



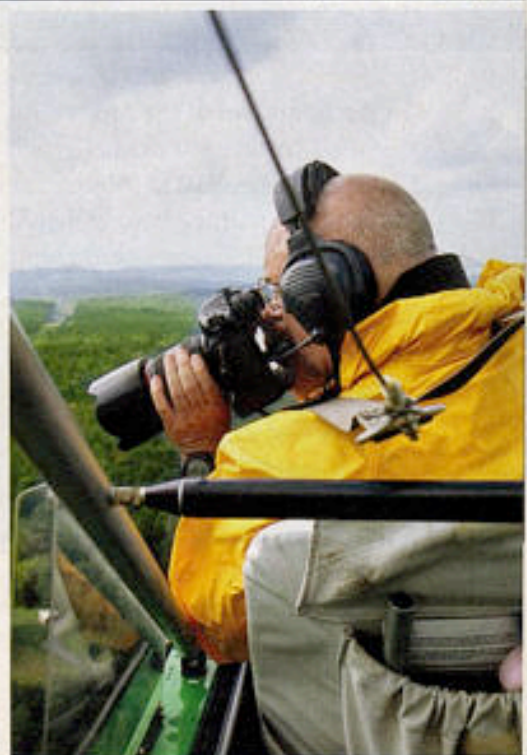
Up, Up, and Away!

In his open-cockpit plane, pilot and photographer Ron Lowery captures exquisite scenes of beauty.

The pilot points out a seemingly flimsy flap over the plane's wiring. "Oh, did he show you the duct tape?" asks his wife as she joins us in the airport hanger. I'm sure I turn the same shade of John Deere green as that of the tiny plane. But I rally when I hear about the high construction standards of the plane's sophisticated and safe design and realize the intention of Ron and Sue Lowery is only to joke away my nervousness. Soon I'll ride shotgun while Ron pilots the plane over hill and dale in Harrison.

Ron and his son Alan, an automobile mechanic, built *Cloud Chaser*. "There are only 100 of these flying in the world," Ron says of the open-cockpit, twin-engine machine. Designed originally for *National Geographic* to use for photography over the African Congo, the 1,054-pound aircraft uses premium unleaded automobile fuel. It flies as slow as 38 mph and as low as the terrain allows, prompting one air traffic controller to query whether the plane uses "pedal power." Takeoffs and landings require a mere 200 feet, and a rustic, opportune field can even serve as a runway.

Ron sits at the very nose of the open cockpit for balance. With no struts, wings, or windows blocking his view, nothing comes between him, the shot, and the wild blue yonder. "People think I'm cheating death everyday," says Ron of his open-air transportation, "but I don't think what I do is risky at all. I feel safer in the plane than I do on the ground." ▶



TOP: Award-winning photographer Ron Lowery captures the beauty of America from above the treetops. ABOVE: The specially designed aircraft allows Ron to be both pilot and photographer.



A yellow canola field in Killdeer, North Dakota, was part of Ron's *Chasing Lewis & Clark* project.

On the Road and in the Air

An aerial retracing of the Lewis and Clark Trail is Ron's latest project. The three-month journey from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Ocean resulted in *Chasing Lewis & Clark Across America: A 21st Century Aviation Adventure*, a book cowritten with author and pilot Mary Walker.

Ron served as the primary pilot, logging 14,000 miles during the trip. The actual trail consists of about 9,000 miles round-trip, but Ron repeated flight paths, zeroing in on the best lighting and angles. Mary traveled mostly by RV, interviewing locals for the book's text.

Sue traversed the highways and byways of the journey in another RV. Ryan, the youngest of the Lowerys' five adult children, accompanied Sue, as did the family dog, Jack. A novice RV driver, Sue became an expert by the end of the trip. "I ended up falling in love with it," she says. Ron adds, "The way we operate, if you need to do

something, you do it. You just don't say, 'Well, I can't do that.'"

Team rendezvous points ranged from airports to fields. Up before dawn each day, Ron would take off in *Cloud Chaser* to capture early-morning light for the images. "Then I would land the plane, tie it down, and

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Ron Lowery

walk into the RV for breakfast," he says. Sue, a graphic designer, maintained a Web site in the RV that was equipped with an Internet satellite dish, which outlined their daily progress.

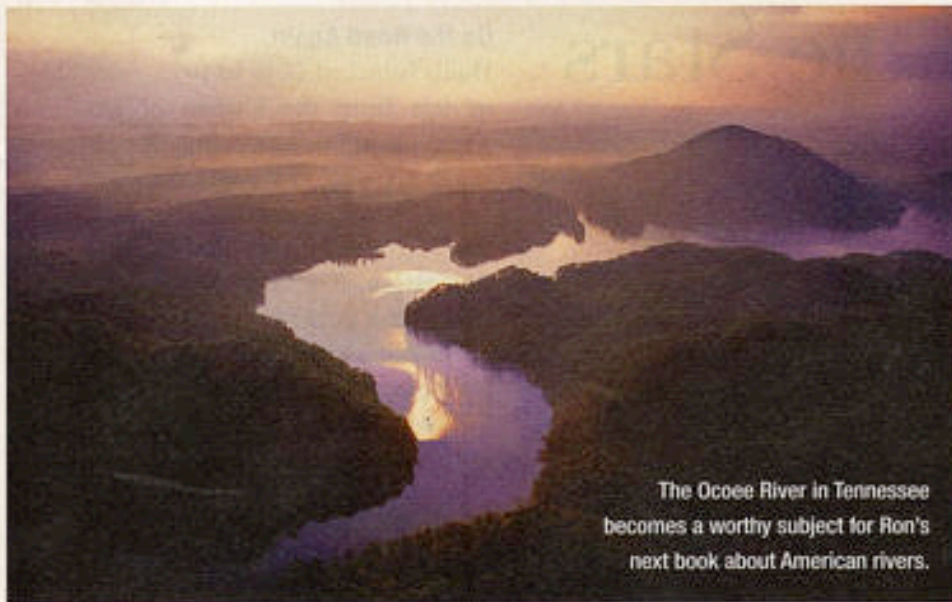
"While I would eat, the images were downloading," Ron explains. "Then we would do a preliminary edit." Sometimes a particular shot took days to obtain. "I'd scout up and down the river before I decide when I am going to shoot," he says.

During harsh daylight hours, which are murderous for obtaining quality pictures, they edited shots, conducted interviews, talked to the media, and did basic maintenance of the plane and RV. During the golden glow of late afternoon, Ron returned to the air for more photos.

Ron credits a superb team effort for the trip's success. "There was no way I could have done it by just getting in the plane and camping out along the way," he says.

A Beautiful Book

"I wanted to show the beauty of the rivers in their natural state, like Lewis and Clark saw them," Ron says, "but also how man's artistic touch contributed to that beauty." Even with a plethora of books on the subject, *Chasing Lewis & Clark* stands out. "There are no national parks along the route, so it hasn't been photographed to death," says Sue. "The book shows people how beautiful America is right



The Ocoee River in Tennessee becomes a worthy subject for Ron's next book about American rivers.

BELOW: Ron—with help from his wife, Sue—traveled across the country to document the Lewis and Clark Trail.



ABOVE: Sue and Jack, the family dog, traveled together during the three-month journey across America. RIGHT: Ron now plans a book about the Tennessee River, which will include images such as this riverboat near Savannah, Tennessee.



in their own backyard." The couple love when readers tell them: "I had no idea that our country looked like this."

My Own Moment of Truth

I count on Ron's aviation expertise as I suit up for the plane ride. In seconds, we barrel down the runway, clearing ground after only a few scant yards. Angelic music should accompany the crisp vision before me. With no scratched, thick pane distorting the view, the crystal clear scene below—

rolling green pastures and craggy hillsides—steals my breath. The experience feels like the stuff of imagination, too pristinely perfect for reality.

"Want to take the controls?" Ron asks. I can only see the back of his head, but I know he's grinning mischievously. I glance down at the control stick. "I don't think so," I reply, unwilling to admit my hands are too busy gripping the seat. Yet when Ron asks if I'm ready to land, I reluctantly answer, "I guess." We soar toward

the airport and start our descent.

Seconds before the wheels touch down, Ron maneuvers the plane up, up, and away once again. I shriek in surprise and then laugh uproariously, ridiculously happy to return to this lovely, lofty world I never knew existed except in the realm of dreams.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

To order *Chasing Lewis & Clark* or for information on Ron's other projects, visit www.ronlowery.com.