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The Magical History Tour

Why are so many Golden Age airplanes traveling the country together this fall?

By Mary Collins

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GREG HERRICK, A COLLECTOR OF AIRPLANES FROM THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS, HAS A STORY TO TELL. He puts his beer down, raises his hands like paws, and growls like the junkyard dog he found guarding an airplane stashed on a ranch in Caldwell, Idaho.

“The dog jumped up against the car door,” he says. “There was no way I was getting out of that car. So I tossed him a peanut butter cracker. He sniffed it, then gobbled it up. I got out of the car real slowly and said, ‘Sit!’ When the dog sat, I gave him some more crackers. I was all set.”

After several years of phone calls and casual visits, Herrick had thought this time he might be able to convince the elderly cropduster and ranch owner, Gene Frank, to give up the beat-up jewel lying in the grass behind the wire fence, the “No Trespassing” signs, and the dog: the oldest Ford Tri-motor in existence.

But when Frank pulled up in his truck and saw his guard dog sitting down on the job, he reached for his shotgun.

“That damn dog!” he exclaimed.

“I shouted at him to stop,” Herrick says. “I told him I’d won the dog over with crackers.”

Maybe Frank decided to take the dog’s placid reaction to Herrick as a good sign: After years of trying, Herrick finally got the Tri-motor. The rancher eventually sold him several airplanes, including a 1929 Keystone-Loening Commuter K-84 and a Cunningham-Hall PT-6F. “Even though he thinks of me as a son, he wept when he sold them to me,” Herrick says.

He understands why Frank was so attached to the airplanes; collectors sometimes see a value in objects others miss. For Herrick, the airplanes represent an era in aviation history of unbounded energy and optimism. In the 1920s and ’30s as many as 180 companies churned out airplanes. But many of the models introduced during that period are gone. The Keystone-Loening K-84, for example, is the last of its type. It is one of the trademark biplane flying boats of Grover Loening, who designed the first short-hulled flying boat while working for the Wright brothers. When Loening opened his own company, he competed for Navy contracts (Leroy Grumman was one of his employees), but also built civil craft. Herrick’s K-84 spent its heyday working for small Alaskan airlines before winding up in Gene Frank’s field in 1954.

Herrick prides himself on knowing detailed histories for each of the airplanes in his collection, which resides at the Anoka County-Blaine Airport outside Minneapolis. With the \$60 million he netted in 1994 from the sale of his mail-order computer business, Zeos International, he’s built one of the largest private holdings of airplanes in the United States—40 in all, worth an estimated \$7 million.

Last April, I asked him for a tour. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Herrick’s boyish face, Eddie Bauer khakis, and plain cotton shirt hardly give him the look of the elite collector. He drives a red Jeep with roll-up windows and a cracked windshield. For his new job, owner and chief operator of the Aviation Foundation of America, he keeps a simple office in a warehouse-like building near some railroad tracks.

We sped along the roads north of Minneapolis, passing miles of flat, brown landscape. When we swung into a parking lot next to a hangar, I spied a small sign over a side door—"Golden Wings Flying Museum."

I have never been so awed by the beauty of a practical object. What a difference between the aircraft inside the hangar and the 727 I'd flown on from Washington, D.C. Herrick's 1931 Stinson Tri-motor, deep blue with varnished wooden trim, reminded me that moving people through the air was once an artform. The collector delights in pointing out the craftsmen's attention to detail on all of his purchases: the fine wicker seats and brass handles on a Travel Air 6000, the quaint wheel covers on a 1935 Waco with a cream-colored fuselage and elegant red trim.

It soon becomes clear that every one of his airplanes comes with a story. During the two days we spent together, he never stopped chatting about the one-of-a-kind Sikorsky flying boat that he's spent \$600,000 to salvage from the bottom of a lake in Alaska (and so far gotten just a piece of the airplane's fabric to show for his efforts) or the number of calls he's had to make to track down the owners of a particular airplane he really, really wants. The rancher in Idaho, the mechanic in Florida, the widow in California—all are characters in Herrick's great airplane collecting adventure, and he takes great pleasure in reenacting the various parts. (On the way back from dinner, he played a mechanic sucking on a cigarette.)

"I was very interested in preserving history," says Herrick, and the era he thought needed the most attention, he says, is the Golden Age of aviation. "That isn't to say that there aren't a lot of people saving Wacos and Travel Airliners, but what really interested me was those that had disappeared or almost disappeared. It's like anything you develop an interest in—wine, cars—you start to refine it into categories you're interested in. I decided I was going to save one-of-a-kind vintage airplanes from the Golden Age."

He also decided that for the centennial year of flight, he was going to find an appropriate way to celebrate the contributions of the Golden Age, and that decision has brought him to his latest, greatest story. To tell as many people as possible about one of aviation's great eras of invention, Herrick is re-creating the Commercial Airplane Reliability Tours, which flew between 1925 and 1931, were sponsored by Henry Ford, and stimulated a remarkable transformation in air travel.

Prior to 1925, people saw airplanes as something used only by a daring stunt pilot or barnstormer, not by an average Joe wanting to go someplace. A few entrepreneurs and industrialists saw the airplane's potential: William Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, Philip Wrigley, and Lester Armour all put up capital for airlines bidding on mail routes. But the capitalist most responsible for transforming the airplane from a novelty into a necessity was Henry Ford.

Ford got into the airplane business in 1922 by investing in the Stout Metal Airplane Company, created by William Stout, an engineer who introduced all-metal construction into the manufacture of U.S. aircraft. Ford soon combined Stout's ideas with a few of his own to produce the Ford Tri-motor 4-AT. He knew he'd have to build a market for his new product, just as he had built a market for his cars. Encouraged by his son Edsel, he decided to sponsor an airplane tour that would show Americans how sturdy and reliable airplanes had become. He modeled it on the Glidden Reliability Tours, which had opened people's minds to the possibility of car travel. (Financed by Charles Glidden, who made his fortune in the telephone industry, the tours brought automobiles into towns all over the United States between 1905 and 1913 and fostered competition among the manufacturers to build the sturdiest car.)

In 1925, the Fords commissioned a \$7,000 sterling silver trophy and invited 17 pilots to fly a 1,900-mile route, with stops in over a dozen cities. Edsel himself waved the starter flag at Ford Airport in Dearborn, Michigan. There was no winner or loser in the first race. To emphasize reliability and safety, rather than speed and daring, a committee set up an elaborate equation that measured the accuracy and quickness of pilots' takeoffs and landings and their average cruising speed between the various stops on the tour. Any pilot who sustained the required cruising speed at least 75 percent of the time and met other performance criteria could win a perfect score and get his name engraved on the imposing three-foot-tall trophy. (Things turned more competitive the following year, when only the top point-getter was honored.)

In a 1929 article in *Aviation* magazine, Ray Collins, a former World War I pilot who refereed or managed all seven tours, recalled the 1925 debut: “We had six days of awful weather, continual rain and storms, including a cyclone in Kansas City. Servicing for the ships was very poor too. Gas was poured into the tanks by the bucketful and gas mileage was lousy so you could only go 175 miles in a day.

“The average crowd at the various airports was about 3,000 persons. The interest at that time seemed to be more in going out to see a group of daredevils fly. The idea of the general public themselves taking a trip in the air was not brought home to them then.”

That was the attitude Ford was trying to change—not only with the air tour but with the three-engine aircraft his company would build. The Ford Tri-motor projected a look of steadiness and safety, an image necessary for commercial flights to catch on in the United States. For passengers who might doubt the safety of an aircraft that relied on a single engine, the tri-motors provided two backups. The early Ford Tri-motor, like the one Herrick coveted in the rancher’s field, and its Stout 2-AT predecessor were nicknamed “Tin Goose” for their aluminum alloy construction. (The Tri-motor also got the name “Flying Washboard” because of its corrugated skin.) One of the first all-metal, multi-engine transports, the Tri-motor underwent a number of refinements over the years and eventually became the workhorse for more than 100 airlines in a dozen countries.

In 1926, the year of its introduction, a Ford-Stout Tri-motor 4-AT-A, with a pilot and four passengers, flew in the second Commercial Airplane Reliability Tour, along with 24 other pilots, who traveled 2,600 miles to 13 cities, before huge crowds. In the 12 months since the first tour, airplane design had undergone enormous changes. Unlike the Swallows, Yackeys, and Martins on the 1925 tour, all but two of the aircraft had the new air-cooled radial engines, wheel brakes, and a much larger carrying capacity.

Charles Lindbergh’s solo Atlantic crossing in 1927 fueled a nationwide obsession with aviation. The Midwestern airmail carrier made Americans curious about airplanes the same way a great athlete can trigger the nation to embrace a previously ignored or misunderstood sport. The 1928 Ford tour rode the wave of interest to a banner year complete with 25 pilots, who flew a 6,300-mile route to the delight of millions of spectators.

Collins recalled: “The crowds at the airport had grown to 18,000 a visit and many of the visitors were eager to take their first ride.” Just three years had passed since the first tour, yet the Ford air tour brochure now carried ads from airlines announcing passenger routes. (A hop from San Francisco to Seattle took seven hours and cost \$55.) Henry and Edsel’s vision of establishing a highway in the air for the average American no longer seemed like a fantasy.

At about 9 a.m. on Monday, this September 8, Edsel B. Ford’s grandson, Edsel II, will wave a starter flag at the Dearborn Proving Ground, formerly Ford Airport, near Detroit. When he does, 30 airplanes—several Ford Tri-motors, other early airliners, mail carriers, bushplanes, amphibians, and barnstormers, accompanied by the last Douglas DC-3 to be operated by the FAA—will begin the 26-city 2003 National Air Tour. The aircraft will fly 4,000 miles, following a route planned for the 1932 tour, which was canceled when towns suffering from the Depression simply couldn’t find the money to welcome touring airplanes.

As Herrick heads the re-creation of the early Ford tours, he is tackling many of the details the original organizers faced: lining up sponsors, pilots, airplanes, airfields, and ground crews. “Imagine the logistics,” he says, “for 30 airplanes all going 110 mph and leaving Dearborn at basically the same time on September 8.”

But he doesn’t dwell on the nuts and bolts. When I ask him about the task of organizing the tour, he answers by describing how much it means to the pilots who will fly their Golden Age airplanes this fall and telling me about Rosemarie Schlee, at 87, the last known living participant of the original tours.

Her father, Ed Schlee, flew two-thirds of the way around the world in 1927 (he skipped the Pacific Ocean), just after Lindbergh won the Orteig Prize, awarded for the first solo nonstop flight from New York to Paris. “Airplanes were our business,” Rosemarie says today. “We owned an airport. I remember my dad gave me a parachute and hung me from some rafters to show me how to use it.”

In 1927, Rosemarie, then 12, flew in the Ford air tour with her father in the family's Stinson S-1. Schlee had Eddie "Lucky 7-11" Stinson, founder of the airplane manufacturing company of the same name and one of the finest pilots of the era, at the controls. That year, dressed in a well-pressed business suit and straw hat, Stinson won with ease, his suave style convincing one newspaper reporter that "flying is not the strenuous proposition it used to be."

Rosemarie recalls the lavish lunches and dinners various towns put on for the pilots and their passengers. People crushed in on the field and the airplanes. "We flew to New York and I couldn't believe how many people showed up. It was like we were coming back from the moon or something.

"The planes were very comfortable and had wicker seats. And I remember Dick Blythe [a reporter] from the Detroit News had a little monkey named Whirlwind Jimmy. We'd land at all of these airports and the kids would be following me and the monkey would be sitting on my shoulder holding onto my hair. I'll never forget the kids trailing after me."

To honor people like her father and Stinson, Rosemarie wants to participate in the National Air Tour this fall, but she's had heart surgery and back problems and can't be sure she'll show.

It's first-person accounts like hers that bring back the innocence, energy, and fun of the era, during the administrations of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, when nearly half of Americans lived on farms, and men with an idea and some cash could design their own airplanes.

After winning the 1929 tour in a Waco 225, John Livingston wrote a day-by-day account of his three-week adventure for *Aviation*. "While the total number of hours I have in the air is not excessive," Livingston wrote, "much of my experience has been in virgin cross-country work. As a result, I think that perhaps I have developed a knack of recognizing little things that help me stay on course."

The original tours focused on manufacturing towns, rather than big cities like New York or San Francisco, so there was a small-scale quirkiness to the whole escapade. In 1928, the city of Wausau, Wisconsin, population 18,000, offered \$1,200 and the honorary title "Air Mayor of Wausau" to the pilot voted into office by the Wausau citizenry. The manager of the town airfield, John Wood, was competing in a Waco 10, painted with the Baby Ruth candy bar insignia. He attached parachutes to small candy bars and dropped them over the side of his aircraft to the crowds. He became the hometown hero, and new Air Mayor of Wausau, when he won the tour. But in a pattern all too common for pilots at the time, he died the following year over the California desert when lightning hit his Lockheed Vega. Wausau (current population 40,000), which named a street near the airport after Wood, will be one of the stops on the 2003 tour.

Greg Herrick can't get enough of these stories. To him, all of the Wacos, Stinsons, Ryans, Fairchilds, Birds, Cabinaires, Stearmans, Travel Airs, and Sikorskys that flew in the tours represented a creative flash in the commercial aviation industry that disappeared with the rise of long production lines at the advent of World War II.

"Everyone is into warbirds, which is just great, but, frankly, the world doesn't really need another [restored] P-51," he says.

"I figured if I was going to put in all this time and money I wanted something unique," says Andrew King of Elwood, Virginia, who plans to fly his 1926 Ryan M-1. "It's a monoplane from a time when almost all of the planes were biplanes. It was used on airmail routes a lot between Los Angeles and Seattle."

Addison Pemberton of Spokane, Washington, also has an affinity for the airmail carriers. In 1993 he decided to re-fly the San Francisco-to-Chicago run in his Stearman 4E Speedmail with his buddy Ben Scott, another pilot who will fly in the September tour.

"We were sworn in as airmail pilots and carried 3,000 letters. I had my two boys with me—they were small at the time—we had airmail bags and everything."

Pemberton continues: “At the time an automobile could go about 35 mph while the planes could fly 110 or so. These planes were like space travel. And the designs were so amazing. Many of them could outperform a Cessna or other modern small airplanes.

“Even today it’s really fun to circle a small town and then land and see the cars pull up and the kids run over. I call them our unfranchised America trips—no Days Inn or McDonald’s. In an airplane you can avoid seeing modern America when you fly at 4,000 to 5,000 feet and then land in a field.”

Dave Allen, who will fly his 1930 Waco ASO in the tour, is “so grateful to relive the Golden Age of aviation. The more we share about it the happier we are.” He says he and his wife Jeanne are “just a couple out in the middle of nowhere in Colorado having a good time flying our Waco.”

For people like Herrick and other owners of Golden Age aircraft, the rides and the carefully restored Wacos, Stinsons, and Ryans are all about spreading the news. No one sells these airplanes on a whim or just for the money. The enthusiasts talk among themselves about each new discovery in some rancher’s field, and want to be sure no single collector corners the rare-bird market. When Herrick first started buying up lots of Golden Age airplanes in the 1990s, “there were some hard feelings initially,” says Pemberton. “But it turns out he’s a nice guy and he sends his planes to all sorts of small-time airshows, which is really decent of him. I’m a bottom feeder [in the collection business] and he talks with me.”

To be a member of the Golden Age collectors’ community, you have to share the airplanes, share the stories, and feel a strong emotional connection to the era the airplanes represent.

Near the end of my tour of Herrick’s collection, we pause in front of a beat-up 1928 Stinson Detroit SM-1B with a jammed door and torn fabric. Of course, Herrick has to share the wounded relic’s story: “This airplane made the first diesel-powered flight. Look at the shoelaces around the fuel tank. That way when they had to replace the tank they could easily pull these off without tearing the wing apart.”

He bounds around to the tail and pokes his head inside a tear in the canvas. “Hey,” he shouts with alarm, “someone didn’t clean the grass in there, did they?”

The mechanic who helped us open the airplane’s door insists he hasn’t cleaned anything. “I liked it because it was from 1930. That was 1930 grass in there.”

Herrick’s right. Such details do help bring it all to mind. The Packard diesel motor roaring away, the pilot charging toward a chalk-lined grassy strip that’s supposed to pass for an airfield, the soft soil pulling on the wheels, the grass catching in the small tear in the fabric, the local people lining the field, just dying to rush in and touch what they see.

Sidebar: The 2003 National Air Tour Thrills for Sale

Besides bringing rare vintage aircraft to 26 U.S. cities this fall, the National Air Tour will also bring a chance to experience airplanes as many did during aviation’s Golden Age. Rob and Bob Lock of Powell, Ohio, creators of the barnstorming act Waldo Wright’s Flying Service, are selling rides on impeccably restored New Standard D-25 and D-29 biplanes, finished in “Stinson maroon” and “Diana cream” Poly Tone paints. The New Standard was designed for the 1920s barnstormer Ivan Gates, whose Gates Flying Circus traveled the country selling airplane rides in the D-25’s roomy, open, four-passenger front cockpit. At six-foot-ten, Rob Lock is delighted with the room in the D-25. His flying service will offer rides at most overnight stops on the tour. (Check www.waldowrights.com.)

Clay Adams of Rosemount, Minnesota, will also join the tour. A pilot for a major airline, Adams has for the past six years been selling rides across the upper Midwest in the two-passenger open cockpit of his Travel Air E-

4000. “It’s such a sweet-flying machine,” Adams says. Like the New Standard, it was perfect for flying to a farmer’s field, where it could scoop up paying passengers for joyrides. One of Adams’ favorite events takes him to Hastings, Minnesota, where the host of an antique tractor show mows a strip in his alfalfa field for the Travel Air.

A tour Web site (www.nationalairtour.org) will report the group’s progress and arrival times at airports on the route.

Tour schedule

Includes refueling stops

Monday, Sept. 8

Dearborn
Kalamazoo
South Bend, IN
Chicago

Tuesday, Sept. 9

Chicago over Meigs
Milwaukee

Wednesday, Sept. 10

Milwaukee
Wausau
St. Paul

Thursday, Sept. 11

St. Paul
Mason City
Des Moines
Kansas City

Friday, Sept. 12

Kansas City
Wichita

Saturday, Sept. 13

layover Wichita

Sunday, Sept. 14

Wichita
Tulsa
Fort Worth

Monday, Sept. 15

Fort Worth
Shreveport
Little Rock

Tuesday, Sept. 16

Little Rock
Memphis
Birmingham

Wednesday, Sept.17

Birmingham
Atlanta

Thursday, Sept. 18

Atlanta
Greenville, SC
Winston-Salem

Friday, Sept. 19

Winston-Salem
Wilson, NC
Manteo, NC

Saturday, Sept. 20

Manteo, NC
Kill Devil Hills

Sunday, Sept. 21

Kill Devil Hills
Richmond, VA
Frederick, MD

Monday, Sept. 22

Frederick, MD
Pittsburgh

Tuesday, Sept. 23

Pittsburgh
Dayton

Wednesday, Sept. 24

Dayton
Dearborn

* Free admission at all events, though spectators may have to pay for parking near the airfields.

To check for schedule updates, visit the tour's web site : www.nationalairtour.org