

Life in the slow plane: Flying a taildragger is like piloting a time machine

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"Look at that beautiful earth down there, the view of distant mountains, the sky and the clouds . . . and just listen to the steady throb of that old Continental A65-8 up front," remarked my father as we shared a flight in the Chief one afternoon.

That ol' flying bug. Let it nip you once, and it'll last you for a lifetime. It nipped my father, Homer Barnes, back in September 1944, when he soloed a Stearman PT-17 during Air Force training. It stayed in his blood for the next 42 years. For a long time it took a back seat while he pursued an electrical engineering degree. Then came a wife and family, and eventually retirement at the age of 63.

It was three years after that when the bug came out of remission and hit him again full force. That's when the flying resumed. That's when the search began.

He knew that somewhere, tucked away in a hangar or tied down at a small grass strip would be the airplane for him. It couldn't just be any plane, though. It had to be a plane with personality, with a character and spirit all its own. It had to be a tail-dragger.

That fact was made especially apparent when my father went to a local airport for refresher flight lessons. In keeping with modern-day aviation, currency flight training was given in a tricycle gear airplane, and although he'd never flown a tricycle before, he didn't have any problem handling it.

He said "I knew that flying a tail-dragger is just a different kind of flying — there's more of a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction when you make a good landing in one, and when you make a few consistently, it's an even better feeling."

After being thoroughly indoctrinated with modern avionics, passing his second class medical with no restrictions, and a rather rigorous check ride (including "blindfolded" Split-S recovery in a Cessna 152), he found himself legally current, ready to leave the tricycles and get back to real flying — tail-dragger style.

The old, fabric-covered tail-draggers are not just airplanes. They are time machines, of a sort, and those who choose to fly them are not just aviators, but time travelers, as well. Time travelers who prefer the simplicity of aviation as it was from the beginning through the '40s, when top cruising speeds were 75-90 mph, countryside grass fields made dandy landing strips, and electrical systems weren't necessary.

"I decided that what I really wanted was to go back to those days — to fly the old, classic, antique airplanes again — simple airplanes!" my father told me later. "So I started searching for one, but couldn't really find anything affordable. Then one day I was riding my motorcycle down the road, and a dove appeared and flew alongside me for a half a mile or more, and I took that as an omen. I was going to find my airplane."

In just a few weeks, he learned of a 1946 Aeronca Chief 11AC (NC9224E) for sale. His son, Thomas (also a pilot), told him about it, and said it was located at Angier, south of Raleigh, N.C. That was a reasonable traveling distance from my father's hometown of Winston-Salem, N.C., so he went to look it over.

"I met Thomas down at the Angier airstrip, and we examined that Aeronca Chief for a while, studied the log books, and rode in it with one of the owners. Then I made an offer, along with a deposit, which was good for one week," he recalled.

His offer was soon accepted, and father met son once more at Angier. Together, they flew a loose formation, Thomas in his Cessna 150 and my father in his Chief, to Everett Smith's farm strip in Davidson County. Several different airplanes had been based at Smith's strip over a period of 30 years, including Smith's own Piper Super Cub, and Smith warmly welcomed my father to base his newly-acquired Chief there.

"We flew back from Angier that day," my father said, smiling and remembering the occasion, "and that was my first time in a tail-dragger, on my own, since '47. And that was in '86." There was a small audience waiting at "Smith International" that day to witness dad's first tail-dragger landing. They were in for a little bit of entertainment.

"For all intents and purposes, I guess I was landing the tricycle gear Cessna that I'd been flying recently. I went down the runway like a jack rabbit and finally stopped, turned around, and taxied back up the runway . . . and there stood Everett

Smith and his entire family, laughing at my landing!" my father said, chuckling good-naturedly.

Feeling somewhat self-conscious, he decided he'd have to back up about 40 years and renew his old flying techniques. But that could wait, for the first order of business was to build a home for the Chief to protect it from the elements.

"Home" would be a small, self-built T-hangar, affectionately dubbed, upon completion, the "Wigwam."

My father started collecting various building materials for the project. It wasn't long afterward that a friend of his dropped by the house for a visit, and asked him what he was doing during his retirement.

"Russ, you may not believe it, but I'm getting ready to build a T-hangar for an old Aeronca Chief that I just bought," my father said, waiting to see his friend's reaction.

Russ thought it was a terrific idea and, as good friends often do, he completely shared my father's enthusiasm by declaring "I want to be a part of this; when do we start?"

The "Wigwam" was completed in about three weeks. Then it was time for my father to really get acquainted with the Chief. Remembering that first testy landing he'd had, he decided to get a little bit of help.

"I called upon a friend of mine, whom I'd known while teaching flying at Hawthorne Flying Service in Greensboro back in '47. John was current in a J-4 Cub Coupe, so I asked him to fly around the field with me a few times, and remind me of what all I'd forgotten about flying tail-draggers."

John accompanied my father for several pattern flights and then proclaimed that he was doing fine — so he "soloed" him and stood by the runway watching him fly. After my father made several acceptable landings, he taxied over to where John and a few others were standing and talking.

John gave my father a broad smile and, laughing, asked him, "Well, how much will you take for it?"



My father's immediate response was, "there's not enough money to buy it! That's my airplane — the one I've been waiting on for 40 years — the first and only airplane I've ever had in my life."

My father and his Chief have been flying happily since that day in August 1986. He's logged nearly 100 hours of flight time each year, which, he says, is "purely pleasure time."

He told me once "the Chief has become my ticket to many golden days in my 'Golden Years.' Flying again, at this particular time in my life, is making a big difference in my attitudes, and my activities.

And one of the most beautiful things about it is that I've had nothing but total encouragement from every member of my family — even my wife, who insists on keeping her feet firmly planted on the ground."

My father feels that flying is not only a personal rejuvenator; it's also a way to acquire friends who have similar interests — those folks who can be found at all of the "backyard" grass strips scattered throughout the countryside.

"They're the kind of people who give you a good feeling for having been with them for a spell," he said, then added that it's also interesting to hear their conversations concerning taildraggers.

"One time I heard a man, whom I've seen flying various taildraggers, say that 'anybody who can fly and land an Aeronca Chief without any problem can fly any taildragger going. That's the toughest airplane to land and keep under control of any that I've ever flown.'"

Although my father doesn't feel the Chief is the toughest taildragger to fly, he agrees that it does demand a pilot's best abilities. Nearly 15 years after buying the Chief, and celebrating his 80th birthday, he's still flying and continually perfecting those abilities whenever the weather permits. He has passed on the art of transitioning from "tricycles" to taildraggers to his son. And with extreme patience and many encouraging words, he has passed it on to yet another person who chose to be a "time traveler" — myself, his daughter.

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