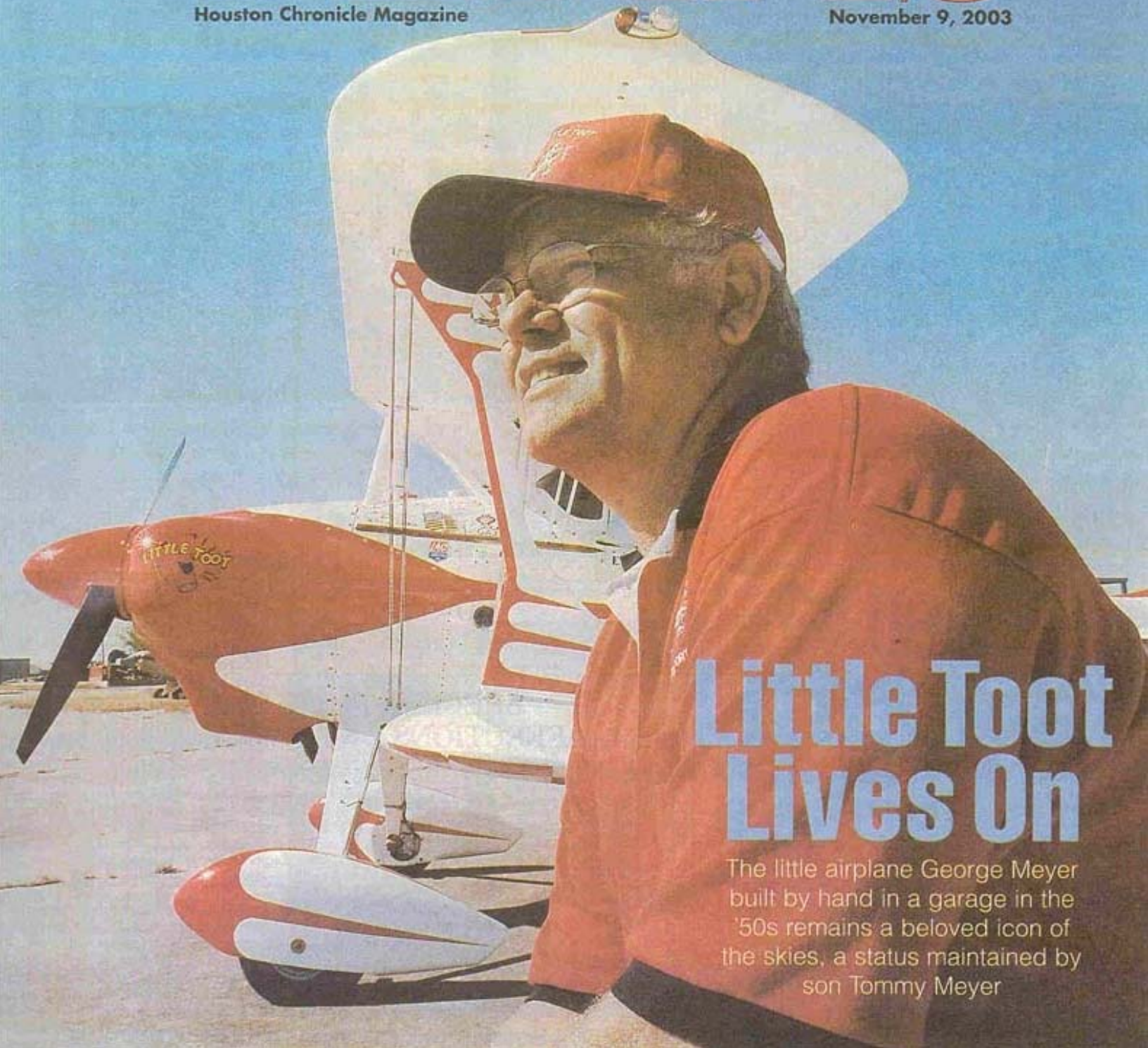


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TEXAS

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Little Toot Lives On

The little airplane George Meyer built by hand in a garage in the '50s remains a beloved icon of the skies, a status maintained by son Tommy Meyer

The late, great Houston bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins once celebrated astronaut John Glenn in song as a man who just had it on his mind — flyin'. That line could just as well have been written about George Meyer. Armed with a high school diploma and an obsession, Meyer designed and built in his garage in Corpus Christi a single-seat biplane that he named the Little Toot, after his son Tommy's favorite childhood cartoon.

Now, more than 20 years after George Meyer's death, Tommy Meyer is still building, flying and promoting the Little Toot, an airplane whose significance to the world of aviation is that it delights and captivates everyone who has ever see one.

Even to the uninitiated, the sight of a Little Toot brings a smile. It has that magical something — like a VW Bug or a Mini Cooper or a big ol' Harley bike — a combination of size, style and proportion that draws people to it. Throw in the fact that the first one was handmade by a man with no previous engineering experience, and it's easy to see why the Toot has become a beloved icon of the air with a pioneer pedigree.

Today, the enormously "cute" yet capable little aircraft still has its die-hard fans, but keeping that status alive is a grueling challenge for the man following in George Meyer's footsteps — his son.

"Ever since he's been gone, I've been doing nothing but trying to keep this airplane alive," says Tommy Meyer, who lives at Double Oak in Denton County, north of Dallas. "It's tough, because there's a lot of plastic airplanes out there that people don't have to do so much work on, that they can buy already built. You're getting less and less craftsmanship in this world, you know."

George Meyer was nothing if not a craftsman. And, like a lot of single-minded people, he wasn't always easy to live with.

"My father used to say that if you opened George Meyer's head, you'd find a little airplane flying around in it," jokes his widow, Gay Meyer, 86, who still lives in Corpus Christi, where she and her husband made their home for many years.

"All his life, almost, he was interested in airplanes. He used to go out to Lambert Field in St. Louis. I'd go with him. We'd just look at all the airplanes. He met Lindbergh; just thrilled him to death. He always liked Lindbergh. I don't really know when he decided he was going to build that airplane."

To celebrate their graduation from high school in a St. Louis suburb, the young couple went flying. "It was exciting, flying over St. Louis at night," Gay Meyer says.

They wed in 1940 and honeymooned at a model-airplane contest in Chicago.

"Well, let me tell you something," she says. "Tommy might never have been here. I was sitting there watching George's (model) airplane, and it was coming right down, right at me. I moved out of the way and broke his airplane wing. I said, 'Well, what should I have done, sit there and let it hit me?' We almost got a divorce on our honeymoon."

George Meyer worked as a metalsmith for airplane manufacturer Curtis Wright in St. Louis, where Tommy was born in 1944. The family later moved to Corpus Christi, where Meyer worked for the government. In 1951, he began building the first Little Toot in his garage. It took six years. He worked on it daily, though some days he didn't even touch the plane.

Tommy Meyer remembers his dad spending entire evenings smoking cigarette after cigarette, staring at the emerging aircraft, mulling some problem he needed to solve.

Tommy's sister, Joy Meyer Kelley, remembers, "My bedroom faced the garage, and I can remember as a tiny little girl, lying there in bed at night trying to sleep, listening to him riveting on that (aluminum) fuselage. I was only 6 years old when he was finishing it."

Gay Meyer has vivid memories of her husband's labors, too.

"He said, 'Don't go to bed! Don't go to bed!' because we'd have to lift that thing up to the ceiling so he could get the car in the garage every night. I did my part, because all the fellows would come over to help George, to do whatever he didn't know how to do. Well, I wonder how many cookies, how much pie and cake I made and coffee I served. That was my part of building the airplane. And rib-stitching! Oh, we all hated that with a purple passion, but we had to help him."

Joy Kelley periodically travels from her home in Allen, another northern suburb of Dallas, to help her brother with rib-stitching in a home workshop that houses his dad's tools.

It's very tedious work, she says, describing the process of working in tandem to draw a big needle through the heavy fabric of an airplane wing. She also maintains the Web site http://flashpages.prodigy.net/tojooes/LittleToot_files/littletoot.htm.

Tommy's childhood eagerness to help his dad build the plane sometimes resulted in a clash of strong wills, his mother says.

"Tommy would clean up the shop, and it would look so nice. And George would come home, and he couldn't find a blessed thing, and Tommy was in for it again. He never learned to leave that shop alone. No, he wanted to clean it up."

Finally, in February 1957, test pilot Pauline Glasson flew Meyer's Little Toot over Corpus Christi for its maiden flight. Everything worked perfectly.

The distinction of being the first to build and fly their own airplane goes, of course, to the Wright brothers, who made the first successful powered flight 100 years ago. This summer the Experimental Aircraft Association AirVenture in Oshkosh, Wis., a huge gathering of pilots from all over the country, celebrated the Wrights' centennial, which also will be marked by a re-enactment of that original flight near Kitty Hawk, N.C., Dec. 17.

"The first home-built design I ever owned was a Little Toot," says Tom Poberezny, the president of EAA whose dad, Paul, is known as the father of the 50-year-old organization. "The person who owned it recently brought it to Oshkosh, so I got to see it again. It was a very good home-built design for me to cut my teeth on.

The plane has a fuselage of aluminum, fabric-covered wings and a 160-horsepower engine that can take the 1,070-pound (empty) craft to 200 mph.

"Little Toot is an economical airplane with a practical design, a good-looking airplane," Poberezny says. "One of the reasons for its popularity is Tommy's vision, to preserve the legacy not only of his dad but of the airplane. George represents that cadre of individuals who had the dream to build their own airplanes. Many home-builts in that era were people's dreams, and George was one of those people who not only fulfilled his own dream but those of others."

He was practical, too. He knew he'd never have enough money to buy an airplane, so he just built his own, son Tommy says.

"He didn't design the airplane for anybody else to have one. Then, all of a sudden, the airplane was getting such fame. A friend of his from Newton, Kan., called him and said, 'I want one.' My dad said, 'Well, I ain't got no plans. I just have sketches. I've got to think about drawing this thing up. I've got to build this airplane so that anybody can build it.'"

As a high school senior in 1962, Tommy drew up a set of plans that would later be copied and sold to people who wanted to build their own Little Toos.

Along with building the airplane, George Meyer learned to fly, though he never became a great pilot. After getting lost en route to an early EAA gathering in Rockford, Ill., he restricted himself to short flights.

Tommy learned to fly at 16 one summer in Corpus Christi, thanks to pilot and family friend Glasson who, like Charles Lindbergh, had been a pioneering airmail pilot.

"I flew every single day for two months or so. A Cessna 140. Hers. It was good training. If you can fly a 140, you can fly anything. It's not an easy airplane to fly, and it's a tail-dragger. A tricycle-gear airplane, you land it and your flying is done. All you've got to do is steer it down the runway. Landing a tail-dragger is like balancing a broom on your nose. When you go left, the stick goes right. When you go right, the stick goes left.

The Little Toot, of course, is a tail-dragger.

The dream that George Meyer built by hand owes much of its longevity to Tommy Meyer, but it almost didn't work out that way. Despite his aviation background and four years service in the Air Force, Tommy Meyer didn't plunge right into building or flying full-size airplanes. He worked for an oil company, spending years as a draftsman, and became a professional photographer.

His dad had promised him the original Little Toot. But in 1970 Hurricane Celia came ashore on the Texas coast and seriously damaged the craft's wings, so it languished, awaiting repairs. Then, shortly before dying of brain cancer in 1982, George Meyer sold the plane to a friend who planned to restore it and use it for aerobatic flying.

"That was pretty hard for me to accept," Tommy Meyer says. "And he sold it for \$7,000. The wings were all torn up, but it had that new engine in it. That was worth \$20,000 all by itself. It just sat there. My dad died, and I said, 'I don't have the original Toot; I guess the way for me to promote this thing is with model aviation.'"

His father, after all, had made highly detailed models for the Smithsonian Institution. Tommy's activities with models included participating in seven George Meyer Memorial Fly-Ins, three in Denver and four in the Dallas area.

But the models were not enough to satisfy him. He decided to turn his career to building full-size planes.

"I didn't have all the skills it would take to do it, but I can remember what I was shown," he says. "And the biggest thing my dad showed me is to be precise. Do it good. If it's not good, throw it in the trash can and do it over. And I can tell you, there's a lot went in the trash can."

A man in Dayton, Ohio, called Tommy Meyer with a proposition. He had two Little Toots and didn't need both. He said to take one, Meyer recounts, and "make it look like your dad's — cowling, paint job, checkerboards and everything, and I'll give you that other one for a little money. You buy all the materials."

"I gave him \$1,500, plus I paid about \$7,000 for paint and supplies. I got a \$100,000 airplane sitting out there for less than \$10,000.

"I said, 'OK, I'll refurbish it, and I'll make it look just like my dad's.' I ain't never done this before in my life. I just told him I'd do it. My dad taught me, 'Don't ever tell anybody that you can't do something. You tell them you can do it, then figure out how to do it. And you will do it.'"

"Got it here, put it in a hangar, and I didn't know what to do. My stomach turned upside down."

On the same weekend it arrived, Meyer ran into an old friend from the model business, Phil Witt, at a George Meyer Memorial event. Witt wound up joining him in restoring the Toot.

"Phil and I have been together since 1991," Meyer says. "That's when that happened. We restored that airplane. And as soon as that one was restored, the owner came down and picked it up and flew it to Florida and left us the airplane that's mine out at the airport now. We used to call it the Old Blue Toot, because it was such a mess."

Meyer refurbished and painted his Little Toot just like his dad's — red and white. So there were two Little Toots in the world that were red and white with checkerboards. But the original Little Toot was not his. It had since been moved to Laredo, and Meyer wanted it.

He finally reached the original plane's owner in Germany, where he had moved after getting divorced.

"I've gotta have that airplane back," Meyer told him. "Would you sell it?"

"The man told him, 'You can pay me exactly what I paid your dad, less the engine.'"

Meyer and Witt drove to South Texas, where, after some wrangling with the owner's former spouse, they retrieved the wings from one site and the fuselage from another. Five years of work — almost as long as it took George Meyer to build his aircraft in the first place — restored it to its former glory. Now it sits alongside Meyer's other Toot in the hangar he and Witt own at Northwest Regional Airport in Roanoke, near Meyer's home.

Both airplanes have won the top awards of the Experimental Aircraft Association. "They're judged on workmanship, craftsmanship, everything, painting," Meyer says. "You're not judged on flying. It's like a car show. They're just judged on how well you did the airplane and how nice it looks."

There was another factor in winning one of the awards in 1999, though. Meyer loves to tell the story of the feather mounted in the cockpit of his plane. His dad had a friend named George Wilson, "and they were just like *Grumpy Old Men*, chewed each other out all the time," Meyer says. Wilson died a couple of years after George Meyer did.

Tommy was talking to Wilson not long before his death and asked a favor: "When you get up there, would you tell my dad what I'm doing? Make me a sign, like a crack of thunder or a bolt of lightning?"

Instead, Wilson said he would send down a feather.

"I don't remember how long it was after (Wilson died), but I was rebuilding this airplane. I was videoing how I put decals on and stuff, and I was backing up, taking movies, and here this feather comes. I have it on video. I mean, it stopped me in my tracks. I embossed it and put it on the fuel tank."

One of the judges who awarded him the Poberezny Award in 1999 asked him about the feather. He later told Meyer that he repeated the story for the other judges, and that broke a tie with another plane. The judge told him, "I just called to tell you, you won that thing by a feather."

Meyer calls himself a jack-of-all-trades, master of some. His day-job title is fulfillment coach for Trane air conditioning in Dallas. Helping other Little Toot owners and selling design plans amount to a sideline.

"I have to have a job," Meyer says. "You would not make a living with this. Phil and I do aircraft maintenance work. People see this work, and it gets us jobs. But you can't make a living at it unless you go into it full time and advertise and get business from all parts of the United States."

Meyer sells two versions of the Little Toot plans he drew in high school. A lot of people who collect plans don't intend to build anything. For a hundred bucks, they can buy one version of the plans. Those who want to build a plane can buy a full set for \$300.

Meyer sells parts, too, though not as a kit. And he's always helping people get their own planes together.

"We have 10 Toots in Dallas now," he says. "They're not all flying, but there'll be a day when 10 of these Toots will be tooling around here, within the next couple of years." About 30 are flying nationwide, and the plane has been written up in a number of aviation magazines. There are also plans to hang a Little Toot in the window of the Frontiers of Flight Museum at Love Field in Dallas.

One of the 10 owners is Dean Dooley, a retired corporate pilot who lives near Bayfield, Colo. He finished and first flew his plane in the summer of 2002, fulfilling a dream that began in the late 1950s.

"I landed in Springfield, Ill., and there was a Little Toot sitting there," Dooley says. "George Meyer had been to the equivalent of Oshkosh, only in those days it was in Rockford, Ill. He was on the way home, and the Little Toot was sitting on the ramp there, and I said, 'Someday, I'm going to build one of those.'"

James Longstreet, who lives near Detroit and traces his lineage to the Confederate general of the same name, also owns a Little Toot. "It's a great-flying airplane," he says.

Longstreet's plane had sat partially built by someone else since 1965. He picked it up in Tennessee in 1999 and spent almost three years on it. When he got it, "It looked like hell," Longstreet says. "I went through it, tore all the sheet metal off it, stripped it all the way down to the frame. Went through and blasted it, went from the ground up to make sure everything was all right with it. It was in my garage, so I worked on it constantly."

The restored aircraft bears the painted inscription "Longstreet's Goofy Toot."

Meyer's next project is building a two-seat Toot with a larger engine. But along with working on other planes, he gets sidetracked by other projects. His sister saw a rocking horse in a toy store and asked him to modify it to look like a Little Toot. He did, and it was so popular that he wound up making eight of them.

"We all got involved in it, sanding and cutting. There's a jillion parts," Joy Meyer Kelley says.

She describes her brother as driven.

"He makes you tired, watching him. He's the kind of person who can't go to bed at night unless he's accomplished something. He believes that if you go out to your shop and do something every day on your airplane, you'll get it built. He is in that workshop every single day."

At the Oshkosh meet this summer, Meyer was in his element, even relatively relaxed. He's royalty there, honored with his dad's EAA number, 64. Usually, he and Witt fly the two restored Toots up from Texas, but this year they got friends to do it so they could drive a truck and pick up another Toot project along the way.

Many of those who fly to Oshkosh don't take off again until it's time to leave. With about 10,000 airplanes parked in close quarters, in-and-out trips are too much trouble and too dangerous. But that's not the spirit or the point of the event, which has been called the Woodstock of the aviation world.

The analogy is far from exact: The Oshkosh crowd is very polite and decidedly unstoned. But there is definitely bliss in the air, the feeling that emanates from crowds of people enjoying their passion in life, whether it's vintage guitars, books or airplanes.

"You're never going to see anything like this; you're never going to see this many airplanes anywhere else," Meyer enthuses.

And what a variety: everything from ultralights and powered parachutes to World War II fighters and bombers featuring classic nose art. Every afternoon there's a spectacular air show.

People socialize, attend seminars and discussions, visit a museum, comb the flea market and buy everything from vintage aircraft nose art to Orville Wright's account of inventing the airplane.

In the evenings, Meyer and his group relaxed at a restaurant or in the backyard of an Oshkosh friend's home, listening to music, drinking beer and telling stories. Witt served his outstanding homemade ice cream. One night, Meyer waxed poetic about the experience of bringing an old airplane back from years of dirt, rust and neglect.

"When you finally get it just right," he says, "it sparkles just like a present under the Christmas tree."



Jay Brakefield of Dallas is a freelance writer and longtime Texas newspaper journalist. Rex Curry is a freelance photographer in Dallas.



A FATHER AND SON ORIGINAL

1950 George Meyer builds a small scale model of the Little Toot.

1951-57 Meyer builds the original Little Toot, first flown in February 1957 at Cuddihy Field in Corpus Christi by Pauline Glasson.

1962 Meyer's son Tommy draws a set of plans available for sale to others who want to build a Little Toot.

1970 Hurricane Celia seriously damages the plane's wings.

1982 George Meyer sells the damaged plane before his death that year from cancer.

1990 Tommy Meyer and friend Phil Witt agree to restore a Little Toot for an owner with two planes. As part of the deal, Meyer acquires a Little Toot.

1994 Tommy Meyer buys and restores his dad's original plane.

1998 Tommy Meyer's first restored plane wins the Charles Lindbergh Award for Craftsmanship.

1999 Tommy wins the EAA Paul Poberezny Founders Award for his restoration of his first Little Toot.

2000 The refurbished original wins the EAA Paul Poberezny Founders Award.



Meyer shapes a wing tip by hand



Tommy Meyer has to contort himself under the upper wing of his home-built Little Toot



Tommy Meyer, left, helps Gary Platner repair a wing of Platner's Little Toot.



The senior Meyer built the first Little Toot in his Corpus Christi Garage



George Meyer built the original Little Toot in 1957