

A Remembrance

The World's Smallest Airport

Perhaps the only traveling circus ever to spring from Athens roots to national recognition in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum was the innovative and outrageous 1940s air show known as The Thrasher Brothers' Aerial Circus.

In 1945 my father, Grady Thrasher, and his two younger brothers, Bud and Tunis, returned home to Athens from service during World War II. Bud and Tunis saw Naval action on ships in the Pacific. Grady, an experienced pilot before Pearl Harbor, spent his war years as a flight instructor for the Army Air



Corps. When the war ended, Grady happily accepted an offer to return to Athens to help manage its airport. Bud and Tunis, who had been taught to fly by brother Grady as teenagers before the war, arrived back in Athens without clear employment or career prospects. But, as they would later recount, they were “ready to try anything that didn’t involve being shot at.”

The author grew up around airplanes.

I was three years old at the time. My mother, a 22-year-old native of Toccoa, was pregnant with my sister, Miki. For a while, we all, including Uncle Bud and Uncle Tunis, both unmarried, lived with my Grandmother Thrasher in her home at 840 West Hancock Avenue. The spacious, aging Victorian-era structure, squeezed onto a small, terraced lot, easily accommodated everyone. The tiny back yard ended a few feet from the emergency entrance to the original St. Mary’s Hospital on Milledge Avenue, a venue for witnessing continual drama, both exhilarating and tragic, throughout my early childhood.

All three Thrasher brothers had grown up in the old house.

Grandmother Thrasher, widowed at the outset of the Great Depression, had raised her children on the value of thrift, initiative and self-reliance, and taught them that a good sense of humor can soften the hardest of times. As a teenager, Grady learned to fly before the war while hanging out and doing odd jobs for pilots and maintenance personnel at the Athens airport.



Uncle Bud did the wing work.

Although only 26 when the war ended, he had logged several thousand hours flying and flight instructing, and was proficient in all aspect of avionics. Aware that airplanes, generally, and daring aerobatics, in particular, had captured the postwar public's fancy, he convinced his brothers that people would pay to see the three of them perform aerobatic stunts at the Athens Airport.

But first, they needed an airplane.

Moving Target

Lucky for them, the federal government at that time was disposing of its war surplus equipment at public auction. The brothers scrounged up a few hundred dollars and made a successful bid on an almost new, ready to fly, maneuverable, single-engine Piper Cub,

Then, as my father told it, "We had some really good luck. I got a loan from an Athens bank and purchased the first brand-new 1946 sedan delivered by the Ford Motor Company to an Athens dealership."

They painted the car white with red stripes, then built a steel and wooden platform on top strong enough to bear the weight of the Piper Cub. Signs were created and placed on the sides of the platform to proclaim "The World's Smallest Airport." The Thrasher Brothers' Aerial Circus was born.

The brothers practiced during the week and performed their aerial feats on Sunday afternoons, first at the Athens Airport, then at airports throughout the Southeast.

The acts included a “delayed opening” parachute jump by Bud (an early version of skydiving) and wing walking, during which Bud hung by his bare hands or knees from the wing struts of the Piper Cub piloted by Grady. Soon they acquired a couple of old, but powerful, radial engine biplanes in which the brothers, piloting separate



The trick was to land and take off as the "airport" sped down the runway.

planes, piloting separate planes, could perform an amazing array of coordinated loops, spins, rolls and other stunts. Carefully choreographed near misses always drew gasps from crowds.

The centerpiece act of the Aerial Circus was Grady’s landing the Piper Cub onto The World’s Smallest Airport as Tunis drove it down the runway. Sometimes, a strong crosswind required two or three approaches before a successful landing could be achieved, but Grady always managed to get it done. When Tunis stopped the car, Grady would step out of the airplane, grin and wave to the crowd. Then he climbed back into the cockpit, pushed the airplane’s throttle forward, and as Tunis accelerated The World’s Smallest Airport to Piper Cub takeoff speed (about 60 mph), Grady and the Piper Cub would roar back into the sky.

Daredevil Fame

As their daredevil reputations spread, the Thrasher brothers received invitations to perform at airports all around the country, but Athens was where it began, and Athens was where it ended in 1950 when Grady, Bud and Tunis decided to quit pressing their luck. They shut down the Aerial Circus, sold their airplanes and sought more conventional ways to earn a living.

Their feats were not forgotten, however. In 1976, when the new Smithsonian Air and Space Museum opened in Washington, DC, the Thrasher Brothers’ Aerial Circus story and photographs were displayed in the Exhibition Flying Hall of the museum. They remained on display there until 1981.

In the early years of the Flying Circus, the income generated barely exceeded the costs of putting on the shows. I remember as a five year-old, riding with my father in the Piper Cub above the Athens airport on Sunday just before a show would begin, both of us counting the vehicles lined up to gain entrance to the airport. The price of admission was a dollar per car, truck or tractor without regard to the number of people it carried. But there is another side to the story.

In 1947, most of the Air Circus airplanes and practice sessions were moved to Elberton's then little-used airport to avoid interfering with the growing air traffic around Athens. For about 18 months we lived in Elberton before moving back to Athens. The tight finances of the Air Circus made it necessary for The World's Smallest Airport to serve also as our family car.

My mother, never a good driver to begin with, would take me to kindergarten, go grocery shopping and run typical household errands in the red-and-white-striped Ford turned mobile-aircraft landing strip. On several occasions, the extended-corners landing platform ripped into store awnings and dented traffic signs when she took the unwieldy vehicle into town. The merchants and town officials were forgiving at first, perhaps because of the novelty of it all, but eventually the Elberton police chief sent a polite letter to my father requesting, "for public safety reasons, please do not allow Mrs. Thrasher to drive The World's Smallest Airport inside Elberton's city limits".

Whether for that reason or other, we moved back to Athens and lived in a house on the Athens Airport grounds until the Aerial Circus closed in 1950. By 1949, when I was in the third grade, we could afford a new family car. In 1951 the unused, rusting and battered World's Smallest Airport was sold for parts.

Grady Thrasher