He keeps his remaining plane, a Beechcraft Bonanza purchased in 1959, at the Skyport field on Buffalo Run Road outside of Bellefonte. And he keeps it just like new. "Government representatives require inspection and relicensing every year. You have to take very good care of a plane."

If the weather today is not turbulent, Sherm is flying. But it's not all he does, as others will testify. His old friend Amos Neyhart says, "He's a man who never praises himself. But, I can tell you that he's taken on the responsibility of regularly visiting with someone at the nursing home whose only son lives far away. Many of Sherm's neighbors in the Glennland Building live alone;

some are elderly. He makes sure to check in on them and sometimes takes one or two of them out socially. He even makes pies for them! He'll still make middle-of-the-night flights for emergencies. And former student pilots always have a place to stay when they come back to town, with or without an invitation. If ever there was a guy who cared, it's Sherm."

It's what Sherm Lutz does best. Fly. And care.

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