In the soft-cushioned, deep-chained comfort of the Hangar Room in the Clark Hotel, Los Angeles, one of America's "last man clubs" met recently. There was a little beer—and a lot of earnest conversation.

The average age of the men who met was 50 years or the shady side thereof. By all the laws of men and nature this truly was a last man club because its membership roster of 280 names will never number more. Year by year it dwindles.

The club? The famed Early Birds. Their symbol is the owl. That's how wiser they are than their more staid brothers. For they regard today's young giant of an aviation game with the shrewd eyes of men who have watched it grow from the cradle to its first long pants. Now they had even more to look at.

Down from San Francisco, up from San Diego, west from Arizona they came. They were the Pacific Coast unit of this exclusive fraternity of men who served during the first 13 years after Kitty Hawk. Pre-war vintage airmen. Chaps who used to check their fuel consumption with a dashboard clock that generally was wrong and chart their drift with a piece of string.

As usual, Bud Morris, Clark Hotel chieftain and co-founder of the group, played host. Roll call was a solemn ceremony. You don't smile very much when a year's obituary notices are read. For 1939 these were the missing among the Early Bird "last men": Tony Fokker, Capt. Hugh Willoughby, who experimented with many a plane in the early 'teens, and Col. C. DeF. Chandler, first Army pilot to use a wise-chose or a shot. In 1938 Capt. Eddie Musick of Pan-American, Chief Van Divort, Missouri dirt farmer who flew for fun in the halcyon days; Alan Hawley, Aero Club president, and Col. Leslie MacDill, pioneer Army airman. So it went—and goes.

In a couple of years, Bud Morris says, the last-man toast really will mean something. But before 1960 there is work to do. Most informal of all the aeronautical societies, yet the tightest-knit for many a good reason, the EB's plan to leave as their legacy the world's most complete aviation history. After all their membership comprises 99 per cent of the globe's old-time flyers and builders.

In trunks in Manhattan under the care of Major Ernest Jones, former chief of information of the aeronautics division of the Department of Commerce and with the A.E.F. Air Corps in France, lies the nucleus of this collection. Walls like Bud Morris' in Los Angeles hold hundreds of priceless photographs of people who are dead and deeds that may be forgotten. Upon the Early Birds falls the task of mak-
ing certain that neither will pass into limbo.

To recapture for a moment the golden era, let's walk in on Bud. He has a low-ceilinged, air-conditioned office next door to the Hangar Club in his hostelry. To talk about aviation, Bud will send his whole corps of chefs, clerks and minor impedimenta of hotel management scuttling. Such chit-chat is tonic to him.

Skipping lightly over Bud's birth—he was christened Percy G. B. Morriss—at Shakespeare's town, Stratford-on-Avon, 50 odd years ago. He was apprenticed to the British merchant marine when he was 14. By 1909 he was a Marconi wireless operator. That same year in London he bumped into Jules Hartig. Jules owned a Bleriot biplane equipped with a 32-h.p. Anzani motor.

Talk about C.A.A. training programs! Bud's lesson was a five-minute talk on which gadgets did what and why. Then he took off. He had expected to cut a few weed tops and settle back to earth. Instead he yanked back on the "cloche"—a sort of bell on a stick that controlled about everything on the Bleriot—and up he went. For 20 minutes Bud putt-putted along at 55 m. p. h.

Henceforth Bud Morriss' life and aviation intermingled. A year later stationed in Palm Beach, Fla., for Marconi, he got a brilliant notion: Why not transmit messages to and from an airplane? Nobody had done it before. It sounded like a swell idea. And it worked.

Perched on the wing of a Curtiss flown by Jack McCurdy, exhibition flyer for Glenn Curtiss, Bud tapped out signals with a tiny homemade portable. Through earphones he got answers from the ground. Around the biplane was wound the world's first cage or loop antenna, about 100 feet of it. A week later the Army Signal Corps dropped Bud a note asking for information on the test.

Bud peddled suitcase-size wireless sets to

Sun Yat Sen's supporters in China for the next few years. In 1911 he went to Tom Benoist in St. Louis. Tom was building planes and flying boats. They would hitch a ship to a tree with a spring scaled between the aircraft and the tree and start the engine. With a hand tachometer placed against the base of the spinning wooden propeller they would test the r.p.m.'s. But there was no chart of the "scientific" preparations for a hop. Should the nose prove over-heavy, they would shift the engine farther aft. Or vice versa. It was trial-and-error with a vengeance—and all in America's second largest factory (only Curtiss was bigger) shortly before Europe's first World War. With luck Tom Benoist could grind out about two planes a month.

On a bitter cold day in November, 1911, he stood in a fairly smooth field near St. Louis with his best friend Tony Jannus who also flew for Benoist. Solemnly they watched a third man billowing a balloon parachute, testing its readiness. The stranger was Albert Berry, a daredevil chap who made a precarious living leaping from hot-air balloons at county fairs. Bud had wished to be guinea pig for this experiment; Benoist had said no. Tony took off. At 7,000 feet Berry jumped.

From its galvanized-iron cone which measured three feet from tip to flange the 'chute streamed out of the craft's belly. It billowed. And heavier-than-air's first successful parachute bail out had been made. It had been tried despite the gloomiest objections of the nation's leading authorities—one even swore that the shock of the diminished weight caused by the jump would cause a plane to turn turtle in mid-air.

Army officers at Jefferson Barracks, Mo., expressed considerable interest in the stunt. You could, they reasoned, drop some sort of demolition or man-killing material with a 'chute. The tactical advantages were terrific.

But nobody thought of the safety factor. Bail out of a plane as a life-saver? Nonsense! It took a war and the invention of the 'chute-pack to prove the efficacy of that.
By 1915 Bud felt himself ready to branch out. He formed the Bud Morris Airplane School which, as far as he has ever learned, was America’s first aircraft construction school.

In two years he and his staff trained some 500 men. At one time, Bud recalls, 19 Chinese studied practical aeronautics at the school north of Chicago near the Navy’s Great Lakes base. One of them was the famous H. C. Tung, commander of the Chinese air force of the early 1920’s.

Then came war for the United States. Bud joined up. He sold his school for $40,000 to his brother-in-law. He took this payment in tuition which he promptly gave to the Navy. In this manner almost 100 instructors received their tutoring and in turn taught thousands of Navy gobs. They built planes, too, in Bud’s school. In 1917 he stopped building make-shift machines which he had designed for a batch of Nome and LeRhone motors which he had picked up and began to turn out some Jennies.

Postwar days were hard times for Bud who no longer had his school. The deflation of the wartime aviation boom sounded the death knell for it anyhow. Bud tried publicity. He ran Eastern Air Express, something that might have been a goldmine if the October, 1929, crash hadn’t occurred. He sold his Long Island home and his automobiles and began to repay $50,000 he owed. He even started a dollar-a-head psycho-analysis business by radio. Hotelkeeping came naturally to Bud. He had been press-agent for many and had “trouble-shot” for others so that when he heard about the Clark’s reorganization in Los Angeles seven years ago he jumped at the chance.

The Early Birds were hatched on a drive along Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D. C., with Major Jones in 1926. “Where’s Charlie?” asked the major.

“Charlie?” Bud frowned. “Haven’t seen him since ’12. He was barnstorming then. With a Curtiss. Funny, too, because I’d like to see Charlie again.”

Tom Benoist recommended Morris in 1915 as pilot, sales manager, aviation editor. Morris learned to fly in 1909.

Once a year the national gang reunites. They’re a little older each time; a little fewer. Yet nobody drops out of the EB’s. If you can’t pay your $5 annual dues, someone else pays for you anonymously.

Their talk is grand stuff. For one thing their conversation is a historical record in itself. Some of them earned $1,000 for 15 minutes of straight or fancy flying in the ’teens: all of them flew when a man who hedge-hopped from a beanfield in a pusher plane was a hero to be greeted by kisses when he landed.

“We kept it that way,” Bud Morris admits. “It was fun to be lionized. Deliberately most of us promoted the thought that flying was dangerous, daring. We cultivated the hero-role.

“Funny thing, too. Most of the crowd, it seemed, were musicians or some such effete thing. Personally, I earned dough not for a whole the EB’s are storing up a treasure house of aeronautics. Sooner or later they will establish a museum, Bud says, for this irreplaceable data—pictures, records, biographies, trophies, planes. For a time the EB’s fought valiantly to bring the original Wright brothers’ plane back to the United States. Tod day, even more imperative quest for the bomb-proof vaults of Kensington Museum, London, mightn’t preserve the world’s No. 1 aerial relic.

But until the wording of the present Smithsonian Institute inscription on Prof. Samuel Langley’s plane is changed, it is doubtful if Orville Wright would consent to removal of his priceless craft to these shores. Langley’s plane is characterized as “the first practical aircraft.”

What do the EB’s expect in aviation for the coming years? Bud laughs when you ask him that.

“We’ve all lived through the kid days of the game,” he says. “Guesses of the Early Birds are about as varied as the men themselves. But we have this in common: We’ve seen it happen. We do know that aviation will advance at least as far as it did since 1903. If today’s planes are Viking sailboats, tomorrow’s will be Queen Mary.”

All the EB’s hope is for one thing: To be the last man on that unbelievable, future day when aeronautics outstrips the wildest dreams of the boldest men. That, they think, would be splendid.