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Backyard airstrip keeps skies blue for local pilot

By BRUCE STAPLEY

While most people use their backyard for a garden, Ed Edward uses his as a landing strip.

The Whitechurch-Stouffville Sixth Line resident owns a 100-acre farm north of the Stouffville Road. He is a self-confessed flying freak, who parks his Cessna 182 at the rear of his house.

Whenever he has the urge to take off into the skies, he simply taxis the four-seater onto his own 1,600-ft. airstrip, and readies for flight.

"I only use half of it for taking off and landing," he claims. "It's a powerful little plane."

Ed has his own real estate holdings company and is able to establish his own schedule.

In summertime, that schedule leaves plenty of time for flights to Sunday breakfast with flying friends, and longer jaunts to places as far as Mexico.

"I'll never retire, but I always have time for flying," he states, looking out of his living room window at his favorite toy.

The farm, one of two he owns, was once the property of hockey legend Lionel Conacher. He moved there with his wife, Jean, in 1982. Previously, they lived in Don Mills. They have four children.

Both properties are rented to the same man, who works the land. Ed has nothing to do with either farm operation. And the arrangement suits him fine.

"It gives me a place to take off with the plane, and we enjoy country living," he says.

His interest in flying dates back to his six years spent as a test pilot for the Royal Canadian Air Force in the Second World War.

"I took my service flying training at Camp Borden," he says. "We started with 40 in the program, but by the end of the eight-week course, there were only 32 of us still alive."

Ed didn't fly again until 1965, when his investigation of a helicopter accident that killed his brother, also a pilot, served to rekindle his interest.

He went out and bought himself a Cessna 172 and stepped up to the 182 model 15 years ago. He flies strictly for pleasure.

"I guess you could call it sport flying," he says. "I travel with my friends, the Flying Farmers.

I've even gone to Mexico and the West Coast."

He recently returned, along with co-pilot Jean, from the American Experimental Aircraft Association 'Fly In' at Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

"There were seven of us from the local area," he says. "And 12,000 to 15,000 aircraft in all. The Concorde was there along with United States military planes, warbirds and home built."

Ed and Jean flew to Expo '86 in Vancouver, along with three other area pilots. Ed claims the experience of flying across the Rocky Mountains was unforgettable.

"It was awesome. That's the only word for it. You don't actually fly over the mountains, you fly through the passes," he says.

The flights are not always long distance, though. A recent weekend saw them travel to Elmhurst Lodge on Rice Lake for a fly-in with fellow enthusiasts.

"We'll head up to Sault Ste. Marie to visit our daughter. It's a two-hour flight," he notes.

"All we talk about is flying," Ed says of those he accompanies on his flights. "We're from all different age groups and occupations, but the common thread is flying."

He claims his enthusiasm is as strong now as ever — he's never as happy as when he's up in his Cessna.

"You'd think by my age I'd be getting tired of it, but I'm not," he smiles.

Ed parks his aircraft at Buttonville Airport during the winter, or in Florida. He and Jean are avid land travellers as well. Some winters, will find them towing their Argosy trailer to the Sunshine State, while spending half their time flying in their plane.

He gives his wife much of the credit for contributing to the success and the overall enjoyment of his flying experiences, despite the fact she's not a licensed pilot.

"Jean's the co-pilot," he insists. "I'd never get the plane off the ground without her."

Ed claims the enjoyment he derives from flying has as much to do with the social element as it does with the sheer pleasure of being up in the clouds.

"Flying with friends makes it that much more enjoyable. I really feel it gives you that zest for life," he says of his hobby. "It keeps you young."

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