

Aug. 22, 2009 - "Pardon me boys, is that the Cordele Georgia. Choo-Choo?"

I have always had a fascination with trains, going back to the 1950's. We lived in a small north Jersey town of 2500 people, with only one elementary school. Four other towns joined together and sent their graduating 8th grade students (there were only 18 from our community) to a High School in a nearby "big city" of about 6,000 inhabitants. So, each morning I would walk the half dozen blocks down to our train station, and wait for the 8:20 to arrive and transport us two towns and 4 rail miles to Dumont, NJ. What makes this story so extraordinary is the fact that we lived in a three "truck (vegetable) farm" town, which was less than a 30 minute drive to the George Washington bridge and gigantic New York City with its 8 million souls just beyond. Also interesting is that during our first year the mode of travel was via a steam locomotive. The next two years were mostly by electric-diesel engines, and our final year of high school travel was by a more conventional yellow school bus.

Ever since those early "train days", I have taken advantage of "rail travel" whenever I have the opportunity. While a few of these trips have been "legitimate", in that they have been used for actual transportation, most have been local "excursions" of some sort. These ranged from fall foliage trains in New England, the White Pass and Yukon Line out of Skagway, which followed the 1840 "gold rush" route in Alaska, to a half dozen or so less spectacular scenic sight-seeing tours on the steel rails. Therefore I jumped at the opportunity to take a "free ride" on the HOG ("Heart of Georgia") Archery Explorer train originating from Cordele, and traveling to Plains Ga, home to our 39th President, Jimmy Carter. Since I have traveled for my business, over the past dozen or so years, primarily by motor home, I have donated to the "Friends of Georgia State Parks". This gives me a complimentary night at one of the State Parks campgrounds, as well as a free ticket on the [SAM Shortline excursion train](#).

I was already in Clemson, SC, to bring my plane in for some service adjustments and an auto pilot installation, on what turned out to be a perfectly beautiful late summer weekend. I decided to schedule a last minute trip before leaving the plane off at the Just Aircraft company shop for almost a month. The distance between the Oconee and Crisp County airports is approximately 225 air miles. Due to the forecast of slight headwinds, I flight planned for a 2 1/2 hour trip. However, because the train was scheduled to depart the Cordele station at 9:00 AM, this would require me being airborne no later than 6 in the morning. I decided that it would make much more sense doing the flight the afternoon before, which would turn the trip into a "mini-vacation". I had been on this train once before...actually the same train, but a slightly different route. Each year I stay in the vicinity of Cordele when I perform my services for several of the Georgia-Pacific lumber plants in the immediate area. On those occasions I would take my motor home over to the scenic campground located at the [Georgia Veterans State Resort Park](#), just outside of Cordele. I knew that they have a really upscale hotel complex that offers superb dining in a extraordinary setting. I decided that this would be my destination for an overnight stay. It further turned out that I had accumulated enough frequent guest stays to have earned a free night hotel lodging. Better yet! Since I would be arriving a day early, I decided to co-ordinate my arrival to coincide with the return of the train at the Veterans Park depot, so as to be able to capture some aerial photos.



Georgia's lake islands provided stunning views



The Archery Explorer, as seen from 500 feet



The SAM Shortline crossing Lake Blackshear



Aerial view of the Lake Blackshear Resort hotel

Therefore, my departure from Clemson would have to be at or before 2:30 PM on Friday, so as to be over the train before it arrived back at the depot by 5:00 PM. I actually lifted off of CEU (Clemson airport) at 2:15, so I was well ahead of schedule. The flight down was done at 4,500 feet, mainly to take advantage of the cooler temperatures aloft. Ground temps were in the mid-90's, so the 75 degrees that the higher altitude offered was appreciated. The downside was a slightly greater headwind. But at exactly 4:50 PM I was able to circle and photograph the train from 500 feet altitude, as it approached and then crossed the Blackshear Lake causway and trestle. Before landing at the Cordele-Crisp Co. airport, I made a flight over to the State Parks resort complex, which featured the hotel, several out-building cottages, the upscale restaurant, conference center and marina. Also at the park is the Veterans Memorial Site, which features several aircraft, including a B-29 Stratofortress, three fighters and a helicopter, along with some military trucks, tanks and armored personnel carriers from WWI, WWII, and later.

After landing, off-loading and tying down the Highlander, I inquired as to local transportation, and was told, "We have a courtesy car...actually 3. It seems that each time the airport commissioner gets a new car, we acquire his old model." In less than 30 minutes I was checking in at the hotel reception desk, and then off to explore the grounds...and especially the military exhibits. As I had circled a half hour earlier, I thought that I recognized a familiar vehicle. When I was in the Army reserve, back in the early 60's, I spent a fair amount of time in Kentucky, learning to drive the M-48 Patton Medium tank. It turned out that the one on display there was the earlier M-47 version. As I recall the main difference was a gas engine instead of a diesel powered one, and a 70mm, instead of my 90mm cannon. In any case, it brought back memories of my "war years" at Fort Knox.

My dinner, of fresh sea scallops, asparagus and a baked potato, that night was at Cordelia's fine restaurant at the resort, followed by a stroll along the lake, and over to the marina. Since it getting to be twilight, the evening sightseeing boat was returning to the docks, and hundreds of Canadian geese were making their final approach to the lake's clear waters, accompanied by ear-piercing "honks" as they flared to touchdown. I only wish my landings were half that good. A bit later in the evening I stopped over at the lounge for a nightcap and a chance to listen to the guitar player that was the featured entertainment. By 11:30 I was snuggled into my very comfortable bed.

I arrived at the SAM (Savannah, Americus & Montgomery) Shortline station at 8:40 on Saturday morning to join 150 or so fellow travelers getting ready to board. This particular route would encompass about 40 total miles, with stops at Americus, Plains and Archery. My earlier trip last year bypassed Americus, with an hour stopover in Leslie, Ga instead. That very little town has one of the best telephone museums in the country. Home to a rural telephone co-operative, it features exhibits and hundreds of phones, going back to the days of Alexander Graham Bell, along with other memorabilia of the past century. My earlier trip also included hour and a half stops in both Plains, current home of Jimmy Carter, as well as Archery, his boyhood home and family farm. Both of these are now maintained as national historic sights, and well worth a tour. However, since I had already seen both of these places along this route, I decided to disembark the train in Americus, and spend the four hours, until the train returned, exploring this old and, at one time, largely prosperous southern town.



Ga. Veterans State Park (note tank in red circle)



Me, in front of my Army day's M-47 Medium Tank



This is my hotel at the Blackshear resort Park



Friday night's dinner at Cordelia's Restaurant

Now, this was not my first time in Americus. When I mustered out of the Army, from that aforementioned Fort Knox, one of my tank crewmen, a Ken Cook, was from Americus. At that time I had taken my car, a 1960 Ford Thunderbird convertible, back with me after our Christmas leave was over, driving it down from NJ. I had planned, after being discharged in February of 1962, to head south, to see Florida, for the very first time, before returning home, to my reserve unit. Ken invited me to spend a day or so touring his hometown, promising me a chance to meet some very pretty southern girls. As it turned out Ken was exaggerating somewhat, and really didn't have those many contacts with southern girls...pretty or otherwise. The thing that I do remember about Americus, was my arrival at about 2 AM. After a full day of driving down from Louisville, Kentucky, I had stopped in at the local police station to get directions to Ken's home. When I entered the station house, the desk Sergeant was on the radio. The call went something like this. "Hey, Clyde, when you get a chance, haul over to Bubbas Lounge. Bubba called and said that a bunch of the rednecks was fighting up a storm. But don't rush, none. Let them wear themselves out a night, before you get there." Ah, such was life in the South in the early '60's.

Since I now had a few hours to kill in Americus, I decided to see its three big tourist attractions. First is the [Habitat for Humanity Global Village](#). A favorite charity of former President Carter since 1980, this facility takes you through a "before and after" scenario first showing the corrugated metal and scrap wood shacks that were inhabited by minorities in the early and middle part of the 20th century. They then present the small, but well built homes that volunteers, including former President Carter have helped to construct, before turning them over to those less fortunate. This is done for little or no money, using only the "sweat equity" of the new owners as payment in full.

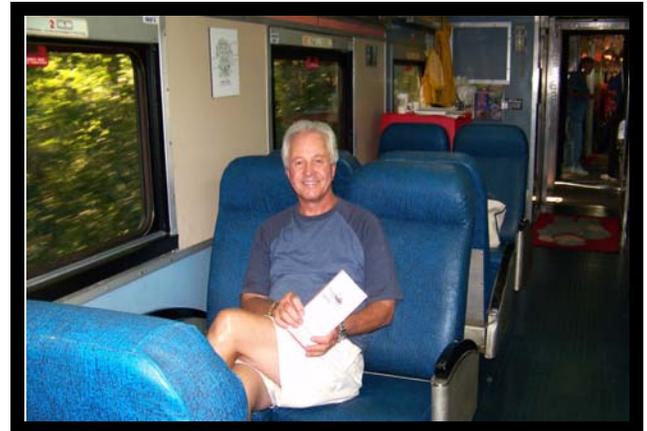
Next I toured the [Rylander Theater](#), which was originally built in 1920 and served as a Vaudeville theater, silent movie house, and even a legitimate stage venue before it closed in the '70's. After a \$5 million renovation, it recently reopened and now has a 280 days a year usage schedule. These range from local high school productions, to touring stage groups and even weddings, graduations and private parties. This 200 seat theater features a grand old Mohler organ, which was built in 1928, and originally used as background music and sound effects for the silent films of the 20's and early 30's. Today, with its computerized control center it is capable of providing all of the music necessary for most of the performances held at the Rylander.

Then I spent a pleasant couple of hours, reading, in the air conditioned lobby of the [Windsor Hotel](#). Another turn of the last century building, it also fell in to disrepair and recently underwent an \$8 million renovation, reopening in 1998. It is now a classic victorian era edifice, brought up to current hotel standards. Featuring a lot of antique furnishings and plush furniture, it presented an air-conditioned respite from the 90 degree temperatures of South Georgia in late summer.

All in all, this weekend provided for an interesting and enjoyable opportunity to use the plane for something beyond the typical "\$100 hamburger" flight. When when you consider the cost of my hotel, 0 dollars, the cost of the train ride, 0 dollars, the cost of the tie-down and transportation, 0 dollars, and with an outlay of \$100 for fuel and \$50 for meals, then the memories for this trip were truly "priceless".



On Saturday morning I caught the "HOG" train



Passenger cars were from the 1940's & '50's era



The Victorian Windsor Hotel in Americus, GA.



Inside lobby. Note the decorative woodwork