

Dixie Living

SOUTHERN PEOPLE, SOUTHERN STYLE

BIG DREAMS of small planes



Good is in the details: Minuscule paratroopers leap from a C-47.



Photos by WILLIAM BERRY / Staff

He was never a fighter pilot, but with his hand-carved models Holic McAvoy vicariously lives his lifelong dream.

Aerial fantasy takes full-throttle flight in woodworker's scale-model world

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Holic McAvoy looks back on his 65 years and allows that if they had gone the way he wanted them to, he probably wouldn't have a museum in his back yard.

Probably wouldn't have that old Seaboard Lines caboose, either, or the antique cars.

"I had a teacher told me once I'd never amount to anything because all I did was dream," said McAvoy, a slender man with a ready smile and sly sense of humor.

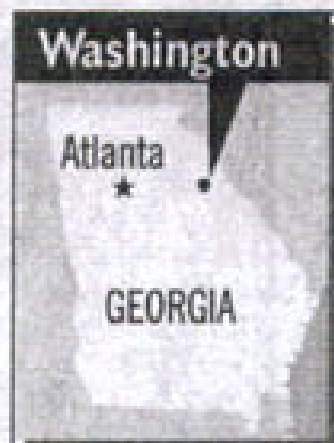
McAvoy never realized the dream he had in his school days, but he found another way, many years later, to work it out. The results are in the trim little red brick museum, where he flicks the light switch and the indirect lighting flows up the sky-blue ceiling and down the sky-blue walls.

It's full of airplanes — climbing, diving, flying on level bombing runs — all 1/30th life-size. At the visitor's elbow is an old yellow PT17 biplane. Its tiny pilot holds the stick with his right hand, and his left hand crosses over to wave at someone on the ground, just a small wave, the same way a real PT17 pilot used to dive low and wave at McAvoy 55 years ago.

There are 39 warplanes in this small blue room and three more in an anteroom full of World War II memorabilia. McAvoy carved them all in wood.

"I used to dream of wearing that officer's uniform and having those fliers' bars right here," he said, pointing to his chest. "I dreamed of it all the time. I drew airplanes all the time. I failed the seventh grade because all I did was draw airplanes."

Holic McAvoy's life took a number of odd turns from its beginning here in the Wilkes County farm country. It was rarely easy; sometimes it was more difficult than many people today could believe.



10 cents apiece.

In March 1940, McAvoy's father found work as a carpenter, helping to build the Jacksonville Naval Air Station. When the war started officers came to McAvoy's school with little kits containing a few pieces of wood, accurate outlines of Japanese planes and a piece of sandpaper, asking the boys to make models for identification training. Those were McAvoy's first models.

"From the ages of 10 to 15 were the best years of my life," McAvoy said. But when the war was over in 1945, the job was over at Jacksonville and the McAvoy's were back in Wilkes County, scrabbling for a living again.

There McAvoy "plowed a mule and drove a lumber truck" to help out while he finished high school. At 17, he entered the Air Force, but it didn't work out. He found out he had to be 21 and have two years of college to get into flight school.

At 20 his enlistment was up, and McAvoy enrolled in the Atlanta Art Institute, where he learned to be a commercial artist. He met his wife, Dolores, and got married there, but the market for commercial art was drying up, and "when I got out of

"We were on welfare in the Depression," he said. "My Daddy was a sawmiller, a sawmiller and a farmer." McAvoy, still in grade school, trapped rabbits and sold them to a wholesaler for

school there wasn't anything to illustrate but salmon cans and milk cartons," he said. After five years of free-lancing, he returned to Wilkes County.

"After all that ambition, that was a hell of a thing. I was pretty well defeated."

His father, in the meantime, had established a woodworking business and McAvoy went to work for him. Before long, young McAvoy started his own woodworking operation, and it's still going. It makes pallets, skids and stakes for holding silt fences in place around construction sites.

His son runs the business now, McAvoy says, and he's got plenty of time to follow his dreams. In a long garage are four antique cars, including a 1936 Pierce Arrow with only 9,000 miles on it. "I love old cars, he said with an embarrassed grin. "I've got 13 others stuck around here and there."

He bought the caboose for his wife, a portrait painter who happens to love cabooses. He remodeled the interior to serve as her studio.

It's McAvoy's ambition to build most of the significant airplanes of World War II, and he figures he's still got about a dozen ahead of him, including the B-29, the largest of all. They're carved in accurate detail from glued-up blocks of high-quality pine. He makes the small figures himself, and molds the plastic for the windscreens and the gun turrets.

Each plane in his crowded museum represents a specific event. Paratroopers are leaping out of the C-47 over France; Pappy Boyington's Corsair is diving on an unsuspecting Zero, its paint peeling "just the way it did in the Solomons."

"If I had realized my dream of flying, I probably wouldn't have done all this," he said. But his eyes are still clear and his hand is steady and now he could surely win a pilot's license.

"Well, I decided not to get my pilot's license. If I did, I'd have to get an airplane, and it would probably become an obsession," McAvoy said. "I'd keep on trading up until I got a T-6 [a military trainer]. These civilian airplanes just don't appeal to me. But my son went out secretly and earned his pilot's license, and that really did please me."

McAvoy's museum is never advertised, and not a lot of people know about it, but it's open to anyone who calls ahead for a visit.

For information or to arrange a tour, call (706) 678-1681.



A B-24 bomber is painstakingly replicated, right down to the hit tallies and worn paint.