

## EARLY AVIATION AT THE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT

There were no asphalt runways, no fleets of planes. Back in the early days, says Laurel's Wes Nicholas, flying was done "from fields of aviation-friendly farmers in the area." Wes should know. His dad, Joe, was one of the early aviators in the 1930's, when he began his forty year career in aviation.

"Back then," Nicholas says, "most of the planes were open cockpit, like the Curtis Wright Pusher, Hisso Eaglerock and an unknown plane named "Whitey Sport". But the scenes weren't exactly glamorized shots of Howard Hughes type pilots in their goggles and gear. They were way more practical scenes of western-style hunting. "They would shoot the coyote from the air, land close by, get the pelt and turn it in because there was a bounty on coyotes at the time," recounts Nicholas. That was for profit, and during some trying economic times, but flying was also done for fun – like scaring unsuspecting fishermen in the Yellowstone, by cutting the power, silently sneaking up on them, then gunning the engine while passing overhead. Those were the days – before the FAA and environmentalist regulations that no longer allow for such antics and back when friends of Joe Nicholas paid \$2,400 for an OX5 Eaglerock. But, that was also back in the days when flying was not nearly as safe.

"Whenever he was flying," Nicholas says of his dad, "he was continually looking for a place to land in case the engine quit. That habit saved his neck many times as he had 17 'dead-stick' landings. One time the field was so small, he had to disassemble part of the plane to get it out."

Wes Nicholas followed in his dad's footsteps and received his private pilot license back in 1967. While no longer flying, he still enjoys talking about the old days, "I still have my mother's helmet and a wooden propeller, although I'm not sure now which plane it came from."