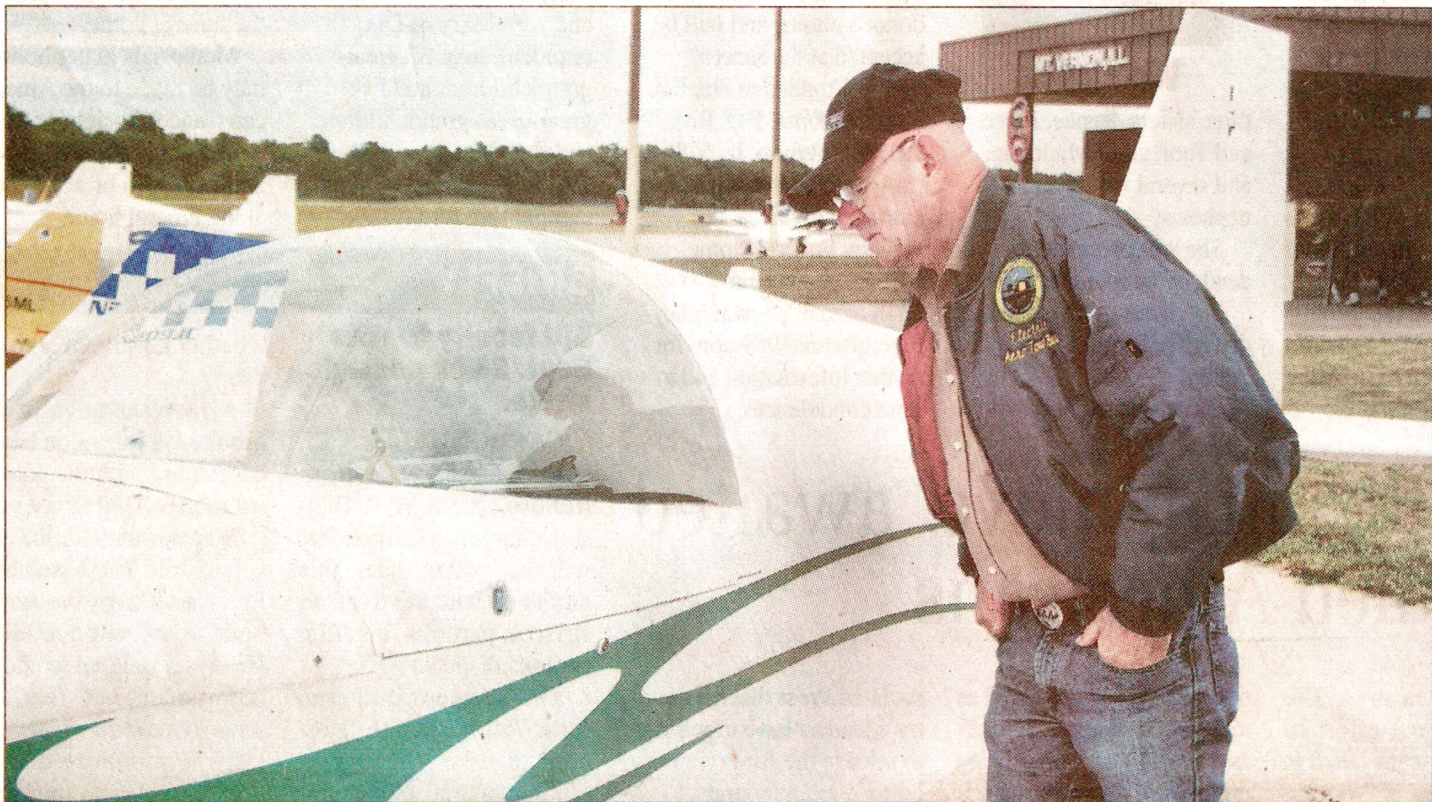


Home-built aircraft



Danny Buckner of Marion, Ind., inspects a KR airplane at Mt. Vernon Airport's seventh KR gathering Friday. Buckner, who flew his factory-built craft to the airport, came to the event for the first time to talk with KR experts and seek advice on finishing his first home-built plane. DEREK BEIGH/REGISTER-NEWS

KR gathering kicks off at airport

By **DEREK BEIGH**

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MT. VERNON — Home-built aircraft enthusiasts from 24 states and three nations came to Outland Airport to kick off the facility's seventh KR gathering Friday.

"This is a chance for pilot/builders to bring their planes to a centralized location and for dreamers who've been working in garages to get inspiration and finish their projects," said Airport Manager Chris Collins. "It's an incredible labor of love to take these ingredients and end up with a 150-mile-per-hour-fliable airplane at minimal cost."

About 200 builders, dreamers and observers are expected to attend the two-day event, which gives guests the opportunity to compare designs, take test drives and vote for which plane will win 'Builder's Choice,' one of six awards given at Saturday evening's banquet. That's in addition to two technical building lectures, this year focused on airframes and engines.

Ron Smolinski of Toledo, Ohio, sat out the first session to take in several of the aircraft alone. Since he's been attending KR gatherings across the nation since the early 1980's, he has a finely-tuned sense of which planes have made the most improvements on the basic KR design.

"I like seeing what people are doing," he said. "Over the years it's gotten better and better."

Smolinski said this year is an especially exciting one for him as a KR fan: He's on the verge of owning his first plane assembled from the ground up after many years of factory designs and fixer-uppers.

"Life gets in the way of building planes," he said with a laugh. "(KR) is built just like a model airplane, and I did those as a kid. It just got big. After the plane's built I'd like to fly it to gatherings and let people see my workmanship."

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Jeanette Rand of Huntington Beach, Calif., also appreciates the craft of KR from an unusual vantage point. She spent the late 1960s and early 1970s watching her husband Ken perfect the first such craft for its initial flight in 1972. Jeanette and the design have kept Ken's name alive together since his unexpected death in 1979.

For Jeanette, who grew up in Marion, the gathering is an opportunity to reminisce with old friends and spread Ken's story to new ones.

"(The design) was ahead of its time from necessity," she said. "It was designed because Ken and his partner (Stuart Robinson) were young engineers with families who couldn't afford factory planes. It was just what they wanted."

Despite Rand's cross-country trip, the 'longest distance flown' award — given

to the person or people who traveled most to the gathering — will almost certainly go to a group who came to Mt. Vernon from Norway, a trek in excess of 4,000 miles.

Collins said that kind of dedication is what has made KR craft, and the gathering, so resilient.

"We also have people this

year coming from Brazil," he said. "It's like this every year - it's a worldwide design."

The KR design has survived tragedy as well; this year's gathering is first in Mt. Vernon since two pilots crashed in Jefferson County in September 2009, one en route and one at the airport. Neither incident proved life-

threatening, but Collins said the memory of that weekend has made safety a priority even though it hasn't jeopardized the event's progress.

While the gathering used to travel every two years, it's now spent seven of the last eight in Mt. Vernon, and Collins said he's doing everything he can to keep KR

in the King City.

"I pride myself on enhancing infrastructure for events like this," he said. "Since these guys were here we've added Wilkey's Cafe with the deck to sit on, the Hall of Honor and a new hangar with bathrooms and showers.

"We want to make this their permanent home."

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