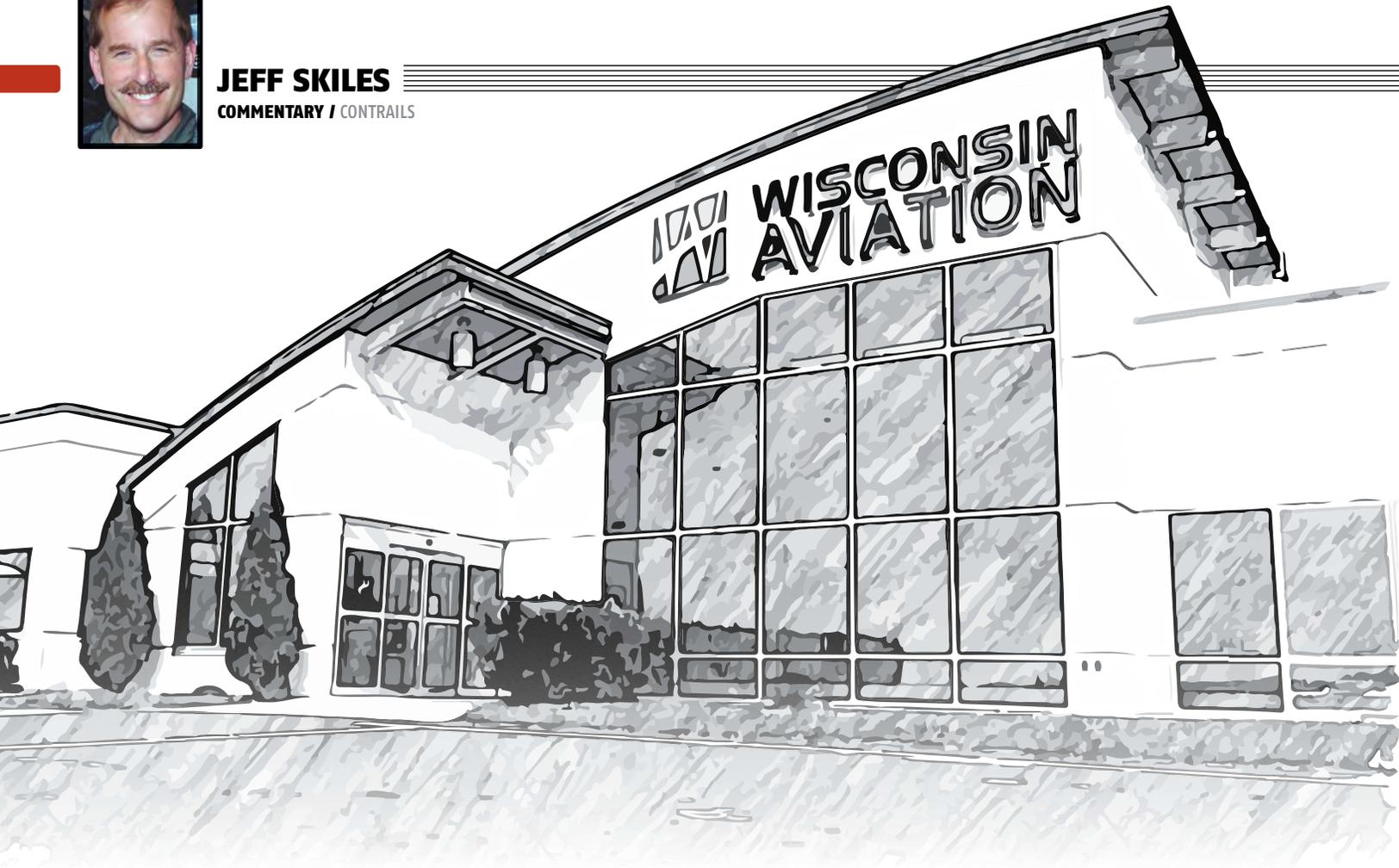




JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Line Attendant

A humble beginning

BY JEFF SKILES

I HAD THE OCCASION recently to appreciate just how much general aviation has progressed over the last several decades since I worked actively at an FBO. I found myself spending the day in the lobby of my local fixed-base operator waiting for my pitot-static system check to be accomplished. The check was supposed to take two hours, but problems reared their head early and often. How could a simple check go so wrong? As the day wore on and repairs dragged out I had more than ample time to consider just how things have changed from the general aviation of my youth.

Most of us just breeze through FBOs these days on our way to wherever we are bound. We order gas, tiedowns, hangar, or maintenance at a marble counter surrounded by glitzy, new age furnishings. Nice carpet and classy decorations abound with maybe even a fireplace to warm the spirits of weary travelers. The FBO I find myself in has a modernish building designed to look vaguely like a wing I think. In my travels, FBOs and airport terminals that look like a wing planform seem to be very popular, displaying a sort of jaunty forward-thinking air. They are a far cry from the drafty, rundown, World War II-era hangars that I remember from earlier years.

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PUMPING GAS

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but really just about anything that involved the support of aircraft from inflating the tires to cleaning up after someone was air-sick was solidly within my purview. It wasn't exactly a kid at the airport fence sort of thing, more a traditional exchange of work for wages, but it still influenced me greatly and set me on a course for life.

Back then FBOs were usually housed in some remnant of a leftover Army Air Force hangar or possibly a barrack from World War II. No one imagined that these buildings would be used for any length of time so they were hardly built to last. Still, it's difficult to envision how our hangar could have reached such a stage of humble decrepitude in just a three and a half decades.

The hangar was a typically massive affair. A B-29 could have easily fit into it. In fact, probably four or five B-29s could have filled its space. High ceilings and a complete lack of insulation made it impossible to heat except for those organizations that existed on a government budget, like the Army Air Force. My boss, however, didn't have any connection to a government subsidy and therefore wasn't about to turn on the heat; it would bankrupt him. Winters in Wisconsin were colder back then, too, adding to the immense challenges of a largely outdoor occupation.

The huge iron hangar doors were maybe 30 feet tall. They must have weighed a ton (literally) and were only operable by manual labor, meaning me. Once you got them rolling, though, their mass and inertia could carry them quite a way. The snows of winter could gum up the works significantly, requiring a gentle nudge occasionally from whatever junkyard heap we were using for a tow vehicle. In summer, however, their movement was well within the capability of any red-blooded American teenager.

THE WILLYS

The boss provided us with a series of decrepit vehicles for towing aircraft, all very close to gasping their last. In no case had the original designers envisioned this wretched utilization when they added the final embellishments to the brand new model year at their drafting boards. They were in no way road legal, but on the plus side this is where I learned to drive a stick.

I remember well a Willys Jeep that ultimately expired under the burdens of its many sorrows. It had only a 6-volt electrical system that did nothing but drain the battery at idle. It was always at idle! And, as I recall, oil only briefly lingered in its crankcase on its rapid trek from fill spout to the ramp below. Good riddance!

The Willys was replaced by a series of equally ancient International Scouts. Turns out the boss was an International Harvester man—remember when they made trucks—as we also had a Travelall for transporting the occasional passenger; an SUV before we knew what an SUV was. With its big heavy rear-wheel-drive frame I remember it being particularly adept at accomplishing donuts on a snow-covered ramp. All of these various conveyances were modified for towing aircraft with the simple addition of a hook welded to the front bumper.

FUEL ORDER

In the modern world you order gas from the receptionist who fills out a lengthy fuel request form; in my day a pilot would just flag down the fueler and tell him to top it off. While the ordering process has changed, the actual transference of fuel from tank to truck to aircraft seems to be accomplished in a familiar way. Not everything has changed with time.

The old Air Force hangar had a lean-to affair on the side that doubled as office space. Stained indoor/outdoor carpet was spread from wall to wall, and threadbare furnishings were available for those who wished to stay awhile. Rarely did anyone partake in these comforts, but, should they appear, we were ready with stacks of out-of-date flying magazines for pilots to while away the hours.

Occasionally something really exotic would turn up on the ramp, but mostly it was your general run of Cessnas and Pipers. This was still the heyday of aircraft production when new planes were piled up like econoboxes at a car lot. A Cessna distribution center worked out of our FBO, and it would generally have 20 or 30 new 152s and Skyhawks scattered about with the occasional 182 or even 206 thrown in. All were waiting for new owners waving the requisite cash before flying away their purchases to new homes. I even logged some hours delivering a few of them for those too busy to pick up their brand new aerial chariots.

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FINANCING A CAREER

The flight instructors at the FBO would fly with me for free. That was a financial god-send when I was trying to get a flying career off the ground at \$2.65 an hour wages. Today I do the same for others. I like to think I'm repaying my debts to pilots long scattered to the winds. Perhaps they were doing the same for their forebears. It was a humble beginning, but the opportunities to fly and the employee discount at the rental desk fueled a career.

Before I left the modern-day FBO with my fresh pitot-static system check in hand, I decided to get some gas. I went through the effort of ordering at the marble and chrome counter and then went out to chat with the line attendant while he filled my airplane. Turns out he's working on his ratings just like I did, trying to get a start in aviation. He complained that you can't seem to get any kind of flying job with less than 750 hours. I smiled when I heard this. You could have added a couple thousand to that in my day before you'd be considered for even the most mundane aeronautical employment.

Still, I look back on my days as a line attendant fondly. I often say it was the best time I ever had in aviation because my future was full of possibility. I remember warm summer nights with nothing but easy work fueling the rental fleet, stacking the hangar as the last rays of the sun dipped below the horizon and whiling away the early evening sitting atop the fuel truck looking at the stars. Nothing but honest work with plenty of time to dream. *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, has been a pilot for 40 years. He currently flies a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.