



See the USA in a 170A.

BY STEPHEN R. BASSETT

America's sophisticated air transportation system was bred by pioneers who flew by reference to roads, mountains, railroad tracks, towns, rivers, and whatever else they could see. They literally flew by the seat of their pants, and today's system was born of their adventuresome spirit. ■ As we traveled across the country in our newly acquired 40-year-old airplane, flying by the seat of our pants, we found that same spirit. It is alive and well in grass-roots general aviation. In just a few days, we experienced aviation still unfettered by regulated airspace and populated by people who love what they are doing. ■ Raymond Free-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER



lin, my partner, is a taildragger driver from way back. I was weaned on a tricycle-gear trainer at a major metropolitan airport, flying parallel departures with air carriers. Two different generations, two different backgrounds, but one common goal: to buy an airplane and fly it coast to coast, just following roads.

We were looking for the perfect airplane. It had to be of a more mature vintage, both because of our finite budget and because we were seeking nostalgia; it had to have a tailwheel; and it had to be capable of making it across the United States in one piece. We located N9972A, a lovely 1950 Cessna 170A, at Reid-Hillview Airport in San Jose, California.

While she was getting ready for her cross-country odyssey, we were back home in Maryland planning our route. We looked at sectionals, drew lots of lines, and studied landmarks. Go north or south? How far? How high? Where to stop? One ground rule that we agreed upon at the outset was that controlled airports were to be avoided.

The planned route was from Napa Valley, California, south to Bakersfield, California, then east to Tucumcari, New Mexico, on toward Wichita, then homeward to Frederick, Maryland.

Backup routes were planned in case the weather didn't cooperate.

Anxious with anticipation, we made it to California and got our first look at our new airplane. Beautiful. Some hours with an instructor helped us get acquainted. This was my first try at a taildragger, and it took some time to get comfortable with pushing the nose over on takeoff and planting the tail on landing. We spent a few days flying around northern California, following the Russian River, venturing out over the Pacific Ocean, tracking up the coastline, then cutting back over to the Napa Valley.

Finally, we could wait no longer. The sky was clear, the breeze was warm, and home was beckoning. It was time to head east.

The journey began with a flight to intercept Route 99, which follows the central valley of California. We tracked the road to near Bakersfield, which was as far south as we wanted to fly before

heading east and tackling the high ground. Delano, California, just north of Bakersfield, was the first night's stop.

We landed at Delano after the close of business and in the middle of the local airport commission meeting. Bob Lesh, the airport manager, was kind enough to interrupt the meeting to refuel the



The author (right) and his partner upon completion of their long journey.



Cessna and deliver us to the Pioneer Motor Inn and Truck Stop, where we feasted on the locally famous "cowboy potatoes."

Haze blocked the view of the Tehachapi Mountains the next morning, but soon after takeoff, we had enough altitude to have a clear view of the craggy peaks. Just southeast of Bakersfield, we picked up Route 58 and flew east toward the mountains.

The highway snakes its way through rising peaks to the north and south, past the Tehachapi Airport and toward the pass, which has an elevation of almost 3,800 feet. Hundreds of power-generating windmills stand tall on a high ridge south of the road. It was an unusual sight, especially for this Easterner.

Over the Mojave Desert, past the birthplace of *Voyager*, we were but 150 miles into the day's flight when we pitted at Barstow-Daggett for fuel. We wanted to keep the legs short until we were more familiar with the fuel-burn characteristics of the airplane. From there it was eastward along Interstate 40, past more mountains and some rainshowers and into Kingman, Arizona. There, we met Bob and Mary Ellen Montgomery of Kingman Aero Services, who sold us \$1.39-a-gallon fuel—the cheapest of the entire trip. The highest was \$2 a gallon in Gallup, New Mexico, but the average was \$1.70. We also refueled ourselves with world-famous (they should be, at least) double cheeseburgers at Emma's Landing Strip Restaurant.

The Kingman Airport once was a storage depot for World War II aircraft and a graveyard for many of them. According to a 1947 issue of *Arizona Highways*, there were 2,567 B-24 Liberators, 1,832 B-17 Flying Fortresses, 478 P-38 Lightnings, 200 P-38 photo airplanes, 27 B-29 Superfortresses, 141 B-25 bombers, and hundreds of P-47 and P-40 fighters stored there in the summer of 1946.

Before we left Kingman, local pilots gave us the same advice we had heard at Delano: Watch for cumulus build-ups in the afternoon. But we never really had a problem with them along the way; it was a period of tranquil weather.

The next leg, east along Interstate 40 through Arizona toward New Mexico, was the most glorious of the trip, one that every pilot should eventually fly to appreciate the beauty of the country from the best possible vantage point—a light airplane.

The weather was perfect. A few puffs of white only emphasized the magnificence of our view of wide-open spaces with high mountains here and jagged canyons there. In the distance, the San Francisco Mountains, just north of Flagstaff, Arizona, were stately and spectacular as we moved ever closer and then by them. Humphreys Peak, at 12,633 feet, is the highest.

Past Flagstaff, enroute to Winslow, Arizona, we flew over the Painted Desert. With the sun to our backs, the



earth was lighted with rainbow colors as far as the eye could see. Buttes, some peaked and others flat-topped, were clear monuments to time.

The spectacular show continued as we flew on to Gallup with 900 miles behind us.

The next morning, we latched onto Interstate 40 and, within an hour, flew well above Albuquerque. A pass through the Sandia Mountains, east of Albuquerque, was the final high hurdle to clear; beyond it is a high, but flat, plateau that descends as you fly eastward. The plateau extends for miles and miles ahead, punctuated only occasionally by a small town. For the most part, though, it was just us and the truckers on the interstate. We raced a couple of 18-wheelers just for fun. We won, but it was close.

To our delight, the airplane was performing beautifully. The pilots, however, still were settling into a functional relationship. With all of the adventure, we forgot to work out a cockpit management plan. That may seem unnecessary, but with two pilots shoulder-to-shoulder on the flight deck for 8 hours a day, each of whom believes he knows more about flying than the other guy, agreement is often reached with a bit of friendly tension. As it turned out, we worked out our cockpit decorum satisfactorily. But we both still know who the better aviator is.

After a stop at Tucumcari, we flew out of New Mexico, over Texas and Oklahoma, and toward Kansas, with color gradually returning to the landscape below us. The circular green fields, a creation of an irrigation system with a well in the center and a boom rotating slowly around the well, transformed the surface to a patchwork quilt.

At one point, we fell to discussing the simplicity reflected in the development of this part of the country. A thin highway, separating thousands of acres of rich farmland, connects one small town after another. A railroad track lined with white grain elevators parallels the highway. The small towns are where the people gather from far and wide, and almost every one of the towns has an airport—testimony to the importance of the role that airplanes play in the lives of rural Americans.

Our next fuel stop was at Kingman, Kansas, just west of Wichita. Bill and Luella Lindt operate the airport and are hoping to widen and resurface the 3,900 × 50-foot runway. The project may be 90-percent funded by the federal government, but the State of Kansas and the city of Kingman are having trouble coming up with the remaining 10 percent. The Lindts are just one example of small-town airport operators who strug-



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gle to maintain and improve their fields in the face of sometimes indifferent political support.

Next, we flew by Wichita, birthplace of our trusty Cessna. Forty years ago, when N9972A was built, Wichita was abuzz with shiny new airplanes rolling off busy assembly lines. Now, sadly, the industrious sound of light-airplane manufacturing is but a whisper.

We landed at El Dorado, Kansas, just east of Wichita, for the night.

We were up and over Route 54 at sunrise the next morning. The slightly rolling country had a soft, peaceful look in

the low light, and we got to watch the town of Eureka, Kansas, wake up. School buses were out, children were milling around at the schools, and things were beginning to stir downtown. With its own lake ringed by houses just north of town, Eureka was peaceful and wholesome and inspired a sense of unity. As it passed behind, I thought that it seemed a nice place to be.

At Lee C. Fine Airport in Missouri, we parked by a G-II, and the two flight crews admired each other's airplane. They were headed back to Baltimore later in the day and would arrive in less than 3 hours; we'd be back in two days. The alpha and omega of general aviation. I couldn't help but think that our 170 was more fun.

After another fuel stop at Huntingburg, Indiana, we selected Mount Sterling, Kentucky, for our final overnight. Ron Hill and his family manage the airport. The genuine hospitality of the Hills was most appreciated as we prepared for the final leg of our journey home. We got a slight weather delay the next morning, but by afternoon, it was clear enough for us to continue.

Route 64 between Mount Sterling and Huntington, West Virginia, is a great place to practice "I Follow Roads" navigation. The highway turns sharply one direction and then the other as it makes its way through the hills. A steep bank to the right, then one to the left, then back to the right—just like driving in a road rally.

After a stop in Cumberland, Maryland, we continued on to Frederick and, with the best three-point landing of the trip, completed the 2,700-mile transcontinental journey.

The people at the small airports where we stopped were, without fail, remarkably helpful, and their warmth and hospitality is a big part of the story. So is the magnificence of the country as seen from the vantage point of a little bit of altitude. If you haven't done it, start making your plans now.

Perhaps our most significant discovery is that you can still fly across this land by the seat of your pants, completely independent of the air traffic control system. The regulators are whittling away at that, but it is our job to make sure that coming generations of pilots can have the freedom we enjoyed on those wonderful few days of flying. □

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