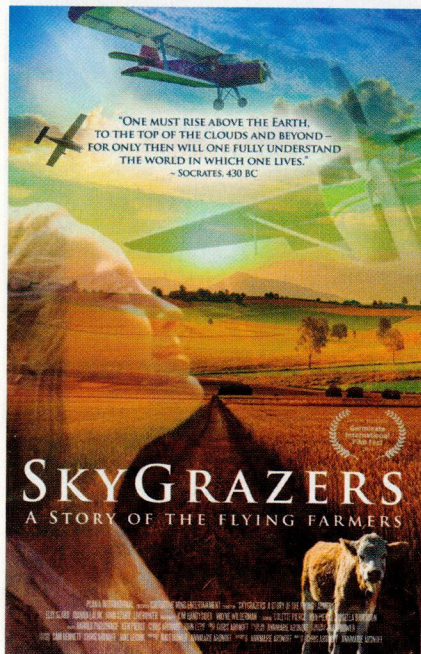


SkyGrazers

A STORY OF FLYING FARMERS



Annmarie and Chris Aronoff are co-directors of the movie.

For a non-flying aviation experience you may find very satisfying and spiritually uplifting, I can highly recommend seeing *SkyGrazers — A Story of the Flying Farmers*. I was lucky enough to attend a theatrical screening of this 73-minute documentary film that tells the story of the International Flying Farmers and expands into a look at current and future general aviation in Canada.

HERE'S HOW THE FILMMAKERS INTRODUCED THEIR WORK:

"A joyous ride in the sky! This uplifting documentary film celebrates a resilient group of rural aviators from the Canadian prairies who show us that you're never too old to fly! Shedding light on the root of the global pilot shortage, and the importance of agriculture in our changing times, *SkyGrazers* illustrates the triumphant stories and struggles of the delightful International Flying Farmers. *SkyGrazers* is a story of togetherness, family, and the pursuit of passion."

I met Annmarie and Chris Aronoff, co-directors of the film, who have been mightily bitten by the flying bug. Like thousands before them, they came into

contact with the International Flying Farmers organization. They met Ken and Colette Pierce, who live with their Cessna 182 on a farm near Virden, Manitoba. The film's story begins with Colette's childhood dreams of flying and how, in her late 50s, dreams became reality when she learned to fly. Ken and Colette have flown over much of Canada and the documentary includes a dramatization of their worst flying experience — an escape from their floatplane when it flipped over during a takeoff run. They're still flying and are pillars of the Manitoba Flying Farmers and active with the international organization.

The flying farmers organization began in Oklahoma in 1944 and has had its headquarters in Wichita, Kansas since 1953. The addition of Canadian chapters made the Flying Farmers International in 1961. During this time there was huge interest in small aircraft for farming. In 1978, International Flying Farmer membership reached its peak of 11,000, but today it is only about one tenth of that. The world of aviation has changed. Aircraft manufacturers no longer encourage the relationship of farming and flying. Luscombe once called its Silvaire Sedan "the plane designed by farmers for farmers". Stinson bragged that its Flying

Station Wagon was "a personal plane specially built to meet the thousand and one needs of farmers and ranchers".

Farming has also changed. Fewer and larger farms accompanied the emptying out of the countryside in Canada and the USA. Some members see the end of the organization as inevitable as the membership ages and many flying farmers trade their airplanes for recreational vehicles.

Some have 'turned pro' and become aerial applicators. The film features a modern aerial application company owned by flying farmer John Lepp and his family, the ground crew.

The Flying Farmers had a lasting effect on Canadian aerial spraying regulations. Beside me in the theatre was Matt Sattler, who started flying to spray his farmland in the 1950s. He was one of many farmers who took advantage of the exemption in the regulations that allows a farmer using his own aeroplane to spray his, and his neighbour's fields for hire within 25 miles of his own farm without commercial licensing. After a few years' experience he also became a licensed custom sprayer.



The film describes the pilot shortage as a great opportunity for people to take up flying. Co-director Annmarie Aronoff came to love aviation through stories from her fighter-pilot uncle who flew F-86s and tested C-104 Starfighters for the RCAF. The key for SkyGrazers, the co-directors thought, is creating awareness of the abundance of opportunity for old and young pilots through visual stories in entertainment. Besides SkyGrazers, Chris and Annmarie have also developed a fictional aviation action adventure movie which they plan to film in Canada. "We believe that if young kids watch a movie and see a young girl piloting a plane on the big screen, they will believe they can possibly do it too. Our role models usually come from what we see on screen. There are too few aviation movies for mainstream audiences, so our mission is to produce more with relatable aviation role models in compelling stories." The Aronoffs also wanted to

highlight the importance of social groups and agriculture in our society's changing times, by illustrating how entrepreneurial family farms are diversifying.

After spending so much time with the Flying Farmers, the Aronoffs said they fell in love with the people of the aviation group. Their documentary was shown at

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the Flying Farmers International Convention, and many of the delegates greeted the couple with hugs after the show.

"We're pretty proud of how this is going," said Annmarie, "And we're excited to get the word out for the Flying Farmers

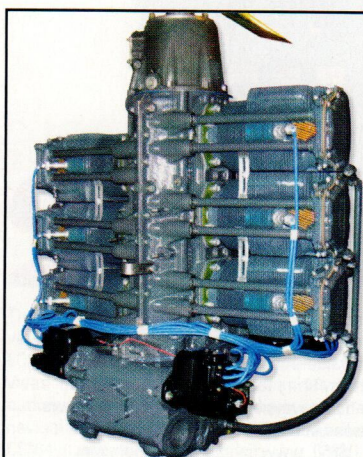
and for aviation in general, and to represent farmers and show their important stories to other people."

While SkyGrazers has aired on multiple Canadian networks, the film is headlining the Germinate Film Festival in Ohio, the Ag & Art Film Festival in California, and overseas at the Helsinki Education Film Festival International in Finland. All of the events explore the importance of educating audiences about agriculture.

With hopes of encouraging one future pilot at a time, SkyGrazers has already at least one success story, says Annmarie Aronoff. "It's funny because we wanted audiences to watch SkyGrazers and say, "I can do that". Sure enough, throughout the making of the film, my co-director/husband Chris started taking flying lessons and just got his pilot's licence. It's a dream come true because it's not something we thought was possible in our busy lives."

Her husband pointed out that aviation is actually very accessible, and most people don't think they can do it. "I went on a discovery flight and, even though I've always been afraid of heights, the moment we left the ground I was hooked. It's just a really wonderful thing for anybody at any age to do."

Although not currently showing in any theatres, a three-minute trailer can be found on YouTube and a DVD version is available on Amazon or from the Aronoff's company Plan A International. A condensed version of the SkyGrazers, called Flying Farmers, is available on CBC Gem. ✎



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