



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Time Machine

Travel in a 1935 Waco biplane

THE PROPELLER BLADES FLASH in the rising sun as the whirling disc ahead churns through the still air. The rearward face of the propeller is painted black to guard against this, but the ever-present oil and grease provide a point of reflection for the sun's rays just up over the eastern horizon. With the engine rumbling at full throttle we hurtle down the grass runway and with slight back pressure on the big circular wheel, we leave the runway behind.

As always when flying such an ancient beast, I begin to scan the countryside for a convenient place to set down should the engine lose power. I know the fields around this runway from many such mornings. But, the Waco has never failed me and doesn't today. As we gain altitude and the safety of the sky, I lose interest in this pedestrian pursuit and reflect on the beauty of the dawn.

This biplane has flown through skies both fair and foul for more than three-quarters of a century. In 1935, only 32 years after the Wright brothers first flew, the biplane was wheeled out the doors

of the Waco factory at Troy, Ohio, and today it is still serving the purpose for which it was created. This was grand transportation for the day, an aircraft to fly corporate chieftains and Hollywood stars. How many famous people has it carried, the importance of whom is now humbled by the passage of time? How many aviators have sat in this seat suspended, as I, transfixed between earth and sky?

I look out at the Wisconsin landscape passing by and wonder what the earth would have looked like out of these same windows in 1935. The world was a much different place then. It was the Great Depression, only six years after the stock

market collapse. World War II was still six years in the future. Farmers from Oklahoma were packing up their belongings and heading west as the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl was raging across the Great Plains. In the air the Douglas Sleeper Transport made its inaugural flight, the nascent launch of what would be an eventual 16,000 DC-3/C-47s darkening the sky. Will Rogers and Wiley Post were killed in Point Barrow, Alaska, as their modified Lockheed Orion crashed into a lagoon. Amelia Earhart was still very much alive piloting the first solo flight from Hawaii to the U.S. mainland. And the China Clipper successfully completed its first journey spanning the Pacific between Alameda, California, and Manila, Philippines.

The world that has passed beneath the wings of this old biplane has changed, but the Waco remains the same, still plying the skies of its youth.

I look at the line stretching off the edge of my sectional chart. Like many, I am like an insect frozen in amber preferring the technological sophistication of my aeronautical youth. For me that's not a GPS signal; it's a line on a map. My line today carries on over the better part of three sectional charts. It is a distance of exactly 400 nm from my home base of Brodhead to Kansas. I like looking at the 400 mile marker on my course line. Not 399 miles, or 401, but 400. The symmetry of that number pleases me as I level out at altitude and pull the power back to cruise.

I carefully set 21 inches of manifold pressure and then bring the prop back to 1900 rpm. The tone and vibration of the Jacobs radial engine roughens noticeably as the "Shaky Jake" proves its name. As I look out at the fabric drumming on the ribs, I wonder for the umpteenth time if it's possible for this airplane to simply shake itself apart.

Every spring I begin the flying season with a full complement of screws and fasteners attaching the myriad inspection panels, fairings, and parts to the airframe. But then, as the months pass, the Waco sheds them one by one. I have given up trying to compel them all to stay in place, so I simply accept this small annoyance. After all, the Waco has survived all these years happily shedding fasteners along the way and seems no worse for the experience.

Up ahead the vast Mississippi is clearly in view, its waters flowing deliberately toward the sea. The sinuous tributaries evidence both deep channels and shallow bayous. Like any river, it changes form as the constant eroding force of its own existence alters its path. While the river is ever changing, twisting across its flood plain reflecting the vagaries of time, the Waco flying overhead carries on as always, no different today than a thousand yesterdays.

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On the far shore, the landscape of Iowa reflects the rich green hue of early summer on this first weekend in June. Eventually the heat of July will take hold and a dusty yellow veil will envelope the landscape, but today the world is still new.

As my eyes feast on such magnificence, the Shaky Jake pulling me through the sky suddenly goes into auto-rough. A malady I have become accustomed to. For no apparent reason the Jacobs will suddenly bristle and take on a coarser tone. My particular representative of this widely used engine is not alone in this trait. The Cessna 195 guys say it's carb ice. Pull on the carb heat and re-lean the mixture. I have never really had much luck with that. But I do know that if I simply wait it out, it will go away. It's just the Jacobs testing me. Reminding me of its years. After a minute of this, it gives up playing with me and returns to a more or less normal tone, and I, in turn, return to my musings.

In 1935, automobile transportation was still primitive. While Fords and Dodges were prevalent on the roads, other car manufacturers had strange names like DeSoto, Packard, and Hudson. Highways were two-lane roads only sometimes paved, and their narrow arteries ran through every town along the way. A cross-country journey afforded one with a close-up view of every downtown square along the path. But in my Waco, then as now, one would travel serenely overhead at a breathtaking speed of 125 miles an hour.

Would the farm fields of Iowa look strikingly different in 1935? I think not! Corn stands tall, then as now, rivers flow, and grasslands grow. But people...people were very much different. Their lives were more sedentary. Many were born, lived, and died within 30 miles of home. Why would one travel? Could there really be something over the horizon that is significantly different than right here near hearth and home? In that time, men like me—who could board a machine in

Wisconsin and by late morning descend from the blue in Kansas—may very well have been viewed as a god.

The serenity of my flight this fine morning is being threatened by a pressing need. I left without full tanks. I could probably make the distance, but “probably” doesn't satisfy my visceral need for caution. As I survey the possibilities that present themselves along the length of the thin line on my sectional, my eyes are drawn to Oskaloosa. I like the sound of that—Oskaloosa, Iowa. I try it on by silently mouthing the word, forming the syllables with my lips. Oskaloosa! It sounds rock solid, pioneer living, America's heartland.

I pull out my iPhone with its fancy ForeFlight app to check out Oskaloosa. Common sense demands reference, and I bought this iPhone solely because of the tremendous utility of this ForeFlight app. But alas, no

Oskaloosa for me; ForeFlight tells me it only has Jet A. My mental fancy about the practicality of Oskaloosians falls a few notches. What self-respecting central Iowa airport doesn't sell 100LL? So I set course for nearby Ottumwa instead to sate the 17-gallon-an-hour thirst of the Jake shaking and rattling up front. In 1935, there was no ForeFlight to save me from the indignity of a pointless landing, but then again there was no Jet A either.

Safely on the ground at Ottumwa, with the Waco barking and spitting on the ramp, the terminal empties out as people come to see this refugee from a time capsule that has mysteriously descended into their midst. This is an occurrence that I have become accustomed to over the years of my association with this grand machine. As I answer the probing questions of the local denizens, I secretly hope the Jake behind me isn't marking its territory on the pristine concrete while I speak. Retaining the rich, black oil on the inside of the engine is an ever-present challenge.

Fueled, oiled, and climbing out once again, the Jake seems happy, and so am I. We climb up to 6,500 feet this time to see if I can get an even better tail wind than the westbound zephyr I have enjoyed thus far.

The invisible border between Iowa and Missouri passes uneventfully beneath the Waco's graceful elliptical wings. The land below has grown flat as we leave the rich green rolling hills of Iowa in our wake. Up ahead, the mighty Missouri River undulates over the horizon marking not only the geographic barrier between Missouri and Kansas, but also the psychological boundary between the stolid and sure Midwest and the adventurous spirit of the Great Plains.

The first vestiges of the great western grasslands are clearly evident over the nose, a grand plateau that stretches absolutely flat and brown to the horizon. The same view greeted the pioneers from the more humble perch of their Conestoga wagons as they sought to tame the west.

Only 30 minutes remain now in my cross-country odyssey. I have touched parts of four different states, and yet I will still arrive where I need to be by 10 a.m. A fantastic feat when viewed within the context of the world of the 1930s. I reluctantly point the bulbous nose of the Waco toward the earth and begin my re-entry into the 21st century. Will my life be as I left it only a few short hours ago? Or, has time, place, and history somehow changed while I sat apart in the heavens?

I think of all the things this Waco has seen in the hands of its many owners—the places it has been, the miles that have past effortlessly beneath its wings. And yet, while the world outside the windows has changed, within the familiar confines of its fabric skin, all is the same. It is only when one leaves the Waco's comfortable cocoon do the hands of the clock start to spin. Perhaps this Waco is more than a just an airplane, maybe this is a time machine. The year atop the calendar doesn't really matter. Whether it is 1935 or 2012, we fly on—just another pilot, the Waco, and the sky. *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA 336120, is EAA vice president of chapters and youth education and flies a 1935 Waco biplane.

Would the farm fields of Iowa look strikingly different in 1935?

I think not!