



EAA Chapter 919 Newsletter December 2006

Chapter President	Russell Braatz
Chapter Vice President	Merle Evenson
Chapter Treasurer	Barb Thern
Chapter Secretary	Denise Braatz
Chapter Newsletter Editor	Russell Marsolek

MEETING NOTICE!

EAA Chapter 919 Monthly Meeting. 12-15-06 at 7:00 PM at Rushford Airport

* = 2006 Paid

* = 2007 Paid

* = 2008 Paid

Membership
(\$15.00 annually)

Allen & Patty Berg *
 Steve & Kathy Buswell ***
 Roger & Jean Braatz *
 Russ & Denise Braatz *
 Susan & Robert Briggs *
 Kevin Daniels **
 Donald Dutka *
 Ken & Arlene Erding *
 Merle & Bette Evenson *
 Richard Exe *
 Al Farner *
 Jim & Wanda Irvine *
 Walt & Jan Kelly *
 Bernard Kriesel *
 Thomas Lee *
 Russ & Helen Marsolek *
 Dave & Roxie *
 McCorquodale *
 Rob Ossell *
 Tom & Marilyn Owen *
 Martin Stickney *
 Max & Carol Tentis **
 Mike & Barb Thern *
 Daryl Thompson *
 Al and Lisa Wiebke *
 Larry Ziemer *

LAST MEETING FOR 2006

The last meeting of the year!!! Hope to see you all there. 2006 has been a great year...and 2007 looks even better! See you in Rushford!

Dues are again due!

Yes...2007 dues are now needed. Please help out this chapter by becoming a member! Send your \$15.00 to Barb Thern, 750 West Burns Valley Rd, Winona MN 55987

Thanks for your continued support!

2007 Programs are needed

We have about 9 openings yet for Chapter Meeting Programs. Help out and share an adventure or expertise with the members! Please email or mail to me your program at Russ Marsolek, 1176 West 5th. St, Winona MN 55987

DEC 2006 Program. Being an Alaskan Bush Pilot! Fred Peterson is back and will be the "Main Event"!!! You won't want to miss this!



EAA CHAPTER 919 ELECTIONS 2007

Chapter 919 has the following nominations for 2007 Officers:

For President

Rob Osell

For Vice President

Thomas Lee

Bernie Kriesel

For Treasurer

Denise Braatz

Merilyn Owen

For Secretary

Walt Kelly

At the December EAA 919 meeting, the floor will still be open for additional nominations.
So exercise your right to vote. See you there!

"If Chekhov had been sheriff of Fillmore County, he would have written it all down too, like this."

—Garrison Kellor

Jailhouse Stories

Memories of a Small-Town Sheriff



Neil Hauggerud

Off to a Flying Start



I had hardly flown all summer, that summer of 1958, and now it had passed, and there I was on the grass strip airfield at the Hammervold Farm and Flying Club, ready to get back in the air. I pulled our club plane, a vintage red-and-white two-seat Aeronca tail dragger, out of the hangar, checked the oil, and cleaned the beginning of a bird's nest from the engine cowling. With everything else ready to go, I chocked the wheels and gave the prop a spin. The engine sputtered, started at a gentle idle, and purred patiently while I removed the chocks. The air was still, the sky a clear, gorgeous fall blue. It was 7:45 A.M.

After takeoff, I made a left turn out of the flight pattern at four hundred feet and continued climbing, leveling off and throttling back to cruise speed at eight hundred feet, where I had a clear view of the countryside. I was born here in Fillmore County, named for Millard Fillmore, U.S. president in 1853, the year the county was incorporated. I was over Forestville, an abandoned town site in the Root River Valley, surrounded by nearly a thousand acres of dense hardwood forest. It was the business hub of the entire county until the railroad came through Preston, nine miles east. The Meighan family had owned the store and stables I flew over until they closed them in 1910, leaving everything—all the fixtures, dry goods, cold and sickness remedies, and sundry items—in tact. They didn't

remove an item, just locked up the store. Some folks propose to make the Forestville area a state park to preserve the rugged woodlands and make the store and village site a historical interpretive center. I smiled as I looked down at the crystal-clear river by the store building, where even today, more than fifty years later, in an unprotected rural setting, thieves had spared this historic treasure; nearly everything was still untouched. No wonder this county of twenty thousand people and 553,000 acres felt the need for only a sheriff and one deputy.

The landscape was pockmarked now with shallow, rusty, open-pit iron ore mines, some as small as an acre, others as large as ten. Many of the excavated areas had filled with water, providing habitat for snow geese and ducks. I could see them from the plane.

I neared another grass airstrip owned by a local mechanic named Bernard Peicempel, who built his own airplanes with Model T Ford engines. From this height I could see the distinctiveness of the terrain, with its contrast between glaciated and nonglaciated land from the Ice Age. The ice had stopped here. To the west and south, flat open farmland; to the east, where I had come from, rugged hills and bluffs gouged by the glacier runoff. The hayfields and pastures, in this first part of November, held a dark green color, my favorite, the likes of which I had never seen elsewhere. During the previous week the hillsides, a march for any New England scene, had lost most of their glorious fall colors; only the stubborn brown-red leaves of the pin oaks and the burgundy leaves of the sumac gave contrast to the barren limbs in the woodlands.

I shot a few touch-and-go landings at Peicempel Field to sharpen my skills. Throttle back, glide to the runway, stall out for a touchdown, then give full throttle for takeoff and go around for another. It was safer here than at Hammervold, which had a power line at one end of the runway and a deep gully at the other. No room for error there.

Touch and go, much like door-to-door campaigning, where you knock on the door, introduce yourself, ask strangers to consider you when they vote, and take off for the next house. I was running for sheriff of Fillmore County and I felt good about the campaign. I'd devoted practically my whole life to it since early June, and I thought I'd knocked on almost every door in the county. People had confidence in me and trusted my judgment, even though some thought that at twenty-eight I was too young for the job. I'd already served as deputy sheriff in the county for three years. Now, thank God, the campaign was over. All I had to do was cast my vote on Tuesday and wait till the wee hours of the morning for election results.

Flying broke me free of such concerns; it left the campaign on the ground behind me. When I was a kid I used to run downhill, with my arms extended, dipping from side to side, making airplane noises in simulated flight. Now with a mere nudge on the stick in the cockpit I could make it a graceful reality. I set the trim tab so I didn't even have to touch the controls and cruised back toward the town of Harmony, toward home. I could see a deer with two late fawns on the ground, chasing around a straw stack. I pulled the throttle back and glided in for a closer look.

One of the things about flying I like best is the quiet, serene glide without engine noise, only the rush of wind across the wings. My wife, Helen, never flew with me as pilot. She liked to have her feet on solid terra firma; she wouldn't go near the water or even climb past the third step of a stepladder. We set her on a little Shetland pony once and she screamed because it was too high for her.

So Helen hadn't come with me this morning; she was readying the children for church. I myself had Sunday school to teach, but there was still plenty of time. I planned to fly east and check out Roger Johnson's place. He'd asked if I'd give him a ride some day, and I knew on Sunday there was free time for farmers. Most of the

people in Fillmore County were farmers, construction workers, truckers, or other tradespeople. I'd grown up on a family farm myself, one of ten children. I left the nest right after high school for a stint in the Marine Corps, knowing that gainful employment on the farm wasn't an option.

Even though Roger lived in a hilly area, I figured I could set the plane down in his hayfield without any trouble. I approached on a silent glide, then just above his house opened the throttle to announce my presence. The hayfield was on a hill, a level above the house with a long slope to the east. I buzzed it low and slow on the downhill run, looking for gopher mounds or woodchuck holes. Then I climbed, made my turn, and came back for a landing on the uphill slope. I didn't even have to apply the brakes. Takeoff downhill, without any wind, would be a piece of cake.

When I got to the house, Roger's wife, Alice, stood on the front steps.

"That was a fine way to wake up a household, Nell," she said.

"Is Rog home? I thought we could go for a spin."

"No, he went in to Harmony for something. What are you doing? I thought you were a Sunday school teacher."

"I've still got about an hour," I said.

"Is Helen going to be in church? I need to talk to her. I just found out our circle has to serve lunch at a funeral Tuesday. Lutherans and lunch. Lutherans and lunch. Sometimes I think they're the same word."

"Sure, we'll be there," I said.

I was looking forward to teaching my Sunday school class and going to church with my family. And maybe in the evening Helen and I could take in a movie for a change. She'd been on the campaign trail, too, although she was seven months pregnant and harbored a dislike for handing out campaign cards. "Like a door-to-door salesman," she'd said, and the way she said it, that was clearly not a good thing.

"Tell Rog we'll go flying another day," I told Alice.

I walked back up the hill and picked a Haralson apple off one of the trees before I climbed over the fence to the hayfield. The sun was warm and I unzipped my jacket. A red-tailed hawk circled peacefully above in the cloudless sky. *Things were going any better I'd have a runaway*, I thought.

With the plane facing uphill, I wouldn't need chocks. I turned on the key, did the preflight check, and gave the prop a spin. But even before I had time to step back, the plane was after me full throttle, growing and grabbing, trying to eat me up. I tripped over backward and the plane began to move. I rolled to the side to avoid the prop, jumped up, grabbed the wing strut with one hand, and opened the door with the other. With the plane picking up speed and turning downhill, I swung my feet up and tried to hook my ankles on the lower part of the doorway.

By now the plane was going faster than I could run. I either had to get in or let go of the strut. When it appeared my feet might leave the ground, I chose the latter and went tumbling and skidding head first across the hayfield. I watched in disbelief as the plane raced for the fence at the end of the field. *That'll be one hell of a crash when it hits that fence*, I thought.

To my amazement the damned thing lifted gracefully off the ground and cleared the fence like a breeze. *What the hell now?* I stood transfixed, staring, as if in a dream, wanting to wake up. *Fast.*

I watched the little plane climb out of the valley. About a mile away it began to turn to the right. Then I lost sight of it behind some hills. I spotted it again just above the horizon. It appeared to be making a wide circle that would bring it back to where I was standing. I waited. No, its path would bring it crashing into the barn. I shut my eyes.

When I didn't hear the crash, I opened them just in time to see the plane clear the barn roof by two feet. Then it roared past me

just sixty feet in the air: I felt like my feet had sunk into the earth and my heart was beating below my navel. The damn thing began another circle that I calculated would bring it back near the vicinity of Roger and Alice's house.

The next thing I knew I was pounding on Alice's front door. I didn't even remember going over the fence. I let myself inside.

"Alice, Alice!" I shouted frantically. "Get the kids and get out of the house! The plane is coming!"

"Are you crazy, Neil? I just got out of the shower. I don't have any clothes on."

"Grab something. The plane got away from me and is heading for the house."

The urgency in my voice convinced her something was wrong, but she was too late. The plane cleared the house roof by ten feet before she arrived on the steps in her housecoat with the kids.

"You're trying to trick me," Alice said. "Who's the nut flying that thing?"

It took some lengthy explaining. Then the plane was making another circle, but it was getting higher so we were out of any immediate danger. I just stood helplessly watching it perform, while Alice and the kids got ready for church. It climbed in full one-mile circles, each carrying it farther southwest, toward Harmony.

I called Alice's brother-in-law, Dick Johnson. We'd hitchhiked to the Dakotas together when we were sixteen to work the wheat harvest, and we'd been fast friends ever since. But we'd played a lot of tricks on each other, and I was having trouble making him believe this plane was not another joke, one I'd cooked up for his benefit. I couldn't get him to stop laughing.

"I'd a pissed my pants if that happened to me. Did you, Neil?" he chortled.

Alice dropped me off at his farm on the way to church. The plane was so high in the sky I could barely see it. Dick said he

would drive and I should keep track of the plane. It was a picture of grace as it continued its climb, flying as if the most experienced pilot was at the controls. It was only a tiny speck high in the sky when we stopped at my home in Harmony.

Helen met us at the driveway. She was dressed in a navy blue maternity dress, with a white collar and buttons down the front. The baby was due the first week of January. She looked so pleasant and content with life. It was like breaking a spell. I didn't want to tell her what was happening.

She said, "What are you guys doing? Where's the car? I thought you were flying. What happened to your head and your jacket?"

I looked at my jacket, streaked with grass stains and dirt. My head was scraped up a bit from taking that dive in the hayfield. I realized I looked like I'd lost a few of my faculties, and Helen probably thought I'd crashed the plane or the car.

I pointed to the speck in the sky. "The plane is flying, but I'm not."

There was no time for explanation because suddenly the speck in the sky began a nosedive, seemingly aimed at the Lutheran church. I thought of my Sunday school class, waiting for my arrival beneath that steeple. I thought of my sister and her children, and all the others in danger if my plane crashed into it. I said a multitude of silent prayers and made a lot of promises to God I wouldn't be able to keep, if He would just help get that plane down without hurting anyone. And then the plane turned out of its dive and climbed just as steeply back into the air. It hung fluttering on its nose before it turned over for another dive. We all watched from the driveway as it repeated itself, each spiral bringing it closer to the earth.

I ran into the house and called the fire department. I told them to turn on the fire siren and keep it going until the plane crashed or flew away from town. Back in the driveway, we could hear the siren start its wailing, and I knew everyone in town would be thinking

“fire,” but at least many of the people would step outside to see where the fire engine might be going; that way if the plane came crashing their way, someone’s life might be saved.

“Call the FAA,” I shouted to Helen as Dick and I left the yard, as if she had any idea what or where the FAA was.

We drove with the car windows down. This was all my fault. Of course I could have called Roger before I left home and had him meet me at the airstrip. Or better yet, adhered to the advice of my instructor never to land anywhere other than at an authorized airfield, but that’s no way to be a barnstormer; this wasn’t the first time I had landed on a farm field. I was sure I had closed the throttle before I spun the prop, but was sure no one would believe it. I was having trouble believing it myself.

That Aeronca was wound up and screaming at such a pitch I thought the engine would come apart each time it pulled out of a dive. It pulled out of its next spiral a couple hundred feet above the church steeple. The next was near the west edge of town. One more and it would be clear of the city limits.

About this time, Dr. Hettig, a veterinarian, was driving back from a call. Doc Hettig and I had wet a line on occasion, in pursuit of wily trout, and sipped a spot or two of tea together. He screeched to a stop on the highway in front of us. It didn’t appear that the plane would make another round. Now it was out over a harvested cornfield. It was pulling out of the dive when its wheels caught in the corn. The nose dipped down and the prop threw corn and dirt in the air trying to burrow a hole in the ground before the plane upended and cartwheeled, tearing the wings off.

Doc Hettig would say later that he had admired the ability of the pilot as he made his loops through the sky, before becoming upset that the pilot performed so close to town. Being a pilot himself, Doc said he damned near pulled the steering wheel off his car on the last turn. He remembered slamming on the brakes, pulling on the wheel, and yelling, “Pull her out! Pull her out!”

Then the crash came. “Look at that som-a-bitch come apart!” Dick shouted.

With the plane on the ground and no one injured and miraculously, no other property damage, I gave thanks to God. Then, deranged excuse speeches for the voters began to flit through my brain. Brazen lies at first. “There was so much smoke in the cockpit I became disoriented, opened the door, and fell out.” Or, “I’m suffering from sleep deprivation from the campaign and can’t remember anything until I see the plane take off.” I even thought of some kind of story with aliens launching the plane before talking me into their craft. But my conscious mind was so relieved I really didn’t care about the election. The truth would suffice.

The crash site was a few hundred yards west of Dr. Wagner’s house. I saw him leap the fence by his house carrying his black bag, his long legs churning toward the crash scene. Just two years ago Doc Wagner had delivered Susan, our second child.

Doc Wagner and a farmer were searching for bodies by the time I got to the scene. The doctor took a startled look at my head and jacket. “How the hell did you get out of there?” he asked.

“I wasn’t in it,” I said.

They started searching the cornfield again.

“There isn’t a body in the plane. Whoever it was couldn’t have been thrown far,” the farmer said.

“There wasn’t anybody in it,” I said.

“What?”

“There wasn’t anyone in it.”

“What!”

“I got away from me when I started it.”

Wag was speechless but only for a moment. “I can refer you to a good shrink, Neil,” he said with a grin.

I still wasn’t seeing the humor.

An hour later I lay on the floor of our living room, hyperventilating.

“I called the FAA,” Helen said. “I’m sure they’ll call back.” I caught her implication that there’d be an investigation, and I detected a little smirk on her face, but she quickly turned away. I figured with the election just two days away this little fiasco would kick my chances of getting elected right square in the ass. Six months of gaining the confidence of people all shot to hell. *Not funny, Helen.*

Then the phone began to ring. United Press International... Associated Press... the *Minneapolis Tribune*... the *Rochester Post Bulletin*... ABC... CBS—it never quit. Monday’s UPI headlines read, “Sheriff Candidate’s Plane Takes 45-Minute ‘Solo’ Flight.”

The next morning the phone began to ring again—school friends from throughout the nation, Marine Corps buddies from Louisiana.

“I don’t know why you’re messing with those newfangled gadgets,” said one Cajun. “We both know your place is behind a plow.”

With the election being held the next day, I was sure of it. I began to see the tragic humor of it all.

On Wednesday morning the phone rang yet again.

“Doc Wag here. Congratulations, Neil. You won handily. Darndest campaign stunt I ever heard of. I take coroner duty from time to time. Look forward to working with you. Stop by the office sometime after 5:30. We’ll call a few friends, have a cup of prescription tea, and you can fill us all in on your strategies for getting elected to public office.”

“If Chekhov had been sheriff of Fillmore County, he would have written it all down too, like this.”

—Garrison Kellor

Jailhouse Stories

Memories of a Small-Town Sheriff



Neil Haugerud