

Out of the Blue

Visitor dropped from the sky, to the thrill of an isolated family.

IN THE 1930s, the drone of an approaching airplane would cause many to drop whatever they were doing and rush outdoors to wave to the pilot and marvel at the miracle of flight.

In the winter of 1937, our family was living in a remote beach cottage on the northeast coast of Florida, just north of St. Augustine. Economic necessity imposed by the Great Depression had moved my father to build our house with his own hands.

We lived in relative isolation, beyond all telephone and utilities lines. Our only communication from the outside world, aside from our trusty Plymouth sedan, was through a battery-operated radio.

Considering all of this, imagine the delight our family experienced when a small plane landed on the beach right in front of our house!

Threatening weather, gathering darkness and a lack of other visible habitation had led the cautious pilot to take a chance that we could offer a temporary haven. We welcomed the aviator as if he were a long-lost relative. Lindbergh himself couldn't have received a warmer reception.

My father, F. Victor Rahner, and my older brother helped roll the light plane into our front yard, where it would be sheltered from the wind-whipped sand and salt spray of the Atlantic Ocean.

Later, as we all sat down to dinner, we learned that our guest from out of the blue was Mr. L.W. Franklin Jr., a pharmacist from Danville, Virginia. The plane was a Taylor E-2 Cub, which he had nicknamed “Jeep” after the character in the Popeye the Sailor comic strip.

To say that we were thrilled and enthralled by our visitor is an understatement. After much animated conversation, Mr. Franklin was given my brother’s basement bedroom and my brother happily slept on the couch in our living room.

Up and Away

Following breakfast the next morning, my father drove our guest to the nearest gas station to fill a can for replenishing the plane’s tank.

Before he departed from the same sandy beach he had landed on the previous evening, our new aviator friend offered rides in his little two-seater “Jeep” in gratitude for our hospitality.

My father, who had flown several times before, declined the offer, as did my mother, Clara, and grandmother Gussie. But my brother, Victor Jr., and sister, Martha Jane, excitedly went for their very first airplane rides. I was only 2 years old and too small to go up, but I’m sure I voiced my disappointment at being grounded.

My father was a professional photographer, so pictures were taken and the story of our intrepid visitor eventually passed from family memory to obscurity until early in 2005, when I discovered the photographs in the family archives.

The registration number, N14737, was visible on the stabilizer sur-

face of the plane, so I wrote the Civil Aviation Registry in Oklahoma City and promptly received a CD that contained 40 pages of records on the plane.

Contact!

Hardly expecting a reply, I wrote to the last owner of record and was astounded to learn that he had purchased the plane in the 1970s, lovingly restored it over a number of years to airworthy condition and was flying it with regularity!

We corresponded via the Internet, and in July of 2005, my wife, Jean, and I journeyed to meet the current owners, Howard Miller and his wife, Lois, and two of their sons at their family air park near Mooresville, North Carolina. They welcomed us as warmly as our family had welcomed Mr. Franklin in 1937.

Mr. Miller, a retired pilot with Piedmont Airlines and a certified aircraft mechanic, told us that perhaps only four or five Taylor Cubs are still flying. He graciously gave me a ride in the beautifully restored plane...68 years after my first encounter with it on the beach in Florida.

As we soared over the lush North Carolina countryside, I experienced exhilaration coupled with nostalgia for that bygone time when the sound of an aircraft engine drew us out to gaze expectantly into the blue.

—Tom Rahner, St. Augustine, Florida