

# Cheerful as a Chipmunk



Bill and Myrt Rose and the perfect av-life

BY BUDD DAVISSON

*Note: Budd had written this article not long before the death of Bill Rose. We publish it now as a tribute to a lifelong contributor to the antique airplane movement.*  
—Editor

BONNIE KRATZ



One of the basics of aviation is that quite often the people who have the most interesting airplanes are more interesting than the airplanes they own. And, although Bill and Myrt Rose have an interesting Chip-

munk (and a Goose, a Mallard, lots of Ryans, a Bell Jet Ranger, and . . . ), it is just one flying milepost in two lives full of interesting mileposts of all possible kinds.

The Roses are something of

vintage aviation icons, because they are both highly active, energetic people who have given virtually their entire lives to vintage aviation and have invested untold dollars and hours into saving vintage airplanes.

"I find them, rebuild them, and eventually put them up for sale," says Bill, though it's obvious he isn't looking that hard for buyers. "I guess you might call it a productive hobby."

To do what the two of them do at their rural home outside of Chicago, with its own grass runway and hangar complex, hardly qualifies as a hobby. Even though Bill uses the word "hobby," most think that trivializes what is actually a wonderfully colorful and worthwhile obsession.

Neither of the Roses can remember a time when airplanes and everything connected with them didn't occupy stage center in their lives.



Bill Rose (aft) and his wife, Myrt, enjoy the sporty handling of the Chipmunk over east-central Wisconsin.

BONNIE KRATZ



H.G. FRAUTSCHY

The Chipmunk's primary role as a training aircraft is defined by the straight-forward layout of the tandem cockpits.

Bill says, "When I got out of the Marine Corps in '47 I went into business, and *then* got my pilot's license in '53. Shortly thereafter, I bought a '46 Bellanca, and I ran that thing from coast to coast over and over. I don't know how many cross-country trips I made. It was simply part of my business."

When asked why he ran coast to coast so many times, he says, "It's like marrying Myrt: It was just the right thing to do."

Myrt says, "My first foray into aviation was actually parachuting. I made my first jump when I was

16 and have been at it, off and on, since. In fact, I was part-owner of a parachute manufacturing company, which my ex-husband still runs, and it's doing quite well. I didn't actually get my private license until 1975, so I'm a relative newcomer as a pilot."

The parachute thing even spilled over into Bill's life when Myrt got him to make a tandem jump on his 60th birthday.

Bill says, "Considering that her ex-husband packed my chute, I thought that was a pretty gutsy thing to do."

Inasmuch as Bill has taken something like 25 airplanes under his wing to "rescue," as he puts it, some are more special than others. One of them being the Chipmunk he and Myrt brought to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2008 and another being Myrt's original Cub.

"I had that Cub when I first learned to fly," she says. "I named it *Winston*. I don't know why. It just looked like a Winston. Then, at one point in my life I sold everything I could sell and, stupidly, one of them was *Winston*. Years later, Bill tracked him down to Florida, but even though the owner had died, the widow wouldn't sell it to him."

When it comes to airplanes, Bill isn't easily dissuaded and he kept track of *Winston*, finally following it to Massachusetts, where he bought the plane.

"I brought it out to Chicago and had it restored exactly the way it had been when Myrt had owned it. Actually, we may have overdone it since it won Best J-3 at Oshkosh 2006 and 2007."

Bill did all of this without telling Myrt, and he smuggled it into their hangar without her knowing. To say she was surprised at the unveiling is an understatement.

"I cried," she says. "It was just too much, and *Winston* looked so happy sitting there."

Today she has lots of airplanes to choose from, but when it comes time to go flying, *Winston* is usually the first choice. Living on a grass strip with a couple that truly loves him, *Winston* must be one happy Cub.

Bill is always on the lookout for airplanes in need of TLC, but buying the Chipmunk wasn't by accident or an act of mercy.

"I saw my first Chipmunk at Sun 'n Fun and decided I had to have one, so I started searching. I knew Ryan STs really well, but the Chipmunk was new to me. When I finally found one I bought it sight unseen. My mechanic looked at it and said, 'It *may* be flyable, but it's leaking all over the place.'"

It sounds like Bill found another bird to be rescue. In typical Bill Rose fashion, however, he overshot the mark a little.

"That airplane was an RCAF machine built in 1956. It is serial number 56, but I also wound up with two more Chipmunks built in 1956 and one built in 1950."

He bought number 56 in 1988, but didn't actually start work on it until 1991, and part of the time was spent learning about Chipmunks and tracking down requisite parts.

"As a lifetime member in the Shuttleworth Trust in England," Bill says, "the other members proved to be an invaluable help. I wanted to restore this airplane to be as original as I could possibly make it, and that meant finding a lot of original parts, which isn't always easy. The parts are generally out there, but it takes relationships like I had with others at Shuttleworth to spread the word and find the hard-to-find parts."

Old number 56 was a tired airplane and should have been restored years before. However, in the early 1990s, Chipmunks hadn't really started to climb the vintage airplane totem pole yet, so investing what was obviously going to be a substantial amount of time and money in such an airplane couldn't be justified by the normal vintage airplane enthusiast. Bill Rose, however, isn't your normal vintage



The later models of the Canadian-built Chipmunks featured the large bubble canopy, a hard-to-find item that Bill Rose was fortunate enough to find as a new old-stock part.

BONNIE KRATZ

**He bought number 56 in 1988, but didn't actually start work on it until 1991, and part of the time was spent learning about Chipmunks and tracking down requisite parts.**

airplane enthusiast. He was on a mission to produce the most original Chipmunk the fly-in crowds had ever seen, and when that's the goal, finances are usually not part of the equation because the owner is doing it for another reason. The payback is sliding down into a cockpit and knowing that the surroundings are exactly as they were when the airplane left the factory. And, as the credit card ad says, that's priceless.

"Although the airplane was basically airworthy, every single part of it needed restoring," Bill says. "For instance, when we got the wings open we found that a number of ribs had to be replaced. This, of course, meant finding ribs or making those parts we couldn't find.

"The fuel tanks had to be replaced altogether, and that's where some of my Shuttleworth friends helped because we found a new set in England, which saved us tons of work and gave us really good tanks. We would have never been satisfied with the originals, no matter how much time we spent restoring them.

"The engine wasn't really worth



Powered by a Gipsy Mk. 10-1 engine, this DHC-1 Chipmunk was built by de Havilland Aircraft of Canada Ltd. in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, in 1956, and is, coincidentally, serial number 56.

BONNIE KRATZ

rebuilding and the prop needed to be replaced, which wasn't easy because those props are unique to Chipmunks. I found two engines, but even though Gipsy parts aren't as rare as those for some other engines, it's still a specialty engine, and it takes a while to find the right guy for both parts and building it. Dave Watson helped us there, and we wound up with a really nice Gipsy Mk. 10-1. And it only leaks a little, but with any old airplane, you just learn to live with small leaks.

"We wanted to take the interior all the way back to stock military, which meant finding the documentation for all the placards as well as the right panels and other assorted military stuff that had disappeared. This took a lot of research, but we think we hit it right on the nose."

Bill's airplane was a Canadian-built airplane so it had the big bubble canopy as opposed to the birdcage type of canopy on the English-built airplanes. It's a huge piece of plexiglass, easily scratched and damaged. It is also hard to replace.

"We spent some time 'flipping over rocks,' and eventually, we actually found a perfect, brand new old-stock canopy. You have to wonder how something like that survives for



H.G. FRAUTSCHY

Myrt's original Cub, *Winston*. She learned to fly in this very Cub, and Bill Rose tracked it down and had it restored for his favorite aviatrix.

so long, but we've seen similar things happen on our other airplanes where a particular part is found in an attic or a barn, where it has sat for 50 years or more. Finding the right canopy saved us a huge amount of trouble.

"After the airplane was finished, I kept fiddling with it," Bill says, "but finally flew it in 2007. I usually do the test flights, but this time I let Clyde Erickson, my King Air copilot, do the honors, and it was almost a totally squawk-free flight. Since then, we fly it as often as we can. It's such a beautifully balanced and gentle-flying airplane, it's hard not to love

it. In lots of ways, I think I see it the same way Myrt sees *Winston*. It has loads of personality, all of it good."

It's hard to say what's next for the Roses, but you know it's something interesting. Who knows? Maybe they'll do another of their fly-in-within-a-fly-in round-ups as they did a few years back when they had 14 airplanes lined up at EAA AirVenture: four Ryan STs, three Chipmunks, *Winston*, an SNJ, a Fairchild F-22, a PT-22, a Grumman Goose, and a Grumman Mallard. Hey, if you can't find a fly-in, invent your own, right? 