# Barnstorming today

Richard Bach

When he had tightened the safety belt down over the two passengers in the front, and shut the little half-door on their leather-rimmed cockpit, Stu MacPherson held for a moment in the propeller blast by my windshield.

“You’ve got two first-timers, and one’s a little scared.”

I nodded and lowered my goggles, and pushed the throttle forward into a great roaring burst of sound and wind.

What brave people! They battle the fear of all the air-crash headlines they’ve read, they put their trust in an airplane nearly forty years old and a pilot they’ve never seen before, just so that for ten minutes they can do in fact the thing they’ve only done in dreams … fly.

The rough ground jolts hard under the wheels as we begin to roll forward … bit of right rudder here, and the ground is a green-felt blur beneath us … back on the control stick—touch it back and the thunder of the biplane moving along the ground ceases …

The bright sunburst biplane skims the grass tops, tearing and slicing the warm summer air with spinning propeller and cat’s-cradle flying wires, and angles on up into the sky. My brave passengers look at each other in the roar of the wind and laugh.

We lift up over the grass; higher, over a field of kelly-green corn; higher still, over a wooded river lost away in mid-year Illinois. The tiny home town rests gently by the river, cooled by multiple hundreds of leafy shade trees and a faint breeze from the water. The town is an inpost of mankind. Men have been born, worked, and died here since the early nineteenth century. And there it is, nine hundred feet beneath us as we circle in the breeze, with its hotel, cafe, and gas station, its baseball game and children selling three-cent lemonade on dark-shadowed front lawns.

Worth being brave for, this view? Only the passengers can answer that. I just fly the airplane. I’m just trying to prove that a gypsy pilot, barnstorming, can exist today.

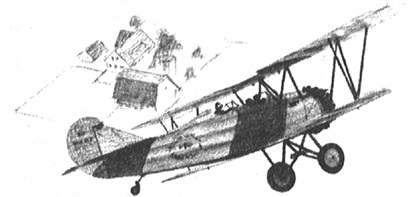
“SEE YOUR TOWN FROM THE AIR!” are our opening words to a hundred small towns. “COME UP WITH US WHERE ONLY BIRDS AND ANGELS FLY! RIDE A TESTED AND TRUE OPEN-COCKPIT BIPLANE, FEEL THAT COOL WIND THAT BLOWS WAY UP OVER TOWN! THREE DOLLARS THE FLIGHT! GUARANTEED TO BE LIKE NOTHING YOU’VE DONE BEFORE!”

From town to town we had flown, sometimes with a companion airplane, sometimes just the parachute jumper and me in our biplane. Across Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois again. County fairs, homecomings, and quiet days of quiet weeks in summer America. The cool lake towns of the north, the baked farm towns of the south; we buzzed our way, a bright dragonfly-machine carrying the promise of new views, and a chance to see away over the horizon.

More than our passengers, though, it is we who looked over the horizon, and on the other side we found that time was dead in its tracks.

Just which moment time chose to stop in the little towns of the Midwest is not easy to say. But it was clearly during a pleasant hour, in a happy time, when the minutes suddenly ceased moving one into another, when the real things ceased to change. Time stopped, I think, one day in 1929.

Those huge heavy trees of the park are there as they have always been. The bandstand, high-curbed Main Street, and the wood-frescoed, glass-front Emporium with a gold-leaf sign and a four-bladed fan stirring the air. White lap-strake churches; open-front porches in twilight; hedge clippers chopping the boundary between one house and another. The same bicycles lying right-side-down by the same gray-painted wooden doorsteps. And we found, flying, that we were part of the sameness, part of the pattern, a thread without which the fabric of town life would not have been complete. In 1929 the barnstormers chugged and clattered about the Midwest in their flake-painted, oil-throwing biplanes, landing in hayfields and on little strips of grass, diverting anyone ready for diversion, impressing anyone ready to be impressed.



The sound of our 1929 Wright airplane engine fitted precisely into the music of these timeless home towns. Even the same boys came out to meet us, with their same black-patch dogs running at their heels.

“Wow! That’s a real airplane! Tommy, look! A real airplane!”

“What’s it made out of, mister?”

“Can we sit in the pilot’s seat?”

“Careful, Billy! You’ll tear the canvas!”

Looks of utter awe, without a word spoken.

“Where did you come from?”

The hardest of all questions. Where did we come from? We came from where the barnstormers always come from—from somewhere out over the horizon beyond the meadow. And when we go, we’ll disappear over the horizon where we always disappear.

But here we are, flying, and my two brave passengers have forgotten what a headline looks like.

Throttle back, and the engine’s roar is supplanted by a polished silver fan spinning on the biplane’s nose, and the whistling hush of air over wings and through streamlined wires. We circle now over the field where we will land, to view a crowd of boys, a dog, an olive-drab pile of sleeping bags and cockpit covers that is a gypsy pilot’s home. Whistling, hushing, turning down across the cornfield … gliding quietly and bam we’re down and rolling over the rough ground at fifty miles an hour, at forty, at twenty, at ten and then the black engine comes alive again to trundle us, rocking awkwardly on tall old wheels, back to where it all began. I push my goggles up on the leather helmet.

Stu is on the wing before we stop, opening the door, guiding the passengers back to solid ground. “How did you like the ride?”

A loaded question. We know how they liked the ride, how every first-timer has liked his ride since back before the clock stopped turning in the little towns of the Central States.

“Great! Nice ride, mister, thank y’.” And turning away, “Lester, your house’s no bigger than a corncob! Aw, it’s great. Town’s a lot bigger than you’d think. You can see clear on off down the road. It’s really fine. Dan, you ought to give it a try.”

While the engine chugs quietly and propeller blade spins easily, Stu escorts the next passengers into the front cockpit, fastens the safety belt on them, and closes the door. I put my goggles down, push the throttle forward, and a new experience begins for two more people.

Daytimes are quiet. We walk, Stu and I, through town, quiet in midday, and it’s a clever electric museum. Here is Franklin’s 5-10-250 Store, with a spring-dangled brass bell on the door and a glass front counter of rainbow candies waiting to be scooped into crackling white bags. Here are long narrow aisles floored in narrow strips of worn-down wood, and a fragrantly blended smell of cinnamon, glass, dust, and paper notebooks.

“Can I help you boys?” the proprietor says. Martin Franklin knows by name every one of the seven hundred thirty-three souls who live in this town, but it would take us twenty years to earn the same quality of his other greetings, and although our airplane from out of the past waits only a quarter mile down Maple Street, it can’t make a pilot and a parachute jumper part of an Illinois town. Pilots and parachute jumpers never are, never have been, never will be part of any town.

We buy a postcard each, and a stamp, and cross the hot empty street to Al and Linda’s Cafe.

We eat our hamburgers, delivered from the kitchen precisely wrapped in thin white paper, drink our milkshakes, pay our bill, and leave, not sure of the reality, but sure we had seen Al and Linda’s before, maybe in some dream.

With the end of the afternoon, the worlds change. We walk back to the dead end of Maple Street, and to our kind of reality. Here the unchanging people come to go back into time in our biplane, and from the past, look down upon the rooftops of their houses.

An unchanging summer. Clear sky in the morning, puffy clouds and distant thunderstorms in the evening. Sunsets that turn the land to misty gold, and later, fade to carbon black beneath the high glittering fireworks of the stars.

One day, we changed. We came out from the towns that never change, and tried to barnstorm and sell our rides to a city of ten thousand. The grass strip was an airport, the walls of its office covered with charts and flying rules. It wasn’t the same.

It doesn’t work. A biplane flying over a city is just another airplane. In a city of ten thousand, time is perking right along and we are unnoticed anachronisms. The people at the airport look at us strangely, thinking over and again that there must be something illegal about selling rides in such an old airplane.

Stu, wearing goggles and a hard hat, snaps into his parachute and lumbers into the front seat, looking as though he planned an assault on Everest instead of a quick descent to a small city in Missouri. The jump is our last hope of bringing passengers out, and our future relations with cities depend upon its success. We circle up through four thousand feet, level at forty-five hundred as the five-o’clock whistles blow around the city, signaling the end of the workday. But for us, there are no whistles. Only the constant roar of the engine and the wind while we turn onto the jump run. Stu is looking overboard absently, and I wonder what he is thinking.

He moves, and as he does an uncomfortable time begins. We usually run seventy to one hundred passenger rides between jumps, and I can’t even get used to the idea of my front-seat passenger unfastening his safety belt, opening the door, and stepping out on the wing, and into the wind blast, a mile above the ground. That sort of thing just isn’t done, and yet here we are with nothing but a tremendous gulf of air between wing and ground, and my friend is carefully latching the door behind him and turning to grasp a wing strut and the cockpit rim as he watches the target approach.

The biplane doesn’t like these moments. It buffets and shakes heavily, its boxy streamlining broken by the awkward figure on the wing. I push hard on the right rudder pedal to hold us straight on course, and looking over my left shoulder, watch the stabilizer shudder. Mixed feelings. That’s an awfully long fall, but I wish he’d hurry up and jump, to save the airplane. The airport and the city are at least beneath us. If we flew only ten percent of the people in this town, at three dollars for each person …

Stu jumps. The shuddering leaves the airplane. He is gone instantly, his arms spread wide in a position he calls a “cross,” flicked off the wing into that big step down. As he falls, he spins, but no parachute opens.

I bank the biplane sharply and drop the nose down to follow, although he’s told me he falls at one hundred twenty miles an hour and I don’t have a chance of catching him now. A long time and he’s still going, a black-cross silhouette roaring straight down against a background of hard green earth.

We’ve kidded about it before. “Stu-babe, if your chute doesn’t open, I’ll just keep right on flying along to the next town.”

He is really smoking down. Even from directly above him, I can see that his rate of descent is fantastic. Still no chute. Something has gone wrong.

“Pull, Stu.” My words are swept overboard as quickly as my friend has been. The words can do no good, will never be heard, but I can’t help saying them. “Come on, kid, pull.”

He’s not going to do it. No main chute opens, no reserve. His body holds the same position, a little black cross spinning to the right, plummeting straight down. It is too late. I shudder with cold in the warm summer air.

In the last possible second, I see the familiar blue-and-white deployment sleeve break from the main chute pack. But too slowly, agonizingly slow. The sleeve trails out, the bright orange canopy helplessly flailing in the air, and then, quite suddenly, the chute is open and drifting serene and soft as a dandelion puff over a summer lawn.

I realize abruptly that the biplane is diving at great speed, engine roaring, wires screaming, controls stiff in the force of the wind. I ease it back into a spiral dive over the open parachute, and in half a minute have come level with it. He had room to spare … he’s still a thousand feet above the ground!

I circle the gay canopy and the goggled jumper dangling thirty feet beneath it. He waves, and I rock my wings in reply. Glad you made it, kid, but still, didn’t you pull a little late? I should talk to him about the pull.

I hold my circle in the air while he floats on down. He flexes his knees as he always does in the final fifty feet—a last bit of calisthenics before impact. Then it seems he drops the last twenty feet very quickly, as if someone has let the air out of his canopy, and he crashes to earth, rolling as he hits. The canopy waits above him for a long moment, then settles slowly down like a huge brilliant sheet in the air.

Stu is up again at once, pulling risers and waving OK, and the jump is over.

I fly one last wing-rocking pass over him, then turn to land and fly the passengers that unfailingly flock to us after a jump.

Today there are no passengers waiting. There are a dozen automobiles lining the edge of the airport, but not one person steps forward.

Stu hastily field-packs his chute and turns to approach the cars. “Still time to fly today. Air’s nice and smooth. Ready to see the town from the air?”

No.

I never fly.

Are you kidding?

We didn’t bring any money.

Maybe tomorrow.

By the time he returns to the biplane I’m stretched out in the shade under the wing.

“This must not be a very air-minded town,” he says.

“Win a few lose a few. You want to pull out tonight or tomorrow?”

“You’re flying the airplane.”

It feels funny. The city is a different place, but that’s not what is strange about it. All the towns have been different.

It is a different time. Here in the city it is 1967. The year has sharp edges and angles that cut into us, that make us alien and out of our element. Traffic hums on the highway at the airport’s edge. Modern airplanes come and go, all built of metal, with wide radio-filled instrument panels and powered by new and smooth-running engines.

A gypsy-pilot barnstormer can’t exist in 1967, but at the same time he can. There’s a big difference, some places.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Where to?”

“South. Anywhere. Let’s just get out of here.”

Half an hour later we’re up in the wind, up in the engine roar and the propeller blast. Stu is encompassed with gear, the tip of our FLY $3 FLY sign and the blue-and-white of his parachute sleeve, still field-packed, show above his cockpit rim. The sun shines in over the right side of the stabilizer, so we are heading off southeast somewhere. It doesn’t make any difference where we are headed; the only thing that matters is that we’re doing it now.

And all at once, there it is. Another small town of trees and church spires, a wide field to the west, a little lake. A town that we have never seen before, but one that we know in every last detail. We circle three times over the corner of Maple and Main, to see a few folks looking up and a few boys running to their bicycles. A turn west, and a moment later, propeller fanning silently around as I pull the throttle back, our old wheels whisper in the old green grass and the old ground rumbles hard beneath us.



Stu is out with the sign at once, striding to the road and the first of the curious townspeople, “SEE YOUR TOWN FROM THE AIR!”

I can hear him as I unload our sleeping bags and engine cover from the cockpits, and his voice comes clear on the clear summer air.

“COME UP WITH US WHERE ONLY BIRDS AND ANGELS FLY! GUARANTEED TO BE LIKE NOTHING YOU’VE DONE BEFORE!”

We are back where we belong. Never having been here, we are home again.