



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

The Signs of Winter

The quietest season foretells a new year of chapter activity

BY JEFF SKILES

ONCE AGAIN A BLANKET of white has cast itself across my small airport at Brodhead, Wisconsin. The three grass runways are silent, now covered in snow. The hangars and buildings surrounding the open field have roofs and eaves rimmed in white. Grass stubble protrudes through the snow's surface on the runways where the strong winter's wind relentlessly sweeps the field.

I know that for most of you flying is not necessarily a seasonal activity. Here at Brodhead it is. Grass doesn't plow well so nobody tries, and unless you can somehow maneuver your plane to the end of the runway and take off, your flying activities are limited until the lengthening days bring life and warmth once again.

A few Cub and Champ owners put their airplanes on skis, but that is a bit more problematic with a larger airplane like my Skywagon. Still, I am envious of their simple ability to come and go leaving only tracks in the whiteness.

FLYING IN WINTER'S FROST

I can't say that I haven't tried to fly. In fact, if I could get my airplane to the runway I am confident I could fly. With a tailwheel airplane and the light snow cover I could easily make a successful takeoff and landing. Last week I tried. I warmed my engine with my preheater and kicked open my

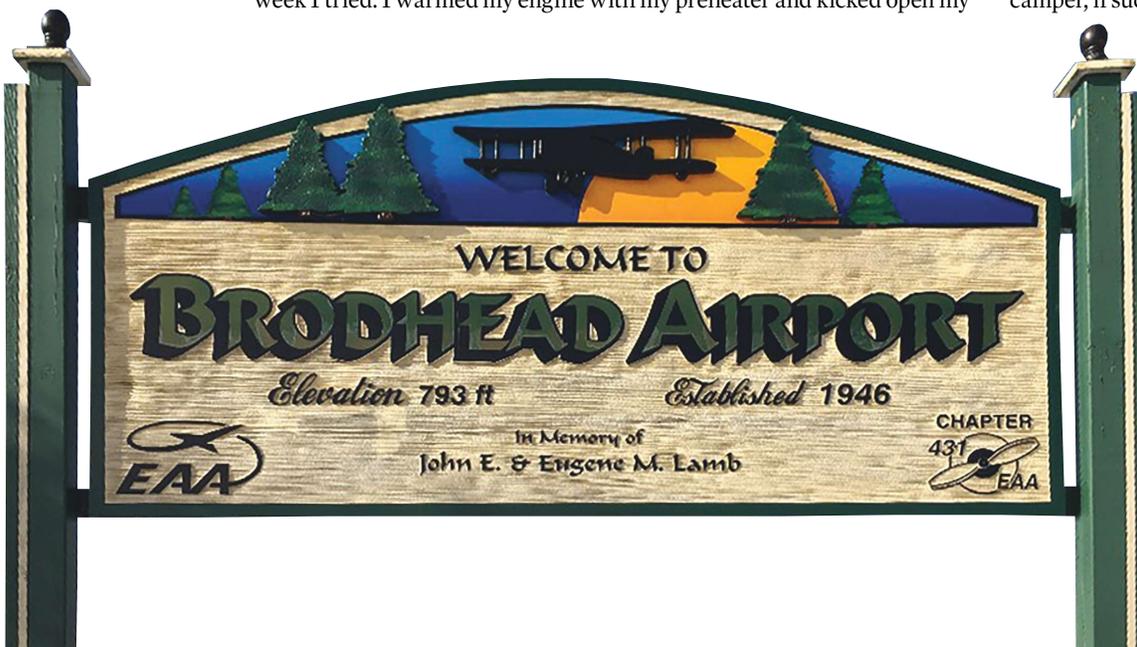
hangar door from where it was frozen to the ground. Things looked good, but there the effort ended. The winter season must have commenced with a hearty flavoring of freezing rain leaving a 4-inch tall barrier of ice and snow outside the hangar door. If I could just push my plane over the accumulation, I could make it. I scraped at it a bit to kind of create a ramp from the concrete of my hangar floor onto the frozen white surface, but try as I might I didn't have the strength to get the Skywagon rolling fast enough to get its wheels over the hump. After several attempts I gave up and told myself that the end of another flying season was upon us.

This period of inactivity is not entirely unwelcome, however. It provides the opportunity to work around the hangar on my airplane or other projects. This year I am entirely engaged in restoring my pop-up tent camper, if such a thing is possible. Its new

canvas is erected in full regalia behind the tail of my Skywagon while I repair and replace components. With the heater roaring overhead, the warmth and solitude of the hangar can be an inviting place to spend the afternoon.

THE ENVELOPE

But the falling snow outside is not the only warning of the approaching winter's inactivity. Like a harbinger of change the end of the flying season is heralded by a rather thick envelope arriving in my mailbox from my



EAA chapter. Like almost all EAA chapters, the first of the year is membership renewal time for “Cheeseland” Chapter 431.

The envelope is thick because it contains many things: renewal forms, a very nice card detailing upcoming events, an order form for the 2016 club calendar (always worth a glance to see if your airplane is one show-cased this year), and the traditional end of year letter from the officers. I am always amazed when I read this letter about all the varied activities that this rather small chapter has been involved in. Chapter 431 probably averages 10-15 members at a meeting, yet this last year we sponsored a pancake breakfast, Young Eagles rally, the annual Groundhog Chili Ski Fly-in (that is planes on skis for you Floridians), had a table promoting the chapter at the annual breakfast on the farm (a local tradition), hosted a hot air balloon demonstration on the field as well as organized and supported two fly-ins.

These fly-ins are not small affairs. It’s not unusual for the larger one in September to have 250 airplanes in attendance over its three weekend days. Because the field is somewhat distant from town, the chapter must provide complete food service for fly-in guests, as well as trash pickup and facilities. The chapter makes a sizable chunk of its yearly revenues at these events selling food and T-shirts from the chapter’s kitchen and assemblage of hangars.

In this last year we also put on a fire department training seminar for firefighters in local communities to familiarize them with aircraft. And we restored, painted, and erected an original lighted airway beacon tower on the property.

PAUL’S GIFT

The chapter is able to do so much I think because of its strong leadership. I was fortunate to have a number of conversations with

our founder Paul Poberezny in his last years about the organization and particularly about chapters. Paul was a great man with much to offer. His greatest gift was in understanding people, and his lasting legacy to us is an organization that we each can feel is our own.

The grand event of EAA, AirVenture, sometimes looks as if it has grown haphazardly. There are myriad smaller components or events within AirVenture that most don’t even know exist. Things like the Replica Fighters group that can be found out by the massive assemblage of Van’s aircraft, the Airline Crew tent on Knapp Street, or aircraft repair run by the Davenport chapter. Today, very few if any know how these institutions were first established. But, I can just imagine someone coming to Paul and suggesting, wouldn’t it be great if EAA did this or that, and Paul saying, “Sounds great, let me know how I can help.” Because that

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was part of Paul's genius in creating an organization where we can all find a place. He let others lead and gave them the responsibility to do so.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership was a constant topic of conversation between Paul and me—leadership within the organization and leadership in the chapters. A chapter takes on the flavor of its leadership, and that leadership must be given room to grow in its own way. I believe Paul felt that EAA can provide the structure of a chapter, but it is up to the chapter leaders to define themselves and their chapter. How can Oshkosh headquarters possibly know what the members want from their chapter in Texas or South Carolina? That must be left to local leadership.

When I worked at EAA one of the areas I managed was chapters. Every year we have 30 or so of our roughly 1,000 chapters disband. But, like corn sprouting from seed in the springtime, another 30 or so form to take their place. At first I thought, like many, that we should never lose a chapter. We should only grow. But often chapters age away, lose their home because an airport closes, or a chapter disbands because no one stands up to carry on in leadership. Maybe it's okay to have that 3 percent decertify every year and be replaced by new chapters with strong leadership and solid purpose. Maybe that's a healthy cycle!

CHEESELAND EAA CHAPTER 431

My Brodhead chapter doesn't really look to Oshkosh for much. While members certainly attend AirVenture, there is no group campground or specific volunteer area. Chapter 431 is instead focused locally on the aviation community in the area. We are just one example of the hundreds of successful chapters that do so. All around the world chapters are the nucleus of their local flying community providing innovative activities for their members while supporting the EAA community and aviation as a whole.

The end of year letter concludes each year with, "What does your membership in Brodhead EAA Chapter 431 provide? Opportunities for leadership, group projects, education, volunteerism, food, and fellowship as we build and fly airplanes." What more can be said? Paul would be proud! *EAA*

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