

April 7, 2020 - The Pahokee Picnic

The month of March was a complete washout with regard to my flying. On the 2nd of that month, on a return flight from the Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport, where I had flown to have lunch with my longtime friend and former instrument flight instructor, Robert Green, who was down from New Jersey for a visit with his daughter and her family, I experienced an electrical system failure. Halfway through that flight I noticed that I did not appear to be generating power to my battery and line voltage had dropped to almost 10 volts from its normal 13+. While the engine would continue to run, even without a battery attached, thanks to its self sustaining magneto system, my radios, gauges and moving map would begin to shut down once voltage dropped below 9. My I-pad tablet GPS map, with its own battery would continue to operate for several hours, but I would have only limited EFIS (Electronic Flight Information System) data with regard to my altitude, airspeed and attitude. Since weather was near perfect and I was operating in solid Visual Flight Rules, this would not be a concern.

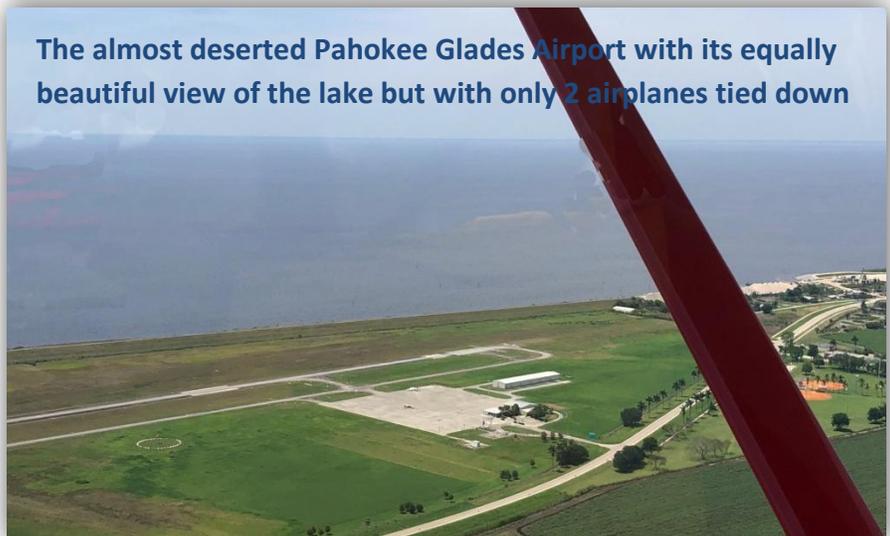
After landing I stopped off at my on-field maintenance shop and told them of the problem. A couple of days later they narrowed the cause to a shorted out alternator stator and possibly a burn out regulator as a result of that short. I called the engine manufacturer's USA rep in Tennessee and a quick inventory check determined the stator to be on back order with a 3 week expected arrival from their Australian factory. By the time everything arrived and had been installed we were in the midst of the Covid-19 health emergency and all restaurants in Florida were ordered closed, including those on airports. While fuel and maintenance services were still available, they being deemed essential, most airports now resembled "ghost towns".

I knew that a test flight is always advisable after major maintenance and it is wise to keep the distance from one's home field as short as practical, "just in case". I began my test flight with a half dozen take-off & landings on my home field, knowing that I would almost always be within gliding distance to a safe landing. With optimum electrical power being generated and all systems "GO", I decided to reach out a bit more and decided that a short flight to nearby Pahokee Airport, 25 miles to the south, would be a good choice.

I have not been to this airport for 10 or 12 years, but with its more than 4,000 foot long north/south runway, it is used, primarily, as a training base for some of the area's flight schools, and generally has a fair amount student "touch and go" traffic, with few stopping in for anything other than a bathroom break. Since I read that the facility boasted nothing in the way of food, other than a possible candy and/or coke machine, and that the actual town of Pahokee was a distant three miles to the north, I decided that a quick drive to the Indiantown Subway store would be in order. Less than 30 minutes later I was back in my airplane with a 6" Italian sub, two cans of soda, a cup of ice and a white chocolate/macadamia nut cookie on board.



Aerial view of downtown Pahokee with the "Big Lake O" adjoining. A beautiful location



The almost deserted Pahokee Glades Airport with its equally beautiful view of the lake but with only 2 airplanes tied down

First, a word about the city of Pahokee, Florida which **could** easily be one of the prettiest small towns in the state. It is located right on the eastern shore of Okeechobee Lake, the largest in the state, covering 730 square miles and it being about half the size of the entire state of Rhode Island. It's surrounding land mass is mostly agricultural and sugar cane is king. As a result many of its 6,000 residents are of Mexican descent with the remaining half being African/ American. Except during the winter/spring growing and harvesting season the unemployment rate tops 25% and the city has, been on a list of 13 Florida municipalities in "a state of financial emergency" since 1994. I have never really stopped off in the city, but have driven through it a couple of times. There is really no reason to stop. No on-field eateries and some of the highest Avgas prices in all of South Florida. However on the flight over I did take a couple of photos of both the cities' downtown area, which actually looks quite nice from one thousand feet up, as well as the aforementioned county owned airport, both offering spectacular views of the Big Lake.



On the ramp with the Pahokee FBO building in the background



It was time to unwrap my Subway sandwich

Upon landing, I was greeted by the FBO's (Fixed Base Operator) line person, Josh, who allowed me to park right in front of the gas pumps. "What if someone comes in for gas", I inquired. "I haven't had anyone in to purchase gas for almost 2 weeks" was his reply. "How much is your gas?", I asked. "\$5.68 a gallon", he answered. Well, no wonder, I thought. I had been paying \$2.80 a gallon at nearby Arcadia so that means that Pahokee's price was over twice as much a gallon. No wonder sales were slow. I then found out that this airport, which is one of 4 owned by Palm Beach county, was being operated by Signature Flight Service, one of the larger and premier FBO's in the United States. Signature was my FBO when I operated my single Comanche out of Teterboro, NJ and the twin Comanche out of Hilton Head Island, SC. They are top notch and the other 3 county owned airports must have well over 100 based aircraft each, with a multitude of visitors each year. I noted only two planes tied down on the Pahokee ramp, but in all fairness, there were some enclosed hangar buildings adjacent, which probably housed others. I suspect that Signature agreed to FBO Pahokee with its obvious financial loss, in order to obtain the other much more lucrative county owned facilities.

Well, it was about time for me to unpack my insulated cooler bag "picnic" and enjoy my "airport meal" inside their air conditioned FBO building, before bidding "adieu" to Josh while mentioning that it would probably be another 10 years before I would be returning. "You won't find me here!", was his cheerful retort.