

Airventure 2012

*Every year I go down to Oshkosh
at the end of July
I go to see the airplanes, I go to see my friends
but most of all,
I go to fly.*

That's the first verse of a song I wrote a couple of years ago, it's still true. Those three objectives are always at the top of my must-do list but every year has its own special distractions. The most special distraction this year was a booth in Exhibit Hangar A. The good folks at Ultralight Headquarters give me a name badge when I register my airplane with them. It says Oshkosh Pilot above my name and I wear it with pride every year. This year was the first time I also had a name tag with a red ribbon along the bottom. Printed in gold on the red ribbon was the word EXHIBITOR. I pinned it on my Hawaiian shirt as soon as Seth handed it to me on Sunday but I am getting way ahead of myself, this story started days before.

Wednesday, July 18, 2012

I had spent the week mowing at Bob's Cabins and then coming home to more grass cutting in the evening. Growth had slowed a bit since the peak in May and June but after ten days unattended the lawns would be starting to look pretty shaggy if I didn't get them all trim now.

I shook grass clippings out of my socks and sat down to write the Chapter Newsletter with a sandwich for dinner. I don't think it was my best effort because I kept jumping up to add something to my Oshkosh list or jam a handful of T-shirts into my bag. I think about this trip all year but the anticipation goes up dramatically as the date nears. By the time I got all the envelopes addressed I was exhausted and fell into bed.

Thursday, July 19, 2012

The sun gets up early this time of year and I wasn't far behind. I threw all the tie-down stuff I could gather and the newsletter into the Oshkosh Marriott (my 91 Chevy van) and headed for the airport. Fifi, my Kolb Firefly was waiting in her cool dark hangar and I wasted no time rolling her up on the trailer and folding her wings. I had borrowed Dan Murphy's trailer (again!) so the task was familiar. It was a perfect summer day and I was sweating pretty good as I rolled the loaded trailer back into the hangar. I splashed some water on my face and went into town. The anticipation level had ramped up to a light euphoria, a two-beers-after-a-softball-game energetic buzz. At the library I made copies of the newsletter and at the post office I stuffed envelopes and bought stamps. At the grocery store I went a little overboard on meat, cheese and chips.

Back at home I started loading the Merry Yacht with everything she would need to be my home for the next ten days or so. I grilled a whole package of Italian sausage and ate two, the other three would be road snacks or perhaps sustain me while setting up camp tomorrow. I finally plopped down on my deck at sunset and propped my feet up on the rail. I couldn't stop smiling, I was about to transport myself to the fabled city that only exists for one week each year. The earth had completed another elliptical orbit and was about to pass into the zone of altered realities known as Oshkosh.

Friday, July 20, 2012

I was up before sunrise pulling everything out of my fridge and dumping it in the coolers. I found out later that in my excited state I totally missed the cheeses on the door shelf. It was cool and cloudy but not too cool for shorts. Even the reluctant black ash trees were in full leaf and the forest was a riot of green in the early light. The Merry Yacht whistled a happy tune as we glided down the highway toward Fifi's hangar. We were in and out of the airport in the time it takes to raise and lower a hangar door and on the expressway by 8:00. Wisconsin fairly flew by in my peripheral vision, I was focused on the destination.

*The airshow there is amazing,
every kind of aircraft has its charm
but the lightest of the light is all I can afford
so you'll find me,
down on the Farm.*

That's the second verse and it describes exactly where I was heading. There were no detours and only a couple of one lane stretches with flaggers so the miles piled up. At the intersection of highways 45 and 41 the simple exit ramp had been changed to a cutesy European round-about complete with landscaping. I zigged when I should have zagged and wound up going the wrong way. Not to be deterred from the goal now so close I coaxed the Yacht into a semi-legal U turn and we were back on our way.

Easing down the driveway to the Barn signals the transformation from earth time to Oshkosh time. It was about 4:00 in the mundane world but that no longer mattered. Good old Ed waved us through the gate to the set up area and I found the one shady spot on the hill. The Merry Yacht gave a contented sigh as I shut her down and I gave a grunt as I tested my land legs. Fifi had survived the ride without insult and I set about releasing her restraints. Even three days before the show starts there are always some folks looking around and I invariably get a willing passerby to help unfold my girl. This year it was a fellow Kolb owner named Jim. We talked about his UltraStar and other Kolb models we had owned or flown while we coaxed Fifi from her chrysalis. Not ten minutes inside the gate and I had already made a new friend.

I rolled my girl down the hill to the corner of the fence between the Farm and Boelter's campground. In her third year at this familiar spot she was becoming a fixture just like her big sister before her. With just a couple of exceptions I had parked my red and white Kolb Twinstar on or near this piece of pasture since 1994. The exceptions were the years I flew Miss Chaos, my Rans S-9 to the show. All this history played in my head as I struggled to screw tie-downs into the firm soil. Finally satisfied that Fifi was secure I fired up the Yacht, dropped the trailer in lot 'U' and turned down Ripple road.

Rick and Nancy were at their perennial post and I jumped out for a handshake and a hug. The Jacobsens drive up from Omaha every year to mind the entrance to the John Moody Ultralight Campground and generally keep the peace in a mostly peaceful kingdom. Rick had flagged sites a little larger this year and I found the last one not roped off at the fence. This old wood-lath snow fence is the only thing between my camp spot and the Ultralight runway I call Beagle Field. This is where the Merry Yacht becomes the Oshkosh Marriott and I began the transformation with lungs full of clean Wisconsin air and a heart full of glad.

Through years of evolution erecting a silver tarp over the Oshkosh Hilton (my old van) became routine but this was only the second year for the Marriott and I was still experimenting. Just as I was getting frustrated Jim pulled the Chimegarden Suburban in next to me and handed me a cold beer.

Things got easier right away. Jim Batzli and I built an airplane together a couple years ago and we have been camping together since tents were made of heavy canvas and canoes were made of wood. As I continued to putter with my tarp Jim covered a small acre of grass with the contents of the Suburban. With these prosaic bits he proceeded to assemble a camp kitchen of impressive proportions right up against the fence. Over the years we have become accustomed to making meals with all manner of ultralight vehicles buzzing the Coleman stove. This year he had two large card tables and two Colemans along with the Smokey Joe charcoal grill and enough kitchen tools for Wolfgang Puck. His crowning achievement was a hardwood strip which he clamped to the front of the tables. A dozen or more wood screws were half sunk into the strip and made the perfect rack to hang spatulas, tongs and anything the avid outdoor chef may require. I took pictures.

As we worked Beagle Field received arrivals in the form of a Legal Eagle and a Hummelbird which did a go around and thus entertained us twice. By the time the sun got low we had spliced his green tarp to mine which covered the Suburban and a small living room between the two vehicles. It felt like home. We were both too pooped to cook so we tore open a bag of shrimp and dredged them through cocktail sauce with our fingers. Shrimp cocktail seems pointless without cocktails so we complied. After dark it got cool enough for light jackets as we lounged on deck chairs and talked about everything.

Jim showed me a guitar his buddy Buzz had picked up in Thailand. It was covered with sparkling inlays and played well so we passed it back and forth and sang all the songs we could remember. It was just the first perfect Oshkosh night this year but it blended seamlessly with the perfect nights of years gone by.

Saturday, July 21, 2012

Jim woke early and watched 'Dactyl Dave arrive. The Pteradactyl Ascender he has flown to the show every year since I can remember probably used to be red. Now its a smokey pink from years in the sun. 'Dactyls are notoriously intolerant of gusty conditions so Dave always launches at first light. Jim also told me about two Challengers that came in before I woke, one had the word POLICE painted on the fuselage. The morning was overcast and cool for July. We chopped pork and veggies for a fancy camp frittata and watched landings on the big runway while we ate. Mark, the green vested volunteer who gives the ultralight briefings putted up to the runway side of the fence on a scooter and we talked him into dining with us.

Mike Garrett, the third in our camping foursome called from an airstrip 30 miles south of us and said the wind was picking up. He was nervous about flying the last leg to Beagle Field even though he had already put 50 or 60 miles behind him in his Kolb Mark III. I biked over to the Barn and fussed over Fifi like a mother hen. I had noticed some light abrasions on her skin from where the tail cables had rested during trailering so I applied small strips of white duct tape to prevent further chafing on the trip home. Like most ultralighters I'm absolutely phobic about adding weight to my girl so I didn't use a millimeter more than necessary.

The clouds began to clear and the temperature began to rise. I wasn't completely satisfied with the experimental tarp over the Marriott so Jim and I pedaled to the Fly Market for tent stakes and rope. Gliding down Knapp Street road I noticed light populations of contemporary and antique/classic birds in their respective areas but the main runways were receiving a steady stream of arrivals and the parking spaces were filling in. Camp Scholler was buzzing with activity as happy campers rolled in and set up vacation homes on a couple hundred square feet of prime real estate.

When we got back to camp Doug Greenfield and his party of hearty volunteers were setting up their bivouac in their usual spot right in our back yard. As we exchanged greetings I was reminded why most of the folks at the Moody campground call Oshkosh a family reunion.

A thick stand of tall hardwood trees to the west of camp and consequently the runway, serve up a double whammy for us. The prevailing wind is from the west so light breezes that might cool our camp are effectively blocked. This is vexing for the ground bound but pilots get a whole other picture of this micro-meteorology. The westerlies tend to tumble over the tops of our windbreak and spill in chaos right down onto the runway. Over the years we have witnessed many 'sporty' landings due to this phenomenon and I've logged quite a few myself. On this day conditions at Beagle Field were conducive to 'sportiness'.

The impressive mass landing of Beechcraft Bonanzas and Barons is one of the best reasons to get planted at Oshkosh by Saturday. Hundreds of Walter and Olive's offspring make formation landings on the main runways three at a time and thanks to thorough planning and practice by the pilots and top talent in the tower they are all recovered in a matter of minutes! In recent years Cessna and Mooney drivers have picked up on the idea and this year they both had impressive total numbers. We have the perfect viewpoint right from our camp chairs and we grade landings with comments like "Nice!" and "Whoa, did you see that?"

I turned away from the action for a moment and caught a familiar face. Chuck Garrett, Mikey's dad was negotiating with Rick on a parking spot for his humongous Class A motor home. The thing was 40 feet long and ten feet tall and I hadn't even noticed it pulling in. Once it was moored Chuck came over and sat down with Jim and me and we toasted another family reunion. I met Mikey and Chuck right in this campground nearly twenty years ago and I see them more often than people I am actually related to.

The three of us chatted and snacked and watched a few arrivals on the grass before us, some sportier than others. Suddenly Chuck cocked his head, scrunched up his face and said, "Here comes Mikey!" Jim and I cocked our heads and sure enough there was a very distinctive propeller sound approaching. We all riveted our attention to the treeline and waited, and waited. Finally the beautiful red and white Kolb Mark III bounced around the corner lit up like a movie star in the afternoon sun. Mike wisely kept her high and did an observation pass right over our heads. We all waved and shouted even though we knew he was watching the windsock and computing his landing strategy. It seemed to take forever for him to complete a lap of the pattern and when we next caught sight of him he was on short final. A twelve knot crosswind is a challenge for any ultralight pilot even when its not spilling over trees but Mikey stayed with it and pulled off a real nice landing. We all abandoned camp and made for the exit on the far side of the runway.

I had never seen one whisker on Mike's face so it was a surprise to see a big blond goatee on his chin but the mischievous smile and twinkling eyes were the same as always. Also as usual he was shirtless and animated. We listened to the full story of his journey while he tied the Kolb down seven ways from Sunday. Once it was secure from anything short of a tsunami we made our way back to camp. We were soon joined by Chuck's buddy Dave and Jim's camp kitchen became the focal point. Mikey bounced around the campground like a pinball while Chuck whipped up a gourmet meal of steak, spuds and asparagus and Dave tossed a salad. There was light activity on the runway behind the kitchen and we watched while we ate. We were all licking our fingers before Mikey's manic orbit decayed enough that he could fill a plate, which he ate standing up. And talking, nonstop.

In deference to forty thousand campers the FAA closes the field at 8:00. Most of us really love the sound of airplanes in flight but after a whole day of sweet racket the quiet is nice. There was no moon but the stars were brilliant and a party atmosphere rolled through the campground like a wave. Anticipation was the stimulant and nobody had to get up early Sunday morning so chairs were pulled into circles around lanterns and small fires. Happy chatter was the background music punctuated often by hearty laughter.

Later in the evening Doug strolled over to ask if his party was disturbing our party. He introduced us to his friend Ed by telling the story of Ed's world record powered parachute flight. Of course this immediately made Ed a quiz show contestant. He kindly answered all of our questions and

we learned he had set the altitude record, was running a Rotax two stroke engine (582) and got very, very cold. Powered parachutes don't move quickly in any direction especially down so it was an exercise in endurance that we all appreciated. Ed also admitted to hooking a bug fogger on his flying machine to make smoke passes down the runway, at 26 mph! You have to love pilots, we embrace a special kind of crazy.

Sunday, July 22, 2012

I crawled out of the Marriott around 6:30 and found Chuck, Gary and Mikey already moving around looking for coffee. Were it not for an appointment at Exhibit Hangar 'A' I would have slept away a couple more hours of a glorious morning. I tended to my diabetic needs and saddled up the bike. At the entrance opposite the bike parking lot I was stopped by the volunteer gate guard.

“Wristband?” he inquired.

“The show doesn't start until tomorrow.” I said.

“We were told not to let anyone in without a wristband.” he insisted

“Do they even make a band for today?” I couldn't help but wonder.

He didn't have a good answer for that one so when I assured him I was on my way to get my wristbands he grudgingly let me enter. All four huge exhibit hangars were buzzing with activity as workers set up displays and hauled in merchandise. I found the booth marked City of Two Harbors on the east row of 'A' facing a large roll-up door.

My mission was to meet Seth McDonald and help set up the booth. Seth had pitched this idea to the City Council then worked tirelessly to create the content. The appointed time came and went, I checked all the entrance doors and walked all the aisles, no Seth. Finally I went outside to sit in the shade and wait. I was about to light my third smoke when he appeared, on a bicycle. Neither of us had any experience with this so he had parked his truck elsewhere and biked in to check out the procedure. By the time we got the truck in position to unload the day was warming fast. The first thing installed and operating was a fan Seth had thoughtfully included and it was appreciated. We must have looked like the Three Stooges minus one for a while but eventually we got the big vinyl banners hung and the tables organized. Matt Ferrari dropped by just as we were getting on top of it and Seth led us through the details. He had a video loop set up in a display on the front table, maps and brochures to hand out and sign-up slips for the raffle. The amount of time and effort he had invested in this project was obvious, Matt and I were impressed.

The package that the City had purchased included wristbands for four so I collected mine and made sure to flash my Monday bracelet to the gate guard on the way out. He was clearly pleased to see it even though it was still Sunday. I stopped at Boelter's on the way back and pedaled the rest of the way home balancing a bag of ice on the crossbar. Jim had kindly moved my cooler to the shady side of camp along with his four or five. I hung my sweaty shirt on the fence and sat down in the shade of the silver tarp. During daylight hours all of the patio furniture is pointed toward the runways and the first thing I saw was a highly polished B-25 smoking its tires in a picture perfect landing. A looming rumble to the southwest made Jim and I abandon the shade to watch 40 RV aircraft pass over in a clever formation. This was the 40th anniversary of Richard VanGrunsven's popular kit designs and the formation told the world. No sooner had that rumble faded when the distinctive throb of four huge radial engines had us out in the sun again to watch Fifi, the only flying B-29 in the world pass regally down the runway at 500 feet.

We ate turkey dogs and oyster stew for lunch while the air parade continued overhead and we stayed in the shade as much as possible. The temperature was in the 90s and the breeze was just an occasional puff through the trees. A few bright white cumulus clouds provided contrast for the crystal blue sky but no shade. .

Later in the afternoon Mikey rolled into camp with his classic VW microbus. He had left his Kolb tied down and hitched a ride home with Gary. Now he was back with the VW packed to the gills. No less than four gas powered riding toys, tables, grills, coolers and a picnic canopy looked ready to spill out of the sliding door but nothing moved. Everything was so tightly intertwined it took three guys twenty minutes just to get the first scooter out. When he finally got down to luggage he whipped out a bag full of t-shirts and started passing them out. He had printed a hilarious image that can only be called insect pornography and we all got at least one.

Our familiar camp was now assembled, The Marriott, the Chimegarden Suburban and the Green microbus lined up along the runway fence just like so many past years. Accused of being crazy campers I think we would all plead guilty but no one could convict us of being Oshkosh amateurs. Arrivals at Beagle Field ramped up as the day went on and we always stopped whatever we were doing to grade the landing. Arrivals in the John Moody Campground ramped up as well and what was a cow pasture a couple of days ago was now a small, very friendly town.

The sun continued west and the temperature mellowed with the light. Jim pulled a huge bag of garden fresh green beans out of his cooler and put water on to boil. (He may have planted a few too many in his home garden, Deeann called every day to say she had harvested another ton and they just kept coming!) We grilled some chicken and added some Wisconsin sweetcorn to a meal made in heaven. Fully awash in Oshkosh Euphoria I drifted down to the camp water supply for a bucket of dishwater and ran into Steve Madgic. He said he had enjoyed last year's edition of this journal and that made me feel even better. How many levels of euphoria are there?

Darkness settled over camp like a warm blanket and Coleman lanterns flickered on over picnic tables. Jim got out the Thai guitar and before long the younger segment of the Greenfield camp appeared. All the songs I know were too old for this demographic and the songs Jim knows are even older but they appreciated the effort. When Doug's son Adam put the guitar in his lap the party really started. They were still strumming and singing when I slipped into the Marriott and my comfy bed. I had an appointment in the morning, one I look forward to all year.

Monday, July 23, 2012

I opened my eyes a little after 5:00 and smiled. Fifi was waiting and I needed to see her. Even an hour before dawn it was warm enough for shorts and the air was beginning to move. I wasted no time collecting my helmet and goggles and jumped on the bike. I may ride from camp to the Barn a couple dozen times during the convention but this ride is the sweetest. I found Ed in his post at the gate and wished him a good morning then strolled around the corner and into the Barn. The ladies behind the counter were all smiles and the coffee smelled good. I selected my traditional first-day pastry from the variety in the plexiglass lidded box. A chocolate covered doughnut with chocolate filling and chocolate sprinkles, hey I know what I like. Most years I am able to wrap it up and put it in my pack after one bite, some years I eat the whole thing and feel guilty. Fortunately for my blood sugar I ran into an old friend before I could take that second bite. Rick Hayes is the master builder who created my first Kolb and we seem to run into each other a lot at Oshkosh. Especially at daybreak in front of the Barn.

At 6:30 sharp the briefing began in the circus tent next to the barn. Mark introduced the FAA meteorologist to twenty or thirty pilots and we listened closely to his prognostication. I saw some familiar faces in the crowd as Mark went through the slide show explaining the traffic pattern and the rules. We all got waivers to sign and were excused to the sign-in station in front of the barn where we got our 'Pilot' wristbands. I never wear jewelry but at Oshkosh it's a mark of pride. I stole another bite of my lavish overindulgence as I walked up the rise to my girl. She looked so regal with her proud posture and the dew sparkling on her wings. I couldn't resist, I kissed her right on her full red lips.

Just as the weatherman said, seven to ten knots of northwesterly wind waved banners and windsocks all along the hill. I assumed the powered parachutes would demur in these breezes so as soon as I had wiped the dew from Fifi I escorted her up the hill to the runway. I hadn't counted on the powered paraglider boys. Powered parachutes with their rectangular wings and three wheeled buggies crave calm. Paragliders however, with their sleek elliptical wings evolved in the free flight community. Like hang gliders they launch without engines from hillsides and mountain tops and they don't even try to fly until there is at least some wind. There were several present on this opening day with big fans on their backs and they were not to be denied. I admire anyone who will attempt to launch a flying machine from flat ground with feet for wheels and they all eventually succeeded but the footwork was completely ad-lib and occasionally hilarious.

As I sat in the shade of Fifi's wing watching the entertainment another old buddy suddenly appeared. I had given Rich Mattson his initial flight instruction at Superior Dragonflyers years back and we always seemed to cross paths at Oshkosh. He told me about a scary issue he had with his Titan Tornado and how he fixed the problem. We sat in the grass and watched as another perfectly crazy sky dog launched an ancient Wasp Wing hang glider with two ducted fans suspended from the keel tube. At least he had wheels but while the paraglider landings were entertaining his was frightening. I heard several gasps from the bleachers as he struggled to get the darn thing to stop flying in some proximity to the ground.

When the foot launch follies concluded Rich assured me he would be in the pattern presently and went back to prepare his bird. Fifi started on the first pull and impatiently strained against my restraint as she warmed up. Before I climbed into her eager embrace I paused to take in the scene. A beautiful summer morning at the most famous ultralight strip in the cosmos, people in the stands and Frank Beagle at the mic, it doesn't get any better than this. I snapped my leather flying helmet, adjusted my goggles and began to taxi to the south end of the runway. I shot a quick salute to Frank and Mark as we rolled past the announcer's tower and stopped at the paddle man, first in line!

When the paddle flipped from orange to green Fifi couldn't contain her enthusiasm and literally flung us both into the sky. I gave a whoop of joy and waved to the bleachers as we climbed into the warm morning air.

This would be a good time to sing the chorus:

*I get my knees in the breeze,
over the trees.
No one can do me harm
when I get my knees in the breeze,
if you please
I'm just havin' fun down on the Farm.*

Anyone who has watched this spectacle for the last thirty years or so will recognize the tribute to Frank Beagle. His booming baritone has informed, entertained and inspired untold thousands over the years and those are his two favorite catch phrases. My imagination heard him clearly as Fifi and I swung west over the southern acres of Camp Scholler.

With the rising sun at my back I could see happy campers starting their day and many stopped to wave. The atmosphere was definitely unstable which is terrific if you are a hang glider pilot looking for lift but a bit unsettling if you're just looking for a joyride. Fortunately over the years I have ridden ultralight wings in much worse so I just dealt with it. Fifi didn't care, she was in her element and as truly alive as any machine could ever be. My controls were bone and sinew connecting me to a living ocean of air. Every fluid nuance was transmitted directly to my brain as if hands and feet existed only as wings and tail. In this moment I find what every mystic and shaman has sought since the beginning of sentient thought. Complete involvement in the now. No past, no future, only the blissfully perfect

gift that is appropriately called the 'present'.

Every couple of laps we swung in past the trees for a reunion with the earth and then found ourselves impatient for the sky. Fifi's petite feet would stumble on the uneven grass until she regained her graceful bearing upon takeoff. From my lofty perch I surveyed the Airventure Kingdom with acre upon green acre of colorful birds patiently awaiting their next graceful moment. And in the sky dozens more executed their careful choreography with casual aplomb. The Oshkosh Alternate Reality was in full effect and Fifi proudly filled her role in the spectacle.

All too soon half her tank of nourishment had been exhausted and we grudgingly exited stage center. It was already almost 90 degrees as I tied my girl down so I lingered in the shade of her wings and submerged myself in the organized chaos. With the busy main runways right in front of me and Beagle Field over my right shoulder I looked like a spectator at a tennis match trying to see, savor and remember everything. There was no shortage of foot traffic and Fifi basked in the glow of admiring stares. I answered lots of questions and even posed for a few phone photographs.

When I got back to camp I enjoyed another bite of my pastry and called it breakfast. Jim and I watched the Orbis flying hospital make a go around in the humid morning air. This DC-10 has saved the vision of thousands of third world kids and would depart on another humanitarian mission soon after Aventure. The coolers were turning ice to water at an alarming rate so we both pedaled up to Boelter's for more. Jim could carry three eight pound bags in his handlebar basket but I could only handle one. When the food was protected we jumped back on the bikes for a trip to show center.

It's mostly downhill from the Barn so we coasted and enjoyed the relative wind. Once through the gate we headed for the first shade and spent some time scoping out exhibit hangar 'B'. From there is was a short stroll across the mall to hangar 'A' where we found Seth in the City booth. He seemed cool standing in front of his fan and was optimistic about the interest he had already encountered. Farther north near the flight line the Rans display was set up and humming with activity. We poked our heads into the factory aircraft and checked out some home built examples. In the shade of their tent we chatted with Randy (company founder) and signed the Rans owners check-in sheet. Back out in the sun my sandals actually stuck to some hot asphalt so we turned south and headed back to camp.

I was feeling cooked so I threw a beach towel on the ground in the shade and took a nap. When I revived the airshow was starting and we watched an antique tri-motor transport do some impressive maneuvering over the runway. This German Junkers JU-52 had flown across the Atlantic on 80 year old wings just to be seen at the world's greatest aviation extravaganza. After a couple of unlimited aerobatic acts shattered all the laws of physics the P-38 Lightning 'Glacier Girl' brought some stately grace back to the show. Recovered from under 250 feet of Greenland ice pack this icon turned the clock back with smooth swooping loops and rolls at the hands of expert warbird pilot Steve Hinton. A tribute to air legend Bob Hoover had a Shrike Commander and the 'Red Tails' P-51A making formation passes over the appreciative crowd. Eleven home built 'RV' aircraft did impressive formation aerobatics trailing white smoke across the clear blue sky. They were advertised as a dozen so we speculated about the missing member.

When the main airshow wound down about 6:00 o'clock we gathered our reserve energy for another bike ride. The Steve Miller Band was getting ready to rock Phillips 66 Plaza in the center of the convention but Beagle Field was also coming to life so we took our time leaving. Our timing turned out to be perfect since the Plaza was packed when we arrived but we missed the tedious commercial introduction. Steve and the boys put on a great show and the sound quality was better than any other rock concert we have seen here, and we have seen them all. Convention planners moved the start time back an hour this year and that helped the comfort level but the real saving grace was that the only cloud in the sky was parked directly over the wicked Wisconsin summer sun. Fans of all ages connected with the music and moved to the rhythms. All around the Plaza rare and special aircraft stood sentinel duty tall and proud against the sky.

The sun was getting low as we biked back to camp and the ultralights had all retired for the

night. Nobody had the energy to make dinner so we shifted smoothly to plan 'B'. Good pilots always have a plan 'B', this one involved liquid nourishment. It has often been said "There's a sandwich in every beer!" so we had sandwiches. Several sandwiches. It had been a long and wonderful day and we went over our adventures to savor the experience while it was fresh. Looking across the camp road I saw some folks sitting by Doug's camp fire talking quietly. I took my beater classical guitar over and introduced them to the song this story is wrapped around. They gave me polite reviews. (Raves actually, they must have been drinking!). It was quiet in the Moody campground. Most of our neighbors would be volunteering or flying in the morning so they retired early. Jim and I have been sharing camp sites for more than 50 years so the conversation bounced all over the space-time continuum and went on well into the night. When a light drizzle started to patter on the tarps we took down Jim's half of our living room ceiling and called it a night.

Tuesday, July 24, 2012

The morning sun hid behind a gray overcast and let me sleep late in comfort. By 9:30 I was too hungry to stay in bed. I fried up bacon, sausage and eggs for three and we enjoyed a busy ultralight pattern while we ate. After breakfast Mike went for ice while Jim did KP. When the rotorcraft show took over Beagle field Jim and I left Mikey to drool over the home built helicopters and took the bikes to show center to start our daily tour.

We were barely inside the gate when we ran into Mark Marino and Sandra Etestad. They had left the Hatz Bantam at home for a change and were manning a display of expertly welded Cub fuselages. The sun was starting to eat through the light overcast so we lingered under their tent while we talked. Soon the flight line beckoned so we wandered through ranks of pretty homebuilts from the putt-putt Pietenpols to the speedy SX-370s. I spent a lot of time in the sun studying Burt Rutan's Boomerang. In the enigmatic world of aircraft design all parameters are subject to innovative adjustment but symmetry is a given. In the even more enigmatic world of Burt Rutan there are no givens. Boomerang is so elegantly non-symmetrical it is a slap in the face of convention but it does so many things so well it's in a class by itself.

We exited the flight line at the famous Brown Arch and made a bee line to the soft serve stand for a couple of cones. Like my opening morning pastry this is a long standing tradition for me and it wasn't hard to talk Jim into it. While we licked we strolled down to the Rans tent again for more detailed examinations and a little airplane envy.

The air was hot, heavy and filled with aircraft of all descriptions. The only time traffic abates at Oshkosh is when some military hardware comes streaking through at high decibels and high sub-mach numbers. As soon as they land the sky fills again with flying machines a normal human can operate.

Walking the Light Sport Aircraft (LSA) Mall we encountered a pretty college coed in a Cessna shirt. She introduced herself then proudly pointed to her name on the door of a Cessna 162 Skycatcher. She was an aerospace student who found the greatest summer intern job ever. Cessna gave her the keys to this cute little airplane and turned her loose. "Go fly it, show it off, give rides." they said, so she did. Smart move by the marketing guys, if I had the dough I'd have bought one on the spot just to keep her smiling. To be fair she was very bright and fully qualified but that just made her prettier. Jim and I both accepted Cessna tee shirts one size too small and thanked her profusely.

We got back to camp as the afternoon airshow was starting and we watched from our shady living room. Jim cracked a tin of smoked oysters and I confessed to leaving my cheese in the fridge door. As the hot sun slowly moved west we were able to pull our chairs closer to the action without cooking our skulls. Chuck Aaron made the Red Bull helicopter do things helicopters simply cannot do then Mike Goulian and Rob Holland made their unlimited aerobats do things airplanes cannot do. The

Aeroshell T-6s did normal loops and rolls but with extreme precision and lots of noise. Their show smoke was thick enough to qualify as its own weather system.

The show thundered on as I pedaled over to the Barn for the 5:30 briefing. After donning my second pilot bracelet I watched the rest of the action from the shade of Fifi's wing. A constant parade of flight fans passed by and I was reminded of nights on the town with Lauri, my second wife. Everybody noticed her, some made appreciative comments, I was invisible. In those days the way I became visible was to offer her my arm and escort her to the door so I used the same tactic as the airshow wound down and escorted Fifi to the ballroom.

The breeze was light and refreshing from the south so we launched downhill and made right turns around our little race track. This direction makes it easy for me to salute our campsite as we climb into the welcoming sky. There was a new farmhouse at the southeast corner of the pattern and I waved to the happy family as they partied on the patio. Flying in the evening session gives me a unique perspective on the mechanics of this huge event. I float unimpeded over a thick snarl of auto traffic as the masses try to escape to their evening plans at two miles per hour. I smile and wave but they are not even looking up anymore, just concentrating on the bumper ahead of them. I feel sorry for them, for about two seconds.

After a couple circuits we pulled over to the gas shack and I bought my girl a cocktail: One part Amsoil Sabre and one hundred parts 93 octane dinosaur bones. It had the same effect as Johnny Walker Black used to have on Lauri, "Let's get this party started!" Just like back then all I could say was, "I'm with you baby!" We waved at a good crowd as we taxied up the hill then zoomed back into our own private paradise above the trees. The air was smooth and the air traffic was manageable so we danced with abandon to music only we could hear. The sun was falling fast when we finally left the dance floor and walked hand in hand to her bedroom. One big difference between airplanes and women is airplanes actually like being tied down. I complied and left her with a kiss.

A nice surprise waited for me at camp. Jim and Mikey had finished their dinner but Jim had thoughtfully grilled me some chicken and sweetcorn and his timing was perfect. I was six fathoms deep in Oshkosh Rapture and thinking it couldn't get better than this. Then it did, of course. Mark Marino and Jim Nelson came PT Cruising in with, what else? A fine bottle of Scotch. This rite has enough years behind it now to qualify as an Oshkosh Tradition so we toasted that fact and celebrated the coming night.

When that party dispersed and the campground got still Rich Mattson appeared out of the darkness and told us about his cross country flying adventures. He has some good stories. The evening cooled enough for long sleeves and my camp chair became very comfortable. Another perfect evening in a wondrous place that only exists in myth and memory for 51 weeks of the year.

Wednesday, July 25, 2012

Thunder woke me at 6:30 and rain was sheeting off my tarp but the sky wasn't very dark and the storm soon spent its fury. It was cool and I stumbled around for a while checking my tarp moorings in a light jacket. No ultralights were flying so I fell back to bed for a nice morning nap. About 9:30 I headed for the showers and stopped to chat a while with Rick and Nancy on the way back. The sun was starting to flex her muscle and the humidity from the morning rain didn't help.

Jim and I left our bikes at the Barn for our Wednesday tour and walked the ultralight vendor area at an easy pace. The new version of the Just Aircraft Highlander deserved a close inspection. We had watched it coast down the grass runway at a ridiculously slow airspeed and just had to see the clever engineering that made that possible. We poked around Quicksilver's display and admired the Mosquito ultralight helicopters. I checked on Fifi then we strolled over to the Barn to sit in the shade for a smoke. Frank Beagle was in his favorite chair so we had some laughs with him. He and Mark,

his co-announcer, had been featured on the main public address earlier at show center. Frank joked that he was giving his eventual successor “Some dual on the heavy iron.”

*Frank Beagle is the man
with the microphone in his hand.
He'll tell you all you need to know.
And If you should decide
to join our happy clan,
He'll gladly tell you where to go...*

*Go get your knees in the breeze,
over the trees,
No one will do you harm.
When you get your knees in the breeze,
if you please,
You're just havin' fun down on the Farm.*

That's the third verse of the song followed by a slightly different chorus. I have been intending to play this tribute to Frank since I wrote it but since I didn't have a guitar with me I didn't mention it. Surely I would get a chance later in the week.

Just beyond ultralight parking two hundred Piper Cubs sat wing to tail on the infield . Their mass arrival on Sunday morning was to commemorate 75 years of the humble, iconic design. I had witnessed that procession at dawn and it was like somebody had hit the mute button. They floated in silently like so many little yellow butterflies. Now Jim and I walked the rows and marveled at the commitment to authenticity, it was difficult to tell any one from any other. In the middle of this sea of flat yellow I heard one fellow remark.”It looks like a freakin' school bus parking lot!” They were awfully cute school buses though and I could just picture myself floating over the summer fields with the door open and a big Cub smile on my face.

Wandering on we came to a clutch of Cessna 170s and Jim soon found N2797D. This is the exact airframe that Jim's dad owned a lifetime ago and it always brings back good memories. The sound of a phone interrupted his reverie and I thought, “Who could be so rude?” He took the phone from his ear and held it out, “It's for you.” Oops! Since I had made a commitment to the City booth I had given Jim's number to the team and this was Mike Busch. I couldn't hear him very well but it sounded like he had just arrived and was heading for the booth in Hangar 'A' . I left Jim to his thoughts and struck out for show center on foot. The straight line to my destination laid at a diagonal to the grid of displays and aircraft and roads so I zigged and zagged all the way. By the time I got there I was pretty hot but the shade of the big hangar was some relief. Mike was indeed there but his back hadn't enjoyed the long car ride and he needed to find the camper to stretch and lie down. Seth gave him his wristbands and directed him to the Sleepy Hollow campground. While I was standing at the counter Jake Hayes strolled up and we had a nice chat. I told Seth I'd be back in the morning so he could spend the day enjoying the show then walked back out into the sun.

Did I mention how big the convention grounds are? My route through the antique/classic area back to the Barn under the wilting sun measured in miles. My feet were pretty tired when I crashed the party on the Barn lawn. Under a too small circus tent top the gang was celebrating the 30th anniversary of FAR part 103. This very short chapter in the giant volume of FAA rules is the mother of all ultralight activity and our little bible. I heard Beagle bark my name and soon I was directed to the front and presented a Certificate of Participation. Each pilot flying this year received this official looking document. Perhaps the fact that the participation parchment was laminated in heavy plastic speaks to the perception of UL pilot personality profiles. (Sorry, I had to p) After some gentle speechifying we

all dove into the punch and cupcakes. I recognized many faces of stalwart volunteers who have given countless hours of their time over the years to preserve, promote and protect our quirky passion. It was great to see them celebrating their successes.

Finally back at camp I had only a few minutes to sit in the shade before the next big event. As builders and owners of Rans aircraft Jim and I had been invited to the company picnic so we biked back down to the big show. What pilot ever turns down a free meal? With dogs and burgers and plates of picnic staples we jockeyed for a small piece of the shade behind their tent and watched the afternoon airshow. Randy bounced around the group taking candid photos of his extended family. This is one of the most wonderful aspects of the Oshkosh altered reality, the Head Honcho of a company that has built and sold multiple thousands of fine aircraft becomes just another friend at the party.

Pedaling back uphill towards home with a full belly nearly did me in. No way was I was going to take my girl out in this condition. I put my feet up on a cooler and enjoyed the ultralight show from the ground. The launch of a C-17 Globemaster from the main runway stopped all general aviation activity for a beat but the ultralight pilots barely noticed. As the sun marched relentlessly west the sky filled with dark clouds. After sunset the lightning show was fabulous. It sprinkled off and on for an hour or so while we talked under the tarp. Suddenly huge raindrops started hitting our roof like firecrackers and the wind came up. The rain blew into the living room and soon we were soaked but neither of us moved, it felt so good to be cool. At one point I got up to freshen my drink and noticed a puddle in my chair. I came back and sat right back down in it. Eventually the obscene heat of the day faded to a memory. We rolled up Jim's tarp again to keep it from becoming a swimming pool and retreated to our steel tents for the night. After toweling off I laid on the bed and listened to the rain on the roof with a contented smile. It took about fourteen seconds to drop off into dreamland.

Thursday, July 26, 2012

I woke to the sound of the bag wings enjoying a rare calm morning. The ducted fan Wasp Wing and the electric Lazair joined them at the bottom end of the airspeed envelope. The sky was full blue and the temperature was on the rise. While I was burning the Jimmy Dean in a cast iron skillet the Wonderbread Belite launched into the slow pattern. Remember the Wonderbread bag? That is exactly how this ultralight is decorated. It always reminds me of my friend Larry Antonich who said, "You can take a slice of that bread, wad it into a ball and it will stick to the wall. Then two months later it still won't have any mold on it."

After breakfast I biked down to Exhibit Hangar 'A' to relieve Seth. I planted myself in front of the fan and read the Airventure Today paper. I never actually finished an article because anytime a shopper paused in front of the booth I shifted into used-car-salesman mode and pitched the heck out of our product. The response was mostly polite but when I mentioned gas prices at our airport the enthusiasm level shot up. Many pilots were paying a dollar more for every gallon of avgas and several said they would drop in at the next opportunity. I also talked to a few folks who were just entering every raffle on the grounds. A spate of rain passed and just pushed the humidity up, it was hot.

Mike Busch rolled in about 2:00 and started reeling in the passers by. He is always good company but his back was really giving him grief. Seth dropped back in to report encouraging news about through-the-fence airport agreements he had heard at an FAA forum. This was potential good news for the future of our airport.

Even in our sheltered location it was easy to see the darkness descend outside as a weather system approached. The rain started lightly and people began drifting in the garage door across the aisle from our booth. As the drops got bigger the crowd did too until there was a huge knot of shelter seekers checking their watches and looking anxiously skyward. A gust front suddenly stomped across the mall and the short driveway outside the door became a funnel for a fierce blast of wet wind. We all

were suddenly standing on the observation deck at Niagra Falls. Papers flew and women screamed. Fully twenty feet from the wall we were getting soaked so I took the initiative, elbowed my way through the throng and with a quick yank of the rope, closed the door. You would have thought I'd parted the Red Sea. Astonished, grateful eyes praised my bravery. Mike started it with a clap and soon there was an ovation from the dripping idiots. I thought, "Are you kidding me? Forty supposed adults in a storm and not one of you had the presence of mind to just close the door?" I flashed to an urban (rural?) myth about domestic turkeys. Supposedly if left out in the rain these birds will look up, beaks agape, to see what is tapping them on the head until they ingest enough water to drown themselves. I don't think Christmas dinner is that dumb but I'm not so sure about people.

As fast as it had come the front scurried out over Lake Winnebago and left lighter and cooler air in its wake. I left Mike at the booth and rode up to check on Fifi. Her tie downs had held fast and she suffered only a power wash from the storm. I bought another bag of ice and pedaled back to camp. Mikey's brother Rob had brought his son Berto to the show and we all watched the rotorcraft wind up their session on Beagle Field.

The afternoon airshow always opens with a gaggle of skydivers bailing out of the DC-3 called Duggy. Most of the jumpers swing smoke canisters or banners but one unfurls a huge American Flag and he is circled by smoke spewing biplanes while the national anthem plays. It is quite the spectacle. This afternoon they misjudged the freshening east wind and two of them had to divert to our strip to avoid crashing into the crowd. Also quite the spectacle and we had ringside seats. I lost sight of the giant flag but apparently it was recovered safely. Team RV was the first act with their full compliment of a dozen beautiful home built birds painting bold smoke figures on the blue sky. The ancient Junkers trimotor seemed as young as today nimbly flirting with the crowd and the ground along the flight line. A brightly polished F-86 Saber streaked up and down the runway opposing passes from three L-39 Soviet bloc jet trainers. The Saber has always been my favorite jet fighter and I watched her closely. She was fast!

It was so much more comfortable after the front had passed and there was not a cloud in the sky. We snacked on smoked herring and shrimp while we enjoyed Sean D. Tucker's antics in the Oracle Pitts Special. The bright red bird tumbled and spun and even seemed to hover in the capable hands of her master. About 5:00 I biked over to the Barn for the afternoon briefing. The breeze was still fresh but the FAA weather guy predicted a gradual calming as the day grew long.

I brought oil along and filled Fifi up before we flew. Taking off to the south I held her low past our camp so the gang could get pictures then turned the extra speed into altitude in one spirited swoop. What a ball! Banking into the pattern I looked across Lake Winnebago at the wind farm. The tall turbines were clear as a bell in the lowering sun. It was the first time all week that the air was dry enough for me to even see across the lake. At the southeast corner of our playground I noticed the deck of the new farmhouse was getting crowded and everyone waved at Fifi. We enjoyed two leisurely laps of sight seeing then made the downhill landing just for fun. Fifi loves to drop her nose and zoom between the trees at the end of the runway before delicately planting her petite feet in the grass. It seemed like all the ultralights were out and we had to wait in line for our return to the sky. When we were first in line the experimental Just Highlander swung onto final and just hung there. With his high lift devices and a headwind it seemed like he was hovering. The young flagger had to hold us while the Highlander pilot showed off for the crowd but back in the day Jamie Kee would have just given me the hurry-up sign and flashed the green. Of course when Mr. Slowpoke finally dragged her in there was a line on final and we had to wait for four or five more landings before we could get back to the business of fun.

The traffic pattern reminded me of the good old days as I watched the gentle jockeying of several ultralights on each leg. We floated past the Wasp Wing in the evening light and the super clear air burned a perfectly focused image on my retina. Even now I have but to close my eyes and I can see it like I was still there. With her small wing and large motor Fifi likes a little more speed than other

conforming ultralights and that presents a problem in a crowded sky. Twice we left the pattern for final approach only to find ourselves tailgating some poor butterfly. I'd throw in flaps and hang her on the prop for a while only to give up and go around. Finally I scanned all four legs and made some judicious passes to put us in position for a clean approach. When committed to land in this direction the runway disappears as you descend and you find yourself aiming right at Boelter's front door. A quick right turn between the trees and a stylish swoop usually results in a happy runway reunion and Fifi pulled it off with grace. Several times. I love that girl.

As predicted the wind all but disappeared so the bag wings were given the floor. I tucked my baby in for the night and pedaled home. Rob was whipping up some delicious chicken with all the fixin's and our campsite was bustling with activity as we watched the Para-pilots float overhead. The temperature was perfect, the food was wonderful and the company was stimulating. I don't care how much money you have, you cannot buy this kind of bliss.

Later Mikey's girlfriend Kristy rolled in with party supplies. Mike had called her several times while she was driving to make sure she picked up the right cigarettes and beer. After dark I had the pleasure of slipping on a flannel shirt for the first time in days, it felt so nice. An occasional sprinkle passed over but they never damped the enthusiasm. Mikey talked Rob and Kristy into going to the beer tent and our room got quiet.

Jim and I were chatting and noodling with guitars when we heard a noise from the runway side of the fence. A quick investigation revealed the prowler, Rich Mattson! There are no gates in this fence anymore but Doug Greenfield had anticipated a need for quick passage and brought a swimming pool ladder. We directed Rich to the stairs then sat him down in the living room. He was hilarious! In a very laid back, tongue in cheek manner he had us in stitches. At some late point in the evening he suddenly announced, "I gotta go!" Then he looked at his watch and said, "No, three more minutes!" Jim and I gave each other raised eyebrows but the conversation resumed until, precisely three minutes later, Rich got up and left. We heard a little noise coming from the direction of the stairs and then Rich reappeared on the runway side of the fence. His face was dead serious in the glow of the lantern when he said, "That ladder gets a little frisky when it's had a couple of drinks!" Then he turned around and disappeared into the darkness.

Friday, July 27, 2012

It was still cool when I rolled out of the Marriott about 7:00. I filled my back pack with diabetic supplies, snacks and a hair brush. I expected to spend most of the day at Hangar 'A'. A little before 8:00 Mike Busch called Jim's phone and said his back was so completely wrecked the only thing he could think to do was go home. I immediately jumped on my bicycle and went searching for Sleepy Hollow in the hope I could help him load his truck or something. I never found the campground so I went to the booth. Seth had put in his time so it was up to me to man the display till the end of the show on Sunday. I got into a rhythm with my patter and was pretty busy all morning. About noon Ryan and Emily Murphy showed up with the express intent of spelling me for lunch. I took advantage of their kind offer and walked to the bike park. There had been about ten bikes there when I parked earlier and there were several hundred when I got back.

I took my time pedaling to camp and when I passed the Barn I could see 'Aunt Laura' being unceremoniously dragged off of Beagle Field on a trailer. Rich Mattson's yellow Titan Tornado was named for the kind Aunt who left him some money and an admonition to "Spend it on something fun!" He bought the Titan and put her picture right on the nose. From the road I could see that one main wheel was missing but otherwise she looked fine. I stopped at the gate to Moody and Rick told me he had seen Rich make one of those 'sporty' landings and the axle just let go. I was glad to hear Rich only had a bruised ego to show for it. I'm an expert at making crappy landings on Beagle field so I felt for

him.

I checked my blood sugar and enjoyed an uncharacteristically healthy lunch while watching the helicopter show. It was getting breezy but the rotorcraft guys don't care much about wind. While I snacked Paul Rickert, the traditional fourth in our camping foursome walked up with his lovely daughter Rachel. Paul had to work all week but he had carved out time to bring his kids. After a nice chat I coasted down Knapp Street road back toward show center and tried to absorb the festive vibe throbbing all around me. When I walked into Hangar 'A' there was a big crowd around the Two Harbors booth with a smiling Emily right in the middle. She was clearly in her element and Ryan had the full attention of another group off to the side. Just for a second I considered turning around before they saw me but I couldn't do that to them. I had explained earlier my frustration trying to find Sleepy Hollow so they said they would get on their three wheel scooter and hunt it down. Traffic slowed a little without a pretty girl in the booth but I stayed busy for the afternoon. I talked to a couple of familiar faces from Lake Superior College and happy campers from all over the planet. I heard the airshow fire up but even stepping outside the garage door I couldn't see the flight line.

I was getting tired of standing at the counter by 4:00 but Ryan and Emily came back and said they had found the campground. Two Harbors had rented a fifth wheel camper for the booth volunteers and I needed to clean it out before the show was over so I closed up the booth and pedaled off behind the three wheeler. It turns out Sleepy Hollow is a heavily wooded island of private property surrounded by the convention grounds. The entrance is on Waukau avenue which is a road I never use so that's why I had never heard of it. We scoped out the trailer and split up the leftover food then went our separate ways.

I got to the Barn just in time for the 5:30 briefing. As soon as the the FAA weather briefer mentioned winds gusting to 19 knots I tuned out. I got the wristband just for show because I knew I wouldn't be flying. As I have said before I fly for fun not for points. Let the macho pilots with the big wristwatches demonstrate their superior skills, I prefer to demonstrate my discretion.

Back at camp Chuck was whipping up a big pot of spaghetti while the warbirds finished up the airshow. Pyro Kenny was earning his money touching off huge fireballs as each bomber and fighter passed over the infield. The P-38 Glacier Girl shared the Heritage Flight spotlight with an A-10 Warthog. The Lightning is a good sized airplane but it was dwarfed by the modern tank killer with its giant turbofan engines and nasty Gatling gun.

Our camp was full of happy chatter as we ate spaghetti and watched a very few brave aviators challenge the crosswind on Beagle Field. I was happy to be on the solid ground. Rich dropped in for a while and said parts were on the way for Aunt Laura so she would be flying again soon. The sun made her exit slowly and it got cool enough for sweatpants. Chuck had brought some Trance Balloons and they lit one but it was so windy Mikey wouldn't let it fly. Probably wise. He just walked around the campgrounds holding it till it burned out. A long day and a full belly helped me decide to retire early and the Marriott welcomed my tired body.

Saturday, July 29, 2012

I crawled out of bed about 6:00 and found Chuck already whipping up biscuits and gravy for the whole gang. The sky was blue and the air was cool so I sneaked off to the showers before I ate then went straight to work. A fresh copy of Airventure Today waited on the counter so I paged through but it only reminded me of all the cool stuff I wouldn't have time to see. I started pushing the brochure and the Two Harbors Visitor Guide when I counted the full boxes I would have to haul home. Right at noon Ryan and Emily came in to spell me and I was happy to see them. I walked through the fly mart on my way to the bike and bought a brush/scraper for my grill at home. I didn't really need one but it was only a buck.

I had a big bowl of leftover spaghetti in a deserted camp. Everybody was out enjoying the last big day of the show. When I got back to the booth the Murphy kids had it rocking again and they stayed to help with the raffle drawing. A couple of young ladies strolled up and had no trouble getting my attention. One said she was just winding up A&P school and was scouting potential jobs. It's always nice to see young people aiming for an aviation career so I encouraged her to call our FBO. Dan Murphy stopped to chat for a bit and Chuck swept through on his tour of the grounds. The afternoon airshow was all about warbirds and the hangar shook from the pyrotechnics exploding out on the field. I went outside for a bit and saw the red 'meatball' of a Japanese zero disappear in the thick black smoke so I figured the Tora! Tora! Tora! Re-enactment must have been happening. I really wanted to see that show but there was a small city between me and the flight line so smoke was all I could see.

Five o'clock finally rolled around and I rushed to the Barn just in time for the briefing. My wrist was getting full of paper jewelry. While the main airshow thundered on I went to camp and put on a clean shirt for my date with Fifi. When the green flag went up over Beagle Field the traffic was launching downhill again so Jim and Kristy took videos of Fifi's energetic takeoffs right from our living room. The flying conditions were perfect but our trips around the pattern were bittersweet. By this time tomorrow Fifi would be tied to the trailer watching the Wisconsin countryside roll by at ground level. We made the most of our last dance and Fifi showed the crowd some really nice landings.

*Every day brings a new way,
to write your name in the sky.....*

*So get your knees in the breeze,
over the trees.
No one will do you harm
When you get your knees in the breeze,
if you please
you're just havin' fun down on the Farm*

Yeah we're still havin' fun down on the Farm!

That short bridge really says it all and the last chorus leads to the wind-up of the song. Flying is a lot like playing music to me. Both disciplines require and inspire passion.

A most delightful thing happened as I escorted Fifi from the floor. Carrying perhaps a bit too much enthusiasm I aimed her between the fence and a stationary Casperwing. Just as I had stilled the engine the Casperwing started moving toward the gate, right in our path. He certainly had the right of way so I got on the brakes. Ever the faithful partner Fifi stopped her feet but inertia demanded her body continue. In graceful slow motion she lifted her tail and put her nose right down on the turf. With her propeller safely stopped behind her high wing no parts were in jeopardy and her polite bow was so gentle nothing was even stressed. I busted out laughing. I had to put one foot out to get her small wheel back on the ground. Passing through the throng at the gate I saw Dan Grunloh with his camera. He said "I got a good shot of Fifi kissing the ground." How fitting! He knows my predilection for anthropomorphism and played right into it. And it's just like my girl to make a dramatic last exit.

I felt like I was following a rock star back stage after the show as I walked Fifi back to her spot. The fans voiced their compliments and posed for pictures next to her. After a week at the fence two distinct divots had formed under Fifi's main wheels and she plopped into them with a sigh. I tied her down and kissed her goodnight.

Pedaling back into the John Moody campground I could feel the party vibe in the air. It was the

end of a fun, successful week and the people were ready to unwind. Paul had returned with Rachel and his son Kyle and another youngster. Their youthful excitement was contagious. Chuck was already commanding the kitchen for the Saturday Feast. His minions lit charcoal, cut green beans and shucked corn. Everyone pulled all the meat out of their coolers. Our camp home buzzed with activity as the paragliders floated overhead. A couple of inspired pilots dragged their feet down the runway with power on in an artful demonstration of grass surfing. If the Farm is all about the light, these guys are the stars. When they're done flying they simply carry their magic wings away in a bag.

My participation in the kitchen seemed unnecessary so I pulled out the electric guitar and serenaded the chefs. Chuck seems partial to Classic Rock and I've got a bag full of that. Soon we were all sitting around with heaping plates and the happy conversation was punctuated with chomps and smacks. Jim always insists the best cigarette of the year is the one right after Thanksgiving dinner, he could be wrong. While we waited for dark the camp film makers showed me their footage of Fifi. When I was a kid phones were bolted to the wall, now they make movies and fit in your pocket!

The night airshow was a total acid trip. The dark aircraft were invisible and the fireworks they flung off seemed to appear out of dark matter. The brightly colored flashes illuminated the rapt faces at the fence like a Jefferson Airplane concert. Groovy! When the airborne display was over mortars on the ground lit the sky for another twenty minutes. The Forth of July could take a lesson. The last embers were still drifting towards the ground when Pyro Kenny lit off everything he had left for the 'Wall of Fire'. The concussion wave hit us in the chest as the angry orange flames boiled skyward. I believe the earth's orbit was adjusted slightly. It was a fitting exclamation point on a week full of superlatives. Later Mikey and Chuck fired up a trance balloon and we watched it fly north until it blinked out miles away.

Paul and the kids said their goodbyes and headed south. Some folks drifted off to bed. The Coleman lantern was lit and our living room became a quiet refuge of reflection. I followed another Oshkosh tradition by sneaking away alone to stroll the darkened grounds. I was comfortable in shorts and sandals as I savored the last evening in this foreign but familiar universe. I wished I could stay but much of the magic of this world is its temporary nature and all good things eventually end.

Sunday, July 29, 2012

I was up early again with a full schedule even though stakes were being pulled and tarps were collapsing all over the campground. The humidity was back and the heat was showing promise as the sun breached the horizon. Jim, Mikey and I made small parts from the whole of our vacation home and stashed them carefully in the vehicles. There was one camp chair that seemed to have no owner but all the other essentials soon found passage as the John Moody Ultralight Campground morphed slowly back into a cow pasture. Out on the main runway the huge C-5a Galaxy looked close enough to touch as it streaked into the sky. Rich gave a wave to our camp as he launched the freshly repaired Aunt Laura for his trip home. When my bicycle and backpack were the last items at large I shook hands with my room mates, wished them safe travels and pedaled back to work.

At exactly 9:00 the attendance taker strolled by with her clipboard and serious expression. I had been hearing tales from other exhibitors about how strict EAA was with booth attendance. The only activity in the Hangar was employees packing unsold inventory and the occasional last minute shopper. I took my chances with the rules and abandoned my post at quarter to eleven. The Memorial Wall dedication was scheduled for 11:00 at the Chapel and I was to represent Dan Anderson's family at the service. Dark clouds stayed in the distance and bright sun shone down on the Wall. I fumbled with the video camera Barb had sent and focused on Dan's name at the very top of the 2012 column. Friends and family members of all those being honored filled a hundred chairs in the shade of tall black walnut trees. I leaned against one to steady the camera as a very respectful but positive message was

delivered. After a prayer Rod Hightower, president and CEO of EAA stepped to the dais and read each name new to the Wall. At the very instant he finished speaking a formation of T-6s roared overhead with full smoke and performed the 'Missing Man' maneuver. It was an emotional moment. I sat on the grass for a bit to compose myself. As I remembered Dan's crooked smile my mind continued back to another face. Clear as day I saw the knowing smile of another pilot named Anderson, my father, Ernie. My own smile blossomed and I let the tears flow. Then, as we Andersons are prone to do, I got up and went back to work.

The dark clouds were gathering in the west and it was a perfect metaphor for the atmosphere on the convention grounds. After a year of sweet anticipation and a week of full immersion the end was coming fast and no one was happy about it. I stood in the booth for another hour or so and idly organized the inventory but no one stopped to talk. I decided to flaunt the rules again and pedaled back to a nearly empty campground. Sporadic activity on the paved runway was all departing traffic but I hadn't lost my enthusiasm for watching airplanes so I kept a positive attitude. With a turn of the key the Marriott changed back into the Merry Yacht and we cast off for the Barn. After hooking up the trailer we coasted through an unguarded gate and went to pick up our VIP passenger. The tie downs came out of the ground every bit as reluctantly as they had gone in and I quickly worked up a sweat. Volunteers on ladders were removing the familiar signs proclaiming 'Ultralight Headquarters' from the Barn. Another sign of the end. When Fifi was on the trailer a family walked by and I drafted the dad to help me fold her wings. He was extremely helpful and his kids were wide-eyed at being so close to a real flying machine. Five minutes after they continued on their way I realized my gross error and slapped my forehead with an open palm. Why didn't I think to invite the kids to sit in the cockpit? I'm sure it would have made their day if not their whole summer. I'm really a very thoughtful guy but I always seem to be five minutes too late.

Laying in the grass snuggling my girl's restraints I saw golf cart wheels roll up. Their duties nearly complete for another year Rick and Nancy Jacobsen were out for a rare tour. I thanked them for their hospitality and we traded well wishes for the year ahead. These two generous souls are the reason the Moody Campground feels like home and I'm proud to be part of their extended family.

I left a roadworthy Fifi by the Barn and drove the circuitous route to the Sleepy Hollow campground. Loading the left-over supplies from the City's rental trailer I notice that Ryan and Emily had snagged the last two Klondike Bars from the freezer. Rats! I found my way to Vendor Parking and was told in no uncertain terms that no one loads out before five o'clock! I had at least eight hours of road time ahead of me so I was irritated but I decided to make the best of it. I knew standing in our booth was a waste of time so I walked a couple of the other exhibition hangars. The focus was mainly on packing up and getting out of Dodge but some folks continued to peddle their wares. One friendly exhibitor showed me his 3-D flying video and I got dizzy when I put on the glasses. I made one last pass through the open air fly mart as the sky darkened ominously. I managed to spend four more dollars. About 4:00 I walked back to Vendor Parking and pointed out the threatening sky to the guard. He just shrugged, "Rules are rules!"

I was enjoying a smoke in the Yacht when the sky opened up and the parking lot exploded with activity. Every vehicle swung onto the access road at once with headlights burning and wipers swinging. It was still twenty minutes before five but the gate swung open as the guard retreated to his tiny shack. When I finally got into the traffic flow I found a spot near Hangar 'A' and got soaked dashing for the door. The heavy rain on the steel roof was deafening as I dismantled the display and rolled up the vinyl banners. With all my camping gear, Fifi parts and the big tub from Sleepy Hollow the Yacht would be hard pressed to engulf this inventory but I had to make a plan on the fly. After several two wheeler trips through the puddles I thought I had jammed it all in but when I tried to close the doors they wouldn't go. I had to stand in the downpour and stress my back leaning in and repacking nine hundred pounds of crap. I barely had room to manipulate the gear shift lever when I finally got all the doors closed. I lit a smoke but when I cracked the window for a vent the rain swirled in and put it

out.

Driving up the off-limits section of Knapp Street road was surreal. The center of color and activity for the whole show had melted into a bleak, wet ghost town. The sky was so dark that headlights were necessary even at this early hour. Sloshing through the Barn gate was equally shocking. The acres of grass that had hosted dozens of colorful ultralights all week were empty save one ancient Mariner with a 'For Sale' sign and Fifi on her trailer. It was downright depressing. I stood in the rain to drop the hitch on the ball and connect the trailer lights. When I climbed back into the Yacht I started shaking and that familiar awful emptiness swept over me. I hadn't eaten since breakfast and I'd been running hard for the last couple of hours. My blood sugar was crashing like the stock market. I knew I had fruit in the cooler but when I turned to reach for it I smacked my elbow on a display container. Oh Great! My cooler was back there somewhere under nine hundred pounds of crap. Fortunately this wasn't my first diabetes emergency so I had rescue bars stashed everywhere. I dug a two year old Nature Valley granola bar out of the bottom of the glove box and gagged it down. It sucked all the moisture out of my mouth but moisture is not a big problem in a deluge. I also crunched down half a roll of sweet tarts along with more water. After about fifteen minutes my vision began to focus and I thought about getting out of my wet clothes. I looked over my shoulder hoping to catch a glimpse of my bag. All I saw was nine hundred pounds of crap.

When the going gets wet, the wet get going so I fired up the Yacht and weighed anchor. Ten miles west of Oshkosh the rain slacked up and before long patches of sun dappled the highway. It was warm enough to keep the windows down a bit and soon my shirt was dry and my shorts were coming along. The odometer spun through the evening into the dark night. Wisconsin rolled by. The Yacht hummed happily along and by 2:00 in the morning we crossed into the Gopher State.

Half an hour later I was pretty beat when I backed Fifi into the hangar at Richard B, Helgeson airport but I still had to unload cargo if I wanted to get to my stuff when I got home. The Merry Yacht was much merrier after losing all that weight and we flaunted the speed laws for the last twenty miles. The old homestead looked great in my headlights as the Merry Yacht transformed once more. She was now lawn art and her job for the next 50 weeks or so would be to sink her wheels into the soil and collect spiderwebs. Nine or ten hours after being soaked in a downpour I took off my socks and wrung them out. My feet were white prunes. I brought in the guitars and cleaned out the cooler but that was about all the energy I could muster.

The eastern sky lost its commitment to jet black as the rumor of a new day whispered through the trees. I was exhausted but strangely buzzed. The whole experience of the last ten days was compressed into a little blue pill on my tongue and as it melted I savored every moment. I consciously committed mental megabytes of permanent memory to each scene so I could replay them at will. I saw the airplanes, I saw my friends and I got my knees in the breeze. I had some fun down on the Farm and I'll never forget it. I can hardly wait for next year!

.....Happy Landings!.....