

Sept. 12-17, 2014 - The States of Wisconsin & Illinois Planes, Trains, Automobiles AND Boats

It was like dejavu... all over again. A year and a half ago I made a similar trip to Wisconsin specifically to tour the EAA (Experimental Aircraft Assoc.) museum in Oshkosh, and to arrange for a flight in one of their bi-planes. However on that early May day when I arrived, there was a low overcast and it was dark, dreary and raining. Instead, I spent the entire day in their spectacular museum, vowing to return again the following year. I specifically wanted to avoid a repeat of those late spring rains, so this year I scheduled my trip for early fall. However, when I arrived, in Oshkosh, it was overcast, dark, dreary and raining. While I always enjoy traipsing through aviation related venues, I really wanted to experience that bi-plane flight, so I decided to amend my travel plans by extending for an extra day. As it turned out, this was a very wise decision. The following day, a Saturday, was clear and sunny, albeit cool. In addition, there was an EAA fly-in breakfast being held right there at Whitman Regional Airport. With proper planning and some luck I would be able to fit everything in and still be able to make my next scheduled stop at the rich people's playground, located in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Pretty much all of the EAA breakfasts that I have attended over the years feature pancakes, (and sometimes eggs) along with bacon or sausage and all the coffee and juice you care to consume. However this particular event, hosted by local Chapter #252, also incorporated a "Young Eagles" day at which free airplane rides were provided to teenagers in order to help generate interest in General Aviation. There were several unique aircraft being displayed just outside of the main terminal building, where the breakfast was being held. I found a turbine engined DC-3 to be the most intriguing. Most 1930 era DC-3's, with their twin 1,100 HP radial engines, could only attain a cruise speed of 185 MPH or so. However this highly modified version, with its two 1,900 HP P&W turbine powered PT6A power plants, if not kept on a tight reign, could easily exceed the ship's maximum structural design capability of 235 MPH. I suspect that this plane's modifications and custom interior appointments probably added another couple of million to its original cost of about \$80K.

After breakfast and following my stroll around the outside display aircraft, I headed over to EAA's "Pioneer Airstrip", where my flight was to take place. Since my pilot for the flight was still busy giving those "young eagles" their introductory airplane rides, I spent time wandering this simulated 1930's grass runway airport looking into the various old tyme hangars, many which featured airplanes from that bygone era. I even came across the 1929 Travel Air that I was soon going to be occupying. And, before you knew it, I was aboard the front seat of that open cockpit airplane and flying over the Wisconsin landscape at 500 feet. It was a wonderful, seeing the rolling grassy landscape drift by, with the wind in my face and hearing the throaty roar of that seven-cylinder, 220 horsepower Continental radial engine as it whisked me along at 100 MPH. Although Whitman field is towered, adjacent Pioneer's grass strip is a non-controlled adjunct. All too soon my 20 minute flight was over and it was time to alight back on that 2000 foot runway so that I could get on with the next phase of my week long tour of America's heartland.



View from the EAA museum's balcony



In front of a WWII P-51 Mustang



At Saturday's EAA pancake breakfast



Turbine engined DC-3 at EAA breakfast

My first experience with Lake Geneva was back in the early '70's while I was attending a Volkswagen Club of America convention in nearby Milwaukee. My wife and I had flown there from NJ in our 4 seat Cessna Skyhawk. In those days of psychedelic hippy slogans such as "make love, not war" and "gas, grass or ass... nobody rides free", Playboy had opened one of its early "Playmate" clubs at this location. Featuring a large hotel, complete with golf course and snow ski runs, their club featured waitresses dressed in tight waisted costumes complete with fluffy bunny tails, ears and bow ties. It was an easy 45 minute flight over from the General Mitchell Airport so I invited the then current VWCA president and his wife along for a lunch and stroll of the resort's grounds. However today Lake Geneva is better known for its many pricey and upscale homes which dot the perimeter shoreline. Many of these were built during the later part of the 1800's and the early part of the last century in order to accommodate many of Chicago's industrial and commercial business magnates. Chicago's air was so foul from its stockyards, slaughter houses, smoke belching factories and raw sewerage dumped directly into Lake Michigan, that many of these multi-millionaires built their summer homes on the shores of Lake Geneva, which was, then, a 2 hour private train ride from their city residences in order to enjoy its fresh clean breezes. Today these private home's prices range between \$1.3 and \$13 million with the small houses being only around 2,000 square feet in size. Each home has its own private dock, which must be completely removed from the lake over the winter months since it's ice will freeze from one to three feet in thickness.

My one day visit would include a 3 hour cruise of the lake on the restored Steam powered Yacht Louise, built in 1902, with a stop over at the Black Point Mansion. This victorian estate was built in the late 1880's by Chicago's German born beer baron, Conrad Seipp, as his summer retreat. It remained in the family for 6 generations and is now owned by the State of Wisconsin and its tours are handled by the local Historic Society. All of the homes furnishings and even the clothing remaining in its closets all belonged to the Seipp family. It was a enjoyable journey into life as it was conducted and lived over a century ago and was the highlight of my time spent in Lake Geneva.

However, it was now time for my day long drive of 350 miles to downstate Champaign, Illinois for a visit with a winter time neighbor from my Hilton Head condo complex. The next couple of days would include a visit to yet another aviation museum, located at nearby Frasca Airport, where we had a personal tour of the various aircraft owned by the Frasca Aircraft Simulator Company. There I happened across a 1946 Luscombe 7AC airplane, just like the one that provided me my very first flight in a general aviation aircraft. It was even the same color scheme. It was that 15 minute ride in that airplane which literally changed my life by instilling in me the desire to engage in what has become a 55 year relationship enjoying the experience of flight.

The next day we took an hour long round trip on a 1950's era diesel engined train from nearby Monticello, over to a typical 1940's mid-western railroad station and museum. Why I even had a chance to "pilot" Barbara's 1976 Cadillac Eldorado convertible. (with the top down). It was a sweet ride... they all were!



This is the 1929 Travel Air bi-plane



Me in the front seat, and pilot in the rear



A bird's eye view of my cockpit, in flight



The beautiful Wisconsin landscape @ 500'



My ride on Lk. Geneva... a 1902 steamer



This is just one of the large private homes



Expensive mansions dotted the shoreline



Our tour of the historic Black Point Resort



One of the airplanes at the Frasca museum



My first airplane ride was in a Luscombe



My ride in a 1959 diesel powered train



I drove Barbara's 1976 Cadillac Eldorado