

Tom Gregorski



**Tom, Donna, & Laura
Gregorski**

MEMBER PROFILE:

Did you ever wish you lived in a coast town with beautiful beaches, clean white sand, pier fishing and breathtaking sunsets? Well, I was fortunate enough to be raised in such a town. Unfortunately, it was in Michigan where summer was a week long, the water temperature never got above 60 degrees and in the winter the beaches had ice bergs. I still don't like the water.

Like a lot of boys, I built some model airplanes and flew them with the line control and went around and around (I'm still dizzy some would say). I even designed some and built them out of pieces of balsa wood. However, coming from a very modest home, I never dreamed of actually flying an airplane or becoming a pilot. In fact, I never knew anybody that owned or flew an airplane. Nobody in my family did either.

Well, sometimes you never know what awaits you. After school I took a job with a communications company installing telecommunications equipment. It was a traveling job and I got to travel across the country

and even spent a few years overseas. Everybody should have to spend some time in foreign countries; it will give you a new appreciation for the good ole USA.

I was in-charge of a large project in Texarkana, Texas and met a good fellow and friend named Ben Fleming. He had a farm with a small 2000 x 30 foot landing strip and owned a Cherokee 140. He took me up for my first small airplane ride. It was a blast. He then put me in the left seat and started to give me some lessons. One day after landing he gets out of the plane and says "take it up yourself." I said "you say what?" Reluctantly, I took it up and actually made it back okay.

One of our favorite places to go was Mena, Arkansas. It was a pretty flight in the mountains and there was an airplane junkyard there. The owner and his two sons would buy wrecks, ferry them back, rebuild some and use others for parts. It was always interesting to see the planes they ferried back and the ones they were working on. They would bring some back with parts wired on, landing gear supported by 2 x 4's and different color parts that they took with them to get them airborne. You name it and they did it.

Well, they had this nice 1965 Cherokee 140 there. This was the early 70's, so it wasn't very old and it only cost \$5,000. I decided to buy it and get my license in it. It had a red spinner so we called it Rudolph.

I remember the day we went to pick it up. It was a beautiful morning, calm and clear. On the way back we were flying along side one another. When we came over the last mountain ridge, we hit some nasty turbulence. When we got back to the strip, the windssock was standing straight out with a direct and gusty 90 degree crosswind. Unfortunately, I had never done a crosswind landing yet. Ben got in just fine. When I tried the plane just kept going off to the side and I couldn't keep it lined up with the runway. After a few attempts, I went over to the big airport, told them I was a student pilot and they cleared the area and let me land. I called Ben and he came over and we both flew it back and he gave me some crosswind landing lessons.

Well I had an airplane now, so I had to find a real instructor and start working on my license. Ben knew one, so he came out and started flying with me. Unfortunately, my job came to an end before my training was completed. I transferred to a new project in Guymon, Oklahoma the feed-lot capitol of the world where their pig-pickins were with Buffalo. It was 400 or more miles from Texarkana, so I took the plane on my first cross country. I made it okay, but didn't know I needed a sign-off

to make the trip and the new instructor I found in Guymon started to wonder about me.

I flew with my new instructor and he signed me off for my check ride. When the day came for me to take my check ride, there was 10 inches of new snow on the ground. The runway at Guymon was plowed, but when I got to the place to take my check ride, the runway was not plowed. I radioed in to see if it was safe and he says "it's fine, just do a soft field landing." Well I got in okay and stopped in a very short distance. I picked him up and we took off in the tracks I left when I landed. He obviously thought I did okay, because he gave me my license.

I did a lot of flying out of Guymon and visited some great places; Amarillo New Mexico, Denver, Kansas, and some trips back to Texarkana. Remember when Jim Bede was selling the BD? I went to see it at his place in Wichita, Kansas. While I was there, I went to a little town east of Wichita where you landed on a grass strip, taxied downtown on the road and parked at the hotel on Main Street. I had a great lunch and a lot of fun. I remember reading recently that it is still the number one spot for a fly-out.

Some of my trips back to Texarkana were eventful. My VOR radio was not the best, so I did most of my navigation via pilotage. Some times the haze was so thick I couldn't see well enough to find my way and in the Oklahoma panhandle there is not much to see and the towns are far apart. It was about dusk and I couldn't see very well, so I landed at a town along the way, caught a ride to town and had dinner. The place I was at had a rotating beacon and Guymon had a rotating beacon. I thought I would wait until after dark and take off for Guymon. The idea was to pick up the Guymon beacon before I lost the one behind me. It worked. I started to pick up Guymon, but somebody forgot to turn the airport lights on. I landed at a nearby town and called the airport manager to get the lights turned on. It was late and he was hot happy. He did get them on and I made it back in.

Guymon has an elevation of 3000', a 4000' run way and a fence off the end of the north runway. The wind usually blew at 40 mph, but it was a steady wind not like the turbulent wind we get here. Landing or taking off into this wind you could literally stop or depart on the numbers. However, during the hot summer, calm months, a few times I didn't think I was going to clear that fence off the end of the runway. Not a good feeling.

After Guymon I went to Stuttgart, Arkansas the rice and mosquito capital of the world. That was the demise of Rudolph. A tornado came

through, picked up the hangar and dropped it on him. It was a complete loss. After that I purchased a Beechcraft Musketeer and continued my flying hobby. There were a lot of crop dusters in Stuttgart because it was the only way to treat the flooded rice fields. One of the crop duster pilots where I based my airplane took me for a ride, in my airplane, to show me how it was done. We dove over power lines, skimmed mother earth and back up over power lines on the other end. It was fun, but not something I'd want to do all day. I can see why they closed the bars up every night.

Since the Musketeer, I have owned and flown a Piper Tomahawk, Piper Cherokee 180 and now the Grumman tiger and recently the Stearman. Before moving to Kenly, we lived in Raleigh and I was based at Lake Ridge. Joe Hunt was rebuilding a Stearman and I was having fun watching. One day he comes up and says "I found you a good Stearman project." He made it sound real good and he was the expert, so I agreed to buy it. When we went to pick it up it was in an old barn near Hillsborough. When the doors were opened I couldn't believe it. Rusted parts were scattered all over. It didn't look like much of a project to me and I thought "what did I get myself into."

But after 5 years of cleaning parts, making parts, hunting for parts, and trading for parts it finally came together. I did a lot of it at Lake Ridge and also took some home to work on. I assembled the fuselage at home, fitted the wings after I built them at the airport, did all the covering and painting at home. Sometimes the paint fumes were unbearable, but we made our way through it. I then moved it all back to the airport for final assembly. I pulled the fuselage to the airport like a trailer with a hitch fastened where the tail-wheel attached. That got a lot of attention along the way. Not sure if you need a license for such a thing, but luckily I was not stopped. As a reward, the airplane flies great and is a lot of fun. Thank goodness!

During the later part of this five year period, we found the property in Kenly and it kept me busy also. I built a runway, barn, mile of fencing, a house and a hangar. I need a rest.

All in all, aviation has brought a tremendous amount of joy to my life. Some of the best good-fellow, fun-loving people are in the aviation community. I will always cherish and remember the good friends I have made along the way, including the good people of EAA 1047. Thanks for letting me be part of the group.

Clear skies and tailwinds,

Tom Gregorski