

St. Francis pilot is featured in airline's inflight magazine

Editor's note: The following article appeared in the September 2003 Hemispheres, a magazine that is available to all jet travelers of United Airlines. As people flew through the skies worldwide, they were entertained by the Wright Brother's adventures as they went from being clever bicycle mechanics to inventing the airplane. But, about two-thirds through the article, writer, Bill Marsano, turns to his adventure with Robert Grace, St. Francis, as they travel through America's southwest. The rest of the story follows:

Serene, unobtrusive transport is an airline's proper function but flying is a different experience. It puts you in touch with the Wrights, with barnstormers and wing walkers, with mail pilots who navigated by railroad tracks (the iron compass) and the names of towns painted on water towers. I know from experience.

I once proposed a low-level voyage through the American Southwest to Robert Grace, crop duster, air taxi, flight instructor and airport operator in St. Francis, a demi-paradise in the upper left-hand corner of Kansas. Robert has more than 10,000 hours flying time, a thousand-odd parachute jumps (all volitional) and countless hot-air balloon ascensions.

Early one September morning, he walked me to the flight line and introduced me to what old-time pilots would have called our "mount," a Stearman biplane. Built in 1941 as a U.S. Navy trainer, she had survived five years of flight cadets and three decades of dusting. Then she was sent to skilled fanatics to be born again, factory-new.

As such, she stood before us, mighty as a percheron, almost 10 feet tall, with wood-framed wings covered in hazard-yellow cotton, round engine and two-bladed prop; open cockpits and her wheels sticking out. She sat on her tailwheel, nose up, as if sniffing the breeze.

For 10 days, we moseyed at 87 knots (a hair under 100 miles per hour), following pioneers' wagon ruts. One afternoon 1,000 feet above the desert, I pulled off my leather flying helmet and let the wind run her fingers through my hair. At Clayton, N.M., a small herd of antelope ran beside us as

we taxied in. At most airports, the hangers were full up until the staff pushed some other airplane out to let Stearman spend the night under cover.

We were history come to call; the Stearman gorgeous in star-spangled livery, her crew decked out in Ray-Ban sunglasses, leather flight jackets with mouton collars, G.I. coveralls made of zippers and buttons. Big and brassy, we were a small sensation everywhere we went. Never more so than at Page, Ariz., a major staging airport for private airplanes bound for the likes of Grand Canyon, gambling dens and Santa Fe. We came in high at noon and staged a show. The Stearman is an aerobatic airplane and Robert a master aerobat, the perfect combination for a sideslip landing.

Directly above the runway, Robert did what the Wrights wouldn't have considered for a minute: He crossed the controls, banking left with the ailerons but not applying left rudder to complete the turn. Instead, he ruddered right. All forward motion stopped like that as we suddenly flew sideways — I could feel the wind on my left cheek — and down.

Steeplly down, too. Ours was a pretty standard 1930s approach but today, it suggests reckless foolery.

Which was the conclusion of folks on the ground. The were yelling and pointing and hollering to each other as we came down like a sidewise ton of yellow bricks. I photographed our howling descent — the pictures show the runway numbers getting bigger and bigger. When they got too big for the viewfinder, Robert switched us parallel to the strip and painted on a picture-pretty three-point landing.

Then we turned onto the taxiway and motored majestically to-

ward the crowd, our audience. They were scattered amongst their gaggle of short-legged, one-winged, Spam-can airplanes — poor little modern things! — when we rumbled up to the tie-downs aboard a snorting mast-odon so tall we had to climb down to get out of it. For just a few minutes we were as gods.

Broad grins were everywhere and little kids ran up all goggle-eyed and open-mouthed. A really pretty girl shrugged off her boyfriend, wriggled between us and threw her arms around our necks yelling, "Honey! Take my picture with these guys!"

So I'm recommending that this centennial year, you seek some small airport and experience flying. Robert Grace holds a Stearman Fly-In every June in St. Francis; he'll be pleased to see you. I won't promise an experience replicating ours in Page, but you'll get seat-of-the-pants flying and a little perspective; Two dozen years after First Flight, United flew its first passengers. Forty-four years after, Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier. Sixty-six years after, man walked on the moon.

Then pull off your helmet and let the wind run her fingers through your hair. You won't forget it. That I will promise.

Robert Grace reported that the trip took place about 10 years ago. Mr. Grace said he had enjoyed reading the article and thought Mr. Marsano did a good job of writing it.

Editor's note: The above article came from Dennis Harding, a New Holland area traveler, who happened to read the article while making a flight. He sent it on to Dave Yost, who in turn, submitted it to The Herald, knowing that readers will find the article interesting, especially where much of it is told about Robert Grace and advertised the Stearman Fly-In.



ERVAGENE DEARAGON and Bobbi Pooreman decorate the table for Thanksgiving at the St. Francis Senior Center for Thanksgiving.
Herald staff photo by Karen Krien

Time to insulate water meters

By Karen Krien

The temperatures in northwest Kansas have been warm but over the weekend, temps dropped to the single-digit mark. However, the temps are supposed to warm up and those who have not insulated their water meters should plan to do so this week. Unprotected water meters could freeze and break which could be extremely costly to the homeowner.

St. Francis residents need to get out those insulating disks or other types of insulation and put them in their water meters. That way, when the really cold weather does hit, their water meters will be protected.

There are several ways of insulating including filling the meter hole with the pink insulation used for insulating homes. Other ways are to fill a heavy plastic bag with packing peanuts, seal it and then place it in the

meter hole. There is also a foam cover that can be purchased at the city plant.

Residents are reminded to not stuff leaves, rags or rugs in the meter hole as they will become wet and freeze, making more danger of freezing pipes. Also cleaning wet leaves out of the meter hole in the spring is not a fun job.

Those who are unable to cover their meters are asked to call the city office at 785-332-3031 for help.

Outdoors with Chuck

By Chuck Kribs

Well, another elk season is in the book, and a good one it was. My "boys" came out from Iowa with a couple of their friends. Camp was the way it ought to be. Good company, good food, and good weather. Too good on the weather part, unfortunately. Temperatures were in the high 70's, low 80's and the elk were still way high. The animals we saw were mostly above 10,000 feet. We hunt

in a wilderness area on the Wyoming border, in Colorado, so the seeing of elk required a walk each day of about two and a half miles (and back). Makes a guy feel his age! Didn't seem to bother the boys though. We filled no tags, fired no shots, and still it was a great hunt. Every one saw parts of elk, but never enough to take a shot. there is kind of a rule in our camp, that if you can't harvest an animal cleanly and quickly, ya

don't shoot. In the prior two years we took nine elk with ten shots. The trip was marred a bit by, by being flagged down on the road by a very agitated young man... "There's something wrong with my Dad" I checked Dad out and had to tell the young man that he was gone. Later from the Sherrifs office in Encampment, found out it was heart failure. The man was way overweight and a heavy smoker....nuf said.

Happy Thanksgiving

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