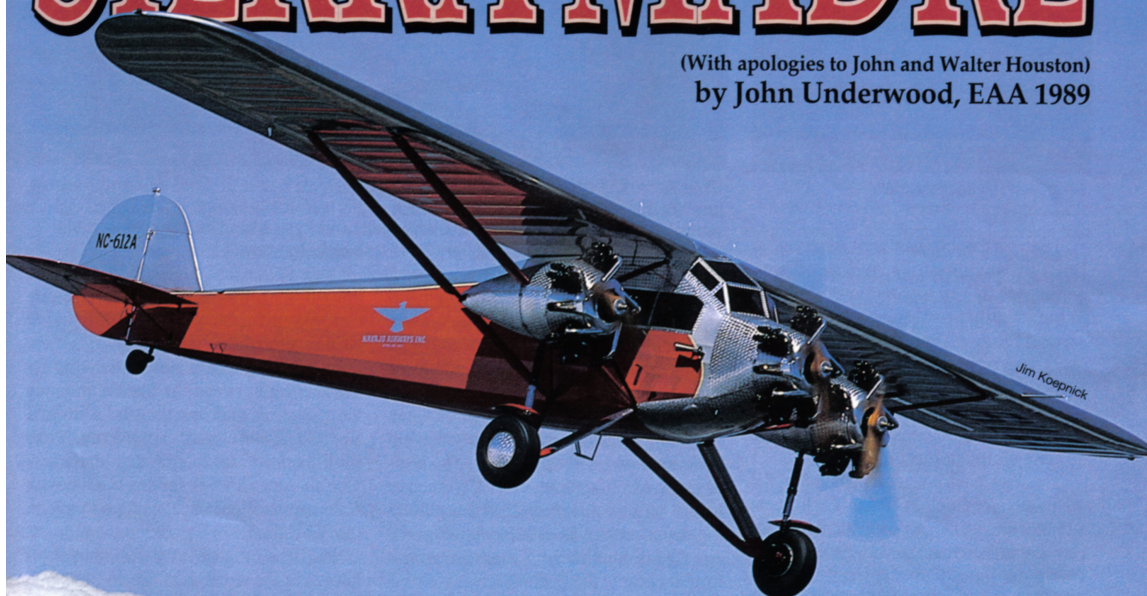


# another treasure of the **SIERRA MADRE**

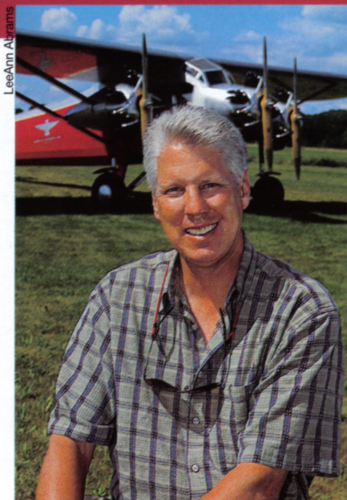
(With apologies to John and Walter Houston)  
by John Underwood, EAA 1989



American dreamer  
Joe Kreutzer  
made his fortune  
putting Buicks  
on the highways  
and lost it all  
building some  
of the first  
corporate  
airplanes.

**O**n Tuesday morning, March 24, 1919, Henry Ogden and Art White departed Santa Monica's Clover Field and set a course for Detroit. Their objective was the Second Annual All American Aircraft Show. It was by no means certain that the Joseph Kreutzer Corporation would be allowed to show their new, six-passenger Air Coach. The airplane, finished only three days earlier, had barely flown and there was no guarantee it would be admitted. It was unlicensed and the Detroiters were unwilling to admit any aircraft not bearing a valid "NC" or "X" prefix on its registration.

Entry to the Detroit show was the aeronautical equivalent to having a ticket to the President's Inaugural Ball. Any manufacturer who didn't present his new airplane there wasn't taken seriously. Joe Kreutzer, well aware of this and had reserved space without knowing whether he would be able to use it. Ogden and White were halfway there when they received confirmation that the Air Coach, Serial Number 102, had been issued an experimental license, X-612. That would get the airplane through the exhibition hall gate and it would permit passenger flights afterwards, but for demonstration purposes only.



LeeAnn Altmann

Greg Herrick, Jackson, WY

The Air Coach was well received at Detroit. Businessmen, weary of long commutes by rail and automobile, took to the idea that corporate ownership of aircraft made sense. Moreover, the price was right. Provisionally priced at \$15,000, the Kreutzer K-2, with its single 90 hp Le Blond and twin 60s, was by far the least expensive multi-engine aircraft on the domestic market.

The Air Coach's nearest competitor, the 10-passenger Bach 3CT Air Yacht, cost \$35,000 and its closest equivalent in load-carrying capacity and performance were all single-engined. They included the Buhl Airsedan at \$13,500, Fairchild's Model 71 at \$18,900, Fokker's Universal at \$15,000, Ryan's B-5 Brougham at \$13,250, the Stinson SM-1F Detroit at \$13,500 and the Travel Air 6000B at \$13,000.

Trimotor safety was the sales pitch that counted more than anything else. Hank Ogden was so committed to that ideal that he resigned immediately after the Detroit show to build his own light trimotor, the Ogden Osprey, with 90 hp American Cirrus. Within a matter of months several other light twins and trimotors were making a bid for a share of what seemed to be a burgeoning market.

It was clear from the outset that the Air Coach needed more power and the K-3, certified under ATC 170 in June 1929, differed from the K-2 mainly in having 90 hp LeBlonds in the outboard stations. The additional 50 to 60 hp was a significant boost and, although the K-2 was approved under



John Underwood

Greg Herrick contracts with the crew at HO Aircraft based at Anoka County Airport, just north of Minneapolis, MN for much of his restoration work. From left to right we see John Mohr, Tom Oostdik, Melissa Mliem and Ryan Mohr. Not shown are Dan White, Mike Rawson, Chad Miller, Carie Dahlenberg and Jill Literski.

ATC 171 in July, only five were built and nearly all were quickly upgraded.

The powerplant situation was by no means resolved and the LeBlonds were found to have their share of idiosyncrasies. More powerful engines were becoming available, most notably the 100 hp Kinner and 110 hp Warner. The Kinner K-5, manufactured locally, seemed to be the better value. Kreutzer's engineering department was detailed to adapt the Air Coach to take the Kinner, in which form it became the K-5.

X-612 remained experimental until it was licensed NC612 as a K-3 in July, at which point the Joseph Kreutzer Corporation was desperate for working capital. Obtaining a loan on NC612 and NC714K from the Pacific Finance Corp., which specialized in financing aircraft, raised \$16,000. But the crash on Wall Street just a few weeks later sealed the company's fate and that of thousands more. The Great Depression had begun. The bankrupt Kreutzer Corporation defaulted on the loan and the PFC seized both aircraft on December 13, 1929.

Little is known of NC612's activities during the next nine months, but almost certainly it was domiciled at the new Los Angeles Metropolitan Airport in Van Nuys, in Hangar 6, in the care of Larry Therkelsen's aircraft brokerage. Therkelsen was responsible for liquidating PFC's aircraft holdings and was well

known in South California aviation circles. His listings for July 1930 included NC612, priced at \$8,500.

In August, a sale was transacted by Therkelsen between the Pacific Finance Corporation and one Clyde Palmer of Seattle. Palmer and his partner Don Phillips proposed to operate a daily service six times a week linking Seattle with Yakima, via Wenatchee, with no flying on the Sabbath.

Phillips, the chief pilot, was well known in the Northwest. Their company, Inter Citiair Express, Inc., had in fact begun flying "the hump" some six months earlier with a Lockheed Vega. Flying the Cascades was dicey business in a single engine plane and the partners opted to re-equip with Kreutzer trimotors.

Inter Citiair Express seems to have re-organized early on as Seattle-Wenatchee-Yakima Airways, Inc. In any event, Palmer was doing business under that banner when the Pacific Finance Corporation caught up with NC612 at Oakland, where it had been grounded as unairworthy by Dept. of Commerce Inspector Wiley Wright on November 23, 1930. Palmer, having failed to make any payments on the financed purchase price, was summarily relieved of the airplane.

There had been little maintenance on the airplane during its service in the Northwest. Messrs. Palmer and Smith seem to have operated more as a charter service

than an airline. Exactly how much scheduled passenger flying they did is unknown, because the logbook was not aboard at the time of repossession. It is known, however, that NC612 was a sometime visitor on the Canadian side, the implication being that it was engaged in a fly-by-night freighting operation. Prohibition had yet to be repealed and the huge profits from hauling bootleg libations were a temptation that was almost irresistible.

Once again NC612 was handed over to Larry Therkelsen, who included it in his May 1931 listings with the notation "Less than 100 hours." This must be a reference to engine time since major overhaul (SMOH). In any case, the LeBlonds, which were not really up to the task, were wheezing again and in need of a full measure of TLC. Therkelsen's price was only \$2,500.

Therkelsen was not long in placing NC612 under new management, this time at Winslow, Arizona. Messrs. W. L. Carpenter, Columbus L. Giragi and C. J. Wiley, doing business as Navajo Airways, proposed to provide a feeder service connecting with Western Air Express at Winslow. Tourism to the Grand Canyon and sightseeing excursions over the Great Meteor Crater would be their bread and butter. The sale was consummated on May 30, 1931.

By March 1932, NC612 was weather worn and tattered. It was time for a complete airframe overhaul and new fabric. The control cables were all rusty and the ailerons were permanently warped. According to the paperwork, NC612 had but

197 hours total time. From this, one can only suppose that a lot of flying went unrecorded, and that the airplane spent a fair amount of time outdoors. The airplane was ferried to Los Angeles for a thorough refurbishing.

Although Navajo Airways was not an element of the T&WA/WAE merger that resulted in today's TWA, it operated from the WAE terminal and went so far as to copy the line's distinctive red and silver color scheme. Navajo may well have used WAE as their ticket agent, too.

It is likely that NC612 participated in supply drops that prevented starvation among Indians marooned by the blizzard of January 1932. Other Kreutzers may have been involved as well, there having been three in operation in Arizona at that time. The International Flying Service kept an elegant K-5, NC243M, at Phoenix and the Packard family at Payson owned NC9493, which spent much of its life barnstorming Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. William A. Packard, close kin to the automaker, had fond memories of the airplane.

As for Navajo Airways, little is known beyond the fact that it probably was a bust for its owners. The company went out of business toward the end of 1932 and on January 9, 1933, NC612 became the property of Willard F. Hellman of Glendale, California. Hellman owned a little Kinner Airster biplane that had once been demonstrated by the Kinner Company's Boston agent, Amelia Earhart.

Hellman was the proprietor of a radio and appliance business. His serviceman

was a radio expert and when Harold Bromley complained one day that no affordable lightweight transmitter/receivers were on the market, Hellman said he'd try to build one. The unit delighted Bromley, whose friend, Wiley Post, ordered one just like it. That unit may still be part of Winnie Mae's avionics.

On the trip home from Winslow it was evident that the gasping LeBlonds were in need of yet another valve job. Hellman took the matter up with E. L. Hollywood, Sr., whose Glendale based Air Transport Manufacturing Company was created to continue Air Coach production. ATM had a cash flow problem, however, and only one new airplane had been produced. It was a custom K-5 for oilman Allen Hancock, one of Hollywood's creditors.

Hollywood's engineer/partner was Albin K. Peterson, who had designed the Air Coach in the first place. Peterson had some improvements he was eager to try out and Hellman was offered a refurbishing proposition he could not refuse. It included the latest Kinner K-5 engines at cost. The Kinner Company, its factory just down the street, hoped to see the Air Coach back in production. Its CEO, Robert Porter, is thought to have had a personal stake in the matter.

NC612 was converted in compliance with ATC 223, which had been amended

The cockpit of the Kreutzer K-5 with the throttle quadrant mounted on the floor between the seats.



Mark Godfrey





The three Kinner K-5s swing a trio of Sensenich fixed pitch, wood props to move the K-5 Air Coach along at a stately 100-110 mph. Al Ball of Santa Paula, CA gets all the credit for restoring the three Kinnners to outstanding condition.

to permit a new fin and rudder design and windshield, mainly in the interests of styling enhancement. The airplane was flying again in March, just in time to provide an aerial platform to inspect the devastation caused by the Long Beach earthquake. The modernization program seemed to generate new interest, especially from operators south of the border, and a production line was set up to produce an initial batch of three ATM style Air Coaches.

In the spring of 1933, Willard Hellman found himself at loose ends. Business reversals and a failing marriage prompted him to relocate and start afresh. Through his friend Harold Bromley a connection was made with West Mexican Mines, Ltd., headquartered at Hidalgo de Parral in the state of Chihuahua. The company, which operated an aging Ryan Brougham, had need of a more modern airplane for its mountain operations and NC612, with



Greg Herrick shows great form as he demonstrates the correct procedure for strong-arming Kinner K-5s. The Heywood Air Starters were not installed in time for AirVenture '99.

its Kinner engines, had the desired performance. Hellman received another offer he couldn't refuse. In a convoluted deal engineered by Hancock, the oilman, ATM would be paid \$29,000 for the airplane. This included development costs and a generous bonus to Hellman, the actual owner, plus a two-year job contract.

The journey to Mexico was not without incident. Bromley had never flown a Kreutzer before, but he'd done a fair amount of test flying for Lockheed and Emsco, which had produced aircraft for his transpacific escapades in 1929-30. He felt confident that the Air Coach was just another airplane. It was, therefore, a bit of

a shocker when, on the approach to Yuma, a dust devil caused the airplane to lurch sideways close to the ground, dropping a wing. Bromley was unable to check the low wing, which impacted violently, resulting in a partial cartwheel. Fortunately, nobody was seriously injured, but the airplane appeared to be all but a total write-off.

Bromley, somewhat chastened, proceeded on to Parral to explain to the management why there would be a slight delay in implementing the new trimotor service to the mines. Hellman caught the next westbound Curtiss Condor at El Paso, TX, which happened to be a non-revenue ferry flight with no passengers and no copilot. The captain explained that he was fatigued from a long night of libation and wondered if Hellman would spare him at the controls while he took a nap. Thus it was that Hellman flew himself back to Glendale, courtesy of American Airways, while the captain snored in the back until it was time for the landing.

Hellman returned to Yuma with Peterson, took stock of the situation and had NC612 ignominiously dumped on a railroad flatcar for the return trip. Two months later, this time with ATM's Del Hay at the controls, the reconstituted NC612 was delivered to West Mexican Mines as XB-AHO. Bromley made the first run to Guadeloupe Y Calvo on the morning of June 7, 1933.

For the next several years Bromley remained XB-AHO's pilot exclusively, save for one thoroughly unhappy occasion. The airplane gave 100 percent reliable service and there were only three minor engine incidents, all due to the center Kinner's appetite for valves, in nearly 3,000 hours of flying. There were, however, a number of landing incidents.

Bromley was only carrying a payroll when he landed on GYC's slushy runway and stood the Air Coach on its nose after coasting into a snow bank. The hot engines melted the packed snow and XB-AHO gradually toppled over on its back. Bromley had to hitch a ride on a mule train to fetch a new propeller.

The Bromley family, which was domiciled at Guadeloupe Y Calvo, were planning a long overdue vacation by the summer of 1935. Harold arranged with Lake Littlejohn, a former PanAm pilot with several thousand hours of trimotor

**"LITTLEJOHN CRAWLED OUT, THOROUGHLY HUMBLED, BUT OTHERWISE UNHARMED. "NEVER IN MY 20 YEARS OF FLYING," HE WAILED, "HAVE I SEEN SUCH HAVOC FROM SUCH SLIGHT PROVOCATION!"**

time, to be his substitute for the month of August. Littlejohn was happy to oblige, because he was between jobs and found the Chihuahua Mountains much to his liking.

Littlejohn, with his vast experience, saw no need for a checkride and the Bromleys left for California. The very next day, Littlejohn was finishing the daily mail/passenger run to GYC when he slightly overshot his landing at Parral and applied some brake. It was a tad too much. The tail lifted slowly, hesitated in midair, then flopped over on its back with a grinding crunch. Littlejohn crawled out, thoroughly humbled, but otherwise unharmed. "Never in my 20 years of flying," he wailed, "have I seen such havoc from such slight provocation!"

XB-AHO was clearly out of commission for months to come. The nose Kinner had broken off its mount, all the propellers were curled, the fuselage was buckled and the landing gear had folded back. It was Bromley's second day on vacation and now he had to find a replacement airplane, preferably another K-5 Air Coach.

It took the rest of the month to find one. NC243M, originally the property of the Kinner company, had been updated by ATM for the previously mentioned International Flying Service of Phoenix. Bromley got it, through the good offices

of broker Charlie Babb, for \$3,000. Thus it was NC243M migrated to Mexico as XB-AAC.

XB-AHO was eventually returned to service and plied the airways for West Mexican Mines for several more years. In the late 1930s, however, the Gringo pilots were being disenfranchised and sent home, so native airmen could have the high paying jobs. The trouble was none of the Mexican applicants seemed to be able to get the hang of flying XB-AHO. Bromley, himself, occasionally alluded to its "tricky ways." In the air, "No problema!" But getting back on the ground again was something else, especially on primitive airstrips at elevations up to 8,000 ft.

Even after the deadline, Bromley was given special dispensation to remain until he could train a replacement. Whereas all Americans who held commercial licenses had their tickets invalidated in Mexico, a special category had been created for Bromley, who was held in high esteem by the Mexicans. He was named Asesor Tecnico #1-literally it meant technical advisor and it permitted him to remain on the job until a qualified Mexican pilot could be found.

The qualified Mexican turned out to be another American, Leo Lopez T., for Talamantes, used only in formal introductions. Leo, born and educated in El Paso, held dual citizenship. He had learned to fly in 1931 and, by 1936, was instructing in Col. Roberto Fierro's flight academy. Fierro, former head of the Mexican AF, was also the governor of Chihuahua. For the next several years XB-AHO would be flown by Leo, who was to become one of Mexico's best-known commercial operators.

In 1939, XB-AHO became the property of one Gerardo Heimpel, a German national, long suspected of clandestine activities. Heimpel was an avowed Nazi and claimed personal friendship with Adolf Hitler. His mission, it was said, was to strengthen German ties with Mexico, which were already strong. Heimpel and his countrymen hoped to make Mexico an Axis ally, or at the very least keep it neutral in the event of an American declaration of war on Germany.

Heimpel was involved in mining operations, which also served Nazi needs. One of his mining operations was Huizopa, in the Western Sierras. Its landing strip was



Jim Koepnick

reputed to be one of the most dangerous in the State of Chihuahua, which had many dangerous strips. XB-AHO's job was to create links between Heimpel's headquarters in Chihuahua, Huizopa and other holdings.

There were rumors that Heimpel's airplane, sometimes described as a twin, was making border crossings into Texas and New Mexico at night, dropping agents and supplies. However true that may be has yet to be determined. What is known for certain is that Heimpel's services to the Fuhrer came to an abrupt end shortly after the U.S. entered WW II. Mexico threw in with the Allies and a few days later Heimpel was packed off to prison for the duration.

Sometime previous to Heimpel's incarceration, XB-AHO had been involved in an accident at Huizopa. The pilot, Desiderio "Chilelo" Varela had trained his copilot to do the braking, but the technique proved his undoing. There was a fairly violent ground loop, resulting in damage to the wing and center engine. "Chilelo" and his brakeman-mechanic were out of a job and XB-AHO went into dead storage. Mining operations had been discontinued at Huizopa, due to unprofitable production, and the place was abandoned. For the next four decades XB-AHO was all but forgotten.

In 1980, a charter pilot by the name of

Hernando Garcia Contreras acquired title to XB-AHO from the Heimpel family, which was still domiciled in Chihuahua, although the patriarch Nazi, Geraldo and his pilot son were long gone. The aircraft was complete, except for the three Hamilton Standard propellers and all of the instruments. The propellers had been distributed among family members as mementos of bygone days.

Garcia's initial salvage operation, which got underway in May 1981, involved a work party of 25 men and 20 pack animals. They retrieved the engines, fuel tanks, oil tanks, tail wheel, controls and other items. That same year, during November and December, a second expedition was mounted, involving 22 men and 19 pack animals. The fuselage was moved a few kilometers before snowfall halted the program.

Garcia could not return until November 1982, this time with a party of 34 men and 25 pack animals. They were in the mountains for another two months, hacking paths with machetes and actually clearing a roadway near the end of the trail to permit trucking their treasures of the Sierra Madre over the last leg of the journey to Casa Grande.

XB-AHO had not been the only aircraft retrieved from Huizopa. Another wreck had been of sufficient interest to Garcia to add to his collection. It was an

unidentified biplane and only the fuselage and tail were salvageable. The writer and Garcia examined the remains and found a serial number stamped on a longeron. It was 1000. Could this have been some sort of experimental aircraft? The puzzle remained unresolved until I remembered the daughter of another pilot who had visited Huizopa as a charter pilot in the early 1930s—an American, George Law. Law had crashed on his last flight out of Huizopa in 1934. A check of the records revealed that Law had been flying a J-5 Eaglerock, NC542Y, Serial Number 1000.

For the next several years, Garcia, his son and nephew, with the help of a Guatemalan mechanic, Marcelino Jolon Camey, labored day in and day out to get the Air Coach back in the air again. Camey, in his seventies, had worked on Kreutzers in Guatemala in his youth. Propellers and instruments had to come from north of the border, however, and finding them became a task for Senor Juan. The writer had been recruited as some kind of purchasing agent.

Funding for the enterprise came from an investment group composed of local businessmen and teachers. Art Acosta was the titular head, mainly because he could understand my brand of Spanish, or maybe it was the other way around. None of them, except the Garcias, knew anything about aviation. All the backers knew

was that a trimotor in the U.S. was supposed to be worth upwards of a million dollars. That was the incentive behind the salvage operation from the outset. If XB-AHO could be made airworthy enough to fetch \$500,000, then it would all be worthwhile.

XB-AHO was repatriated at El Paso as N612A in 1986 and trundled to Santa Teresa, a few miles west of the New Mexico side, where the Garcias busied themselves with their activities. N612A was ready to fly, or so it seemed, and antique airplane guru Bob Taylor came down from Iowa to give it his blessing. Alas, the problem was no one with the necessary credentials was willing to sign off the paperwork.

California seemed to offer more favorable prospects. The Los Angeles office of the FAA was used to dealing with licensing vintage aircraft. Southern California also seemed to be a better place to locate a buyer. Besides, it was N612A's place of birth and there was the prospect of some free TV coverage. Once again, the Kreutzer was trundled off on a flatbed tractor-trailer.

Finding an airport suitable for a test flight with hangar accommodations was not easy. Chino was considered and ruled out. (Hangar space was \$900 per month and there was nothing available.) So was Mojave. Camarillo seemed ideal, with its 10,000 foot runway surrounded by farmland and a huge, half-empty hangar for only \$400 a month.

The next step was to find a suitable test pilot. There were several volunteers, including Bill Turner of Repeat Aircraft, Mel Heflinger, retired from United Airlines, and a gentleman who had flown for NASA for many years, whose name I can't now recall.

Chuck Yeager had also been approached. He liked to fly oddball aircraft and agreed to do the job at no charge, provided certain insurance conditions could be met. That was the first hang-up. The actuaries knew Yeager could handle jet fighters "no problem," but they wanted to know how much recent time he had in trimotors. In the end, no underwriter was willing to provide coverage on a 60-year-old trimotor, except Lloyds, and their premiums were prohibitive.

Licensing was another problem. FAA wanted N612A licensed in the homebuilt category. While the aircraft had con-

formed to ATC 223, there was nothing in the FAA's files to guide them in the way of an inspection handbook with ATC 223 specifications. All that information had been purged from their files decades earlier. There had not been a Kreutzer trimotor on the FAA's books since 1940.

By a curious coincidence, a long deceased friend, Lee Enich, had fallen heir in the 1950s to the Kreutzer engineering residue, which consisted mainly of a crate of blueprints for the Kreutzer trimotors (three models), the General Western Meteor and the Hodkinson trimotor, a Don Berlin venture that had not gone beyond a single prototype. Lee, an early EAA activist, had donated everything to the EAA museum, then in its infancy.

An appeal was made to Paul Poberezny, who had a vague recollection of the collection, and made a personal search of material in dead storage. The crate had not been entered into the EAA's computerize property inventory, which necessitated a massive search that proved unfruitful, initially.

Meanwhile, things in California had taken a downward turn. Having been carefully inspected, N612A revealed itself to be a cosmetic restoration. Despite invoices in the amount of \$7,000 for aircraft grade spruce and plywood, much of the structure was not aircraft grade. Moreover, the fabric proved to be improperly applied. It was shrinking with the passage of time, warping improperly installed fairing stringers. It was beginning to look like Hell. Close inspection of weldments in the forward fuselage revealed kinked tubing in critical locations.

Meanwhile, efforts continued to find a buyer. For the next couple of years the writer showed N612A on the average of once a week to prospects, including a Japanese group, which was looking for a theme park attraction. On one occasion, having just returned from the 120-mile round trip to Camarillo, a Trade-a-Plane reader called to say he wanted to see the airplane that very afternoon. It meant another 120-mile trip, but this time at the other party's expense.

He asked me to meet him at nearby BUR and we'd fly out in his airplane, which was assumed to be a Bonanza or Cessna. It turned out to be a beautiful, recently restored B-25. Hey, my friends, that was a memorable trip and a highlight of my mission to find a new home for

N612A. Alas, the gentleman declined to make an offer, which was disappointing, although not entirely unexpected.

N612A's owners, having despaired of ever consummating a sale on terms acceptable to all concerned, eventually hauled the airplane back to Texas, where I never knew exactly. Another decade passed, more or less, before the arrival upon the scene of an extraordinary young man by the name of Greg Herrick. Herrick had just acquired Channing Clark's prototype Fleetwings Seabird. He told me he was interested in the Kreutzer and wondered if I knew where it had gone to after CMA. I didn't, but I gave him some leads.

The upshot of this was Greg Herrick's becoming N612A's protector and benefactor, probably for life. I think Greg's ambition is to own the largest private collection of vintage aircraft in the world. Reflecting upon that expectation is his new hangar at Anoka County Airport, 25 miles north of Minneapolis. It was finished during this past summer and is big enough to hold 100+ aircraft.

The thing about Greg's taste in airplanes is that he prefers the rarest of the rare, although he does make exceptions. For example, he has a weakness for Fairchild PTs, not on the endangered species list, and a couple of Wacos in the same category, but most of his fleet consists of one-only survivors, such as his "Packard" Buhl CA-3D, Cunningham-Hall PT-6F and Stinson "A" trimotor.

Once again a search was mounted for the Kreutzer blueprints, because nothing much could be achieved without them. For one thing, the Mexican built wings deviated so far from the originals as to be unrecognizable. The spars were all wrong, so too was the airfoil. This time the blueprints were found and they gave new impetus to the program. Indeed, without them the restoration would have been virtually impossible.

Greg has the team and the wherewithal to perform marvelous restorations, but without the late Lee Enich's long ago contribution it probably could not have been done. Hey, it's the happy hour as I write this, so here's to you Lee! If you didn't have the foresight to save those blueprints, NC612A might still be a moldering relic with very little future. Instead, it's a delight to behold and one that will be enjoyed by generations of air show spectators in the new millennium. 