



The People and Planes of Anoka County

Denizens of a small Minnesota airport: bombers, Cubs, a 1938 Stinson SR10 once owned by the governor of Pennsylvania, and a veritable hive of homebuilders.

May 2005

Carl A. Posey

Novelist and award-winning science writer Carl A. Posey was the author of seven published novels, a number of non-fiction books, and dozens of magazine articles. He was a licensed pilot and an Air & Space magazine contributor for more than 30 years, beginning with its second issue in 1986. Posey died on February 9, 2018. ([See Obituary](#))

Introduction

Although just half an hour north of central Minneapolis, Anoka County-Blaine Airport looks less like a suburban airport than a remote Scandinavian village: a bit severe, clean as a whistle, cheerfully bland. The setting is not unlike the Minnesotan scenes in Garrison Keillor's imaginary Lake Wobegon, with its community of distinctive characters. It is not immediately obvious, for example, that the residents of this little city of pastel hangars are extraordinarily single-minded about aviation, or that, while most of them have other lives, they seem to think the life at Anoka County-Blaine is the one that really matters.

The airport stays open year-round—airplanes like the Minnesota winter's dense, stable air—but it quiets down in the cold months. One resident pilot notes that the runways are kept clear and you can fly all winter—but you can freeze to death prepping your airplane.

Article – Smithsonian Magazine, May 2005

The arrival of reasonably warm weather is celebrated with Discover Aviation Days, held the penultimate weekend in May. Warbirds, vintage civil aircraft, and homebuilts arrive for aerobatic displays, helicopter and open-cockpit rides, and tri-motor sorties. Hundreds of hangars decant their eclectic collections—a squadron of Russian jet trainers and a fighter, another of North American B-25 Mitchell bombers, yet another of T-6 trainers, a flock of slow-flying military liaison aircraft of yore, interspersed with ghosts from the Golden Age of Aviation and tiny, swift homebuilts.

DAD, as the fete is called, evolved from a pancake breakfast established two decades ago by Anoka's Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 237. In recent years, the crowds have topped 25,000. DAD proved such a success that in 2003, the event was incorporated. The following year, the army of volunteers marshalled for the event expected 40,000 visitors.

Last May, however, the Minnesota weather ambushed DAD, thinning crowds with cold wind and rain. No warbirds flew in; now and then one could be heard above the overcast, approaching, then giving up, the growl receding. Candy-striped tents and kiosks set up along the flightline offered hamburgers, corn dogs, foot-long, and caramel corn. There were tents for Pilots for Christ International, for the EAA, for the Air National Guard, with its cutaway C-130 Hercules cockpit, and for the usual vendors of aviation memorabilia.

A trio of pristine warbirds—two B-25s and a Convair L-13A—were trundled out for display. When the ceiling rose slightly, the L-13 began shooting stately touch and go's, joined by a tundra-wheel Super Cub, then a minuscule buzzing homebuilt, then a yellow and blue Stearman PT-13. Three Russian jets—a couple of L-29s and an L-39—were towed across the field and tied down next to a pair of T-6s. In a nearby ring, the Piston Poppers' tethered models swarmed like bees.

Saturday night's Divine Swine pig roast didn't attract many takers. But by the time the Fourth Annual Hangar Dance rolled around, 500 or so celebrants, dressed like extras

in a 1940s film, had braved the elements to gather around tables with small American flags. Then, lulled by Dave Andrew's Big Band, they settled happily into a past not all of them were old enough to remember.

Anoka County-Blaine Airport is also known as Janes Field, after the late Phillip Janes, a former Navy pilot who directed the Federal Aviation Administration's General Aviation District Office and later worked with the Metropolitan Airport Commission for many years. The airport identifier is ANE—Janes with the J and S removed—but on the radio it's just "Anoka Tower" and "Anoka Ground"—unless you're an out-of-towner.

According to airport manager Joe Harris, the number of Minnesota-registered aircraft calling Anoka home is 544, but some residents believe the airport hosts a thousand airplanes (though not all are airworthy).

The first tenant was Daniel F. Neuman, who in 1953 bought a hangar on the southwest side of the field. After 37 years of flying for Northwest Airlines, seven of them as a Boeing 747 captain and instructor, Neuman retired in 1978. Now, at 86, "I still pass my physical, still fly, I'm still doing what I love to do."

Neuman does what he loves in an old hangar filled with neatly filed books and blueprints. Occupying much of the space is a 1929 Waco 10 fuselage frame, freshly sheathed in Irish linen. "It's the third one I'm rebuilding," Neuman says. "I've rebuilt a number of planes. Usually when I get through I sell them." At the moment, he flies a 1980 Beechcraft F33A, a Buhl Bull Pup, and a 1938 Stinson SR10 Reliant.

Anoka is also home to Greg Herrick's Golden Wings collection, which comprises about 40 of aviation's rarest craft. Herrick settled on the Golden Age of Aviation as a pilot and collector, but his interest goes far beyond owning and using a priceless work of flyable art. For example, he doesn't see the Fleetwing Seabird as just a shining amphibian with a big radial engine atop its high wing. He sees a relic of an era when manufacturers were choosing a metal with which to cover aircraft. The Seabird is all stainless steel, built for imperviousness to rust, even in the sea.

The collector values the back stories of his airplanes as much as the machines themselves: the Arrow Sport designed for the 1930s Bureau of Air Commerce's Everyman's Airplane competition; the 1935 Waco Wind Harp, considered the Learjet of the 1930s, that ferried gamblers to Havana; the replica of Amelia Earhart's Avro Avian biplane; the Kreutzer tri-motor retrieved from a mountain strip in Mexico. The only thing Herrick likes better than telling their stories appears to be flying them (see "The Magical History Tour," Aug./Sept. 2003).

The unwritten rule at Anoka County-Blaine: If you see a car outside a hangar, you're free to go in and visit, borrow a tool, seek some advice, and, if the hangar is Dan Neuman's, have a cup of tea. On this day, Neuman hands a bulky case to the visiting Greg Herrick. Inside is a set of World War II-vintage Japanese naval binoculars. Herrick is clearly charmed by the gift, but protests. Neuman waves away the objections: "You're always giving me stuff. Thought I'd reciprocate."

At Anoka-Blaine, homebuilts constitute a large part of the mix. Gary Specketer, a noted crafter of homebuilts who is active in the EAA chapter and a principal in the Anoka County Airport Association (basically a hangar owner's group), has built a Dragonfly and a GlaStar, finished a Van's RV-4, and helped colleagues with GlaStars and Glasairs. He flies a Glasair III he built 16 years ago that looks as fresh as one of Herrick's Golden Agers. "You build a homebuilt either to get performance you can't buy, or an airplane you can afford," he says. He says his rocketship gives him 295 mph cruise—southern Florida is five and a half hours away, he says, and five more to the Virgin Islands. But now he's thinking about selling it and building a Van's RV-10.

He also employs his expertise as a technical counselor for the EAA. "The big question when you haven't built before is: What do I spend time on? The counselor gives shortcuts, warns of misdirection. There are 500 to 600 EAA counselors. The FAA won't inspect a plane if you haven't had a counselor inspection."

Nancy Carter, current president of EAA Chapter 237, presides over the airport's weekend pancake breakfasts, chatting with colleagues and accepting the occasional

\$20 dues from new members. “We’re very active,” she says. “We have about 50 builders in our group. Some are on their third plane. Most of them have at least a couple of airplanes.” At the EAA Christmas party, plaques are awarded to members who have completed projects. Most years there are three or four, some years as many as 13.

Carter joined the EAA in 1996. “I started to build a plane—a DR-109, two-seater aerobatic,” she says. “The airplane’s still in my basement.” The man responsible for her having an airplane in her basement, she says, was the late Mike Langer, a former Mohawk pilot in Vietnam. “He was the kind of person who encouraged dreams. I was living in an apartment. Then I ended up having the house built, a walkout with double doors because of the plane. Right now I have wings in the basement.”

Another thing Langer made happen was the American Wings Air Museum, at the north end of the flightline, next to the control tower. “Mike and I had worked together since the mid-1970s,” says museum director Len Burgers. “He happened to find the serial number of an A model Mohawk he’d flown a lot in Vietnam. Brought it back to a T hangar—then, in December ’85, began moving stuff here. In the meantime he’d been talking with Grumman and the Army. To restore it required more support from them. They said they’d be glad to help except we weren’t a museum. So we started doing the paperwork. Started acquiring Mohawks. We once had 14. We opened November 1997. Mike died April 1998.” Langer’s Vietnam Mohawk has been in storage since his death.

American Wings has lent floor space to the Minnesota Air & Space Museum, which has no home, to restore a 1911 Steco Aerohydroplane. The project feels more like archaeology than aircraft restoration.

The only airplane built by Stephens Engineering Company (hence “Steco”) was flown a few times off Lake Michigan, then packed away in crates and left in a Chicago garage. Three-quarters of a century later, Dennis Eggert, the president, recovery team

captain, and chief mechanic of the Minnesota Air & Space Museum, came upon the remains and opted to restore the Steco.

While the provenance of the aircraft was known, its design contained some mechanical puzzles. For example, directional control came from a movable empennage, not from rudders, ailerons, or warpable wings. “We finally figured out that Stephens was trying to get around the Wright brothers’ wing warping,” says Eggert. “He wanted to compete for aeronautical patents.”

Having gained possession of the Steco, and one of Stephens’ 1909 cars, the homeless museum was forced to put the crates back in storage. Then, in 1998, the relic was lent out to be restored for the Heritage Halls Museum in Owatonna, Minnesota. When that didn’t work out, Eggert and colleagues retrieved the aircraft, disassembled it, and shipped it back to Blaine, where American Wings Air Museum offered 1,600 square feet of floor space.

That was in the winter of 2002. Since then, the Steco has been gradually metamorphosing into what the restorers believe was its original form. Last June, Eggert ran up the Steco’s Gnome Omega rotary engine half a dozen times. “It started beautifully each time,” he says. In time, Eggert hopes to wheel the whole machine out, its “first time in daylight since 1914.”

A few businesses reside happily at Anoka-Blaine. Dan White runs a restoration shop. Today he’s winding up some work on Herrick’s Stinson Model A tri-motor, a low-wing monoplane wearing old American Airlines livery. “It took a guy seven years hauling the airplane out of the forest, using a Caterpillar and big skid,” says White.

White is in the middle of restoring seven Super Cubs, building new ones, and finishing up a Howard DGA. He learned the restoration art by rebuilding a Stearman for himself. How many airplanes has he done all together? “Oh my gosh,” he says, “probably 25 Cubs, over 20 Stearmans, then all these one-of-a-kind airplanes for Greg. Over a hundred. We can do anything. Most of the stuff that comes in doesn’t usually fly in.

One guy brought in almost a whole airplane in garbage bags. A lot of this stuff is done strictly from blueprints. People bring me plans, I build the airplane.”

Helping White is 27-year-old Melissa Lund, who, he says, “is good on the English wheel,” which they use to roll sheet metal into complex contours like cowlings and wing panels. She did the Kreutzer tri-motor’s cowlings, which look like hammered silver.

In one of the smaller, older hangars, Mike Rawson, a compact, bearded man, is restoring an A-25, a rare Army version of the Navy’s Curtiss SB2C Helldiver. “The first bunch of fragments came out of Lake Washington, in Seattle,” Rawson says. “It’s the only one in the world right now. Hoping to finish it in three months.” It will be airworthy, but it will fly only as cargo en route to the Air Force museum in Ohio.

Patrick Harker, resident prodigy at Anoka County-Blaine, presides over the aircraft at C&P Aviation, another restoration shop housed in a huge structure that locals call the Cargill Hangar, after its corporate owner. This laid-back, 30-something connoisseur is said to be the kind of craftsman who finds tools that are no longer used to do things that are no longer done on airplanes that are no longer built. And what he restores, he flies.

On the gleaming floor sit a restored 1951 Grumman Albatross, a burnished aluminum L-13A with a wooden prop grained like a fine piece of furniture, a couple of Russian jet trainers, and a 1941 Waco UPF-7 biplane restored by Dan White. In a further cavernous room, a rare Boeing L-15 Scout, one of only a dozen built, waits to be recalled to life. The major work in progress is a P-82 Twin Mustang, which Harker figures will take him three years. “North American airplanes are easy to work on,” he says. “No fancy stuff. A Mustang, T-6, B-25—all have similar features.”

Doug Weske and his father, Paul, have fashioned another kind of warbird nest: a center for Russian L-29s and L-39s—jets that have won the hearts (and wallets) of American pilots. Paul Weske struck up a relationship with a retired colonel in the

Russian air force and began importing L-29s. Now “people come here from all over for Russian airplanes and parts,” says Doug. “There are eight L-29s on the field.”

One of the L-29s at Anoka-Blaine belongs to Dan Sullivan, who is less a collector than a man with a keen interest in machines that are fun to fly. His office, a well-appointed mezzanine above his hangar floor, overlooks two Russian trainers, a MiG-17, a Piper Seneca, and a Super Cub with tundra tires. “I’m in the medical device business, make catheters and things,” he says. “Do something nice for people, make money, waste it on jet fuel.”

Sullivan learned how to fly in college and stayed with it through the years. Like most of the warbird owners here, he was never a military pilot. “I learned in the ’90s they were selling Soviet airplanes. Bought an L-29. Someone taught me to fly it. Went down to a convention and someone showed me an L-39.” He shrugs happily.

“For the MiG-17, I brought a major over from the Polish air force to restore it to perfect specs. If they’d let me buy an F-18 Hornet and I had the dough, I’d buy it.” In 1998 he took his L-39 down to Naval Air Station Cecil Field in Florida and flew with some Navy pilots, who reciprocated by letting him fly the fighter.

Airports are small societies, and it’s only natural that at times some unease arises between those with Russian jets and Mitchell bombers and those with an unfinished Pietenpol in a garage. Nor is wealth the only difference among the various tribes on this field. Warbirders are mainly metal guys, homebuilders mainly fiberglass. People immersed in the varnishes and stains and fabrics of an earlier era don’t like the itchy fibers. Homebuilders prefer sculpting seamless forms from glass to cranking metal on an English wheel.

Hardly anyone from the warbird and Golden Age tribes appears in the roster of EAA chapter 237, although there is the rare crossover—someone who built a Kitfox, say, but flies a T-6. These days such stuff doesn’t seem to matter much, nor does what a person flies, or how many airplanes are in somebody’s hangar. They are all

passengers aboard the time machine known as Anoka County-Blaine Airport, where all the pilots are above average, and all the airplanes are good-looking.



A Piper L-4 Grasshopper demonstrates the Brodie System, in which an aircraft snagged a trolley that ran along a cable in order to land on a short strip or a ship. Caroline Sheen