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DOWNTOWN MADISON, with the Wisconsin State Capitol at left, and the University of Wisconsin campus at lower right.

movement. My friends and I were no activists, but demonstrations sometimes intercepted us on our way to class. Once, protesters deflated city-bus tires to block State Street; another time police shot tear gas into our dorm, forcing everyone into the street. (My buddy Fred, an Army veteran, showed us how to soak handkerchiefs for tear-gas protection.) Every day I walked by the empty shell of Sterling Hall, blown up by antiwar activists a year earlier (See “Flying Carpet: Flying the Mists of Time,” March 2013 *Flight Training*).

There were more benign protests, too, as when feminists stormed the men-only swimming pool in the UW Armory. Guys swam nude there, so the intruders stripped off their clothes and jumped in too. (No, I wasn’t there.)

I’ve always appreciated piloting both for its inherent rewards, and as a vehicle for pursuing additional interests. In 1938, legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright proposed a Madison Civic Center design, but despite lobbying until his death, it wasn’t built. However, in the mid-1990s,

AVIATOR’S BIRTHPLACE VISITING MEMORIES IN ‘MAD CITY’

Even after takeoff from Centerville, Iowa, I waffled about whether to land at Madison, Wisconsin’s Dane County Regional-Truax Field Airport where I learned to fly, or nearby Middleton Municipal-Morey Field Airport outside the Class C.

“Middleton will be quieter and simpler,” said Jean, settling the matter. We crossed Iowa’s Cedar River and the broad Mississippi, then the northwest corner of Illinois. Ninety minutes after takeoff, Madison’s signature four lakes appeared on the horizon. This would be stop two on our zigzag birthday-and-reunion journey from Flagstaff, Arizona, to Chicago.

“Madison Approach, can you approve aerial photography over downtown?” I radioed, with a lump in my throat. For 35 years I’d waited to revisit “Mad City,” my aviation birthplace.

“Approved,” came the reply. “Watch for a Cherokee also on the ‘city tour,’ and remain west of the Capitol building.”

Downtown Madison, including the state capitol and University of Wisconsin campus, floats magically on a half-mile-wide isthmus between Lakes Monona and Mendota. Handing Jean the camera with far more instructions than she needed, I circled offshore over Lake Mendota—is there a prettier city, anywhere?

Upon landing, I learned from the

Middleton airport attendant that Frickelton Aviation’s building at Truax Field where I trained had long been torn down, erasing any regret at not touching tires there. Moments later, our host Brett Kelly arrived. Brett and his wife, Kathy, are longtime friends.

“I know you’re eager to revisit UW, Greg,” Brett said. “Let’s stop there before

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going home.” Ghosts of classmates past soon joined us wandering campus and sipping beer on the Wisconsin Union terrace overlooking Lake Mendota, where I once rented sailboats. Between classes, I drove my 1939 Chevy across town to Truax Field—there to soar over these very lakes on flying lessons with the UW Flying Club (see “Flying Carpet: Forty Years Aloft,” November 2012 *Flight Training*).

My Badger stint occurred at the height of the turbulent Vietnam antiwar

Wright’s plans were updated by a former associate and completed as the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center. As an architecture grad, I’d long wanted to visit. My companions humored me with a Monona Terrace tour, followed by a visit to the imposing Wisconsin State Capitol.

You probably know that Wisconsin is “America’s Dairyland.” Brett and Kathy took us to Middleton’s award-winning Carr Valley Cheese shop, timing our visit

to intercept cheese curds fresh from the dairy.

“Curds are the cheese ingredients before it’s processed into blocks,” Brett explained. “They squeak like gum when you chew them!” The clerk introduced us to more than 100 cheeses Carr Valley crafts from goat’s, sheep’s, and cow’s milk. Unfortunately, a week’s remaining travel prevented us from taking any home.

One mission yet remained: visiting Jean’s beloved Uncle Walt. Walt greeted us in his driveway when we drove up, his booming voice, wisecracks, and optimistic outlook undiminished since we last saw him 20 years ago.

“I had a stroke last week that messed up my speech,” he said, slurring slightly, “but I feel great otherwise, so what’s there to worry about?” The hour-long visit proved a highlight of our trip. Before leaving, Jean handed Walt a bag from the cheese shop.

“Are these the good curds that squeak when you chew them?” Walt asked with delight.

“Yep! Fresh from the dairy,” said Kathy. “They’ve yet to be refrigerated.”

Brett, a retired U.S. Army officer, told harrowing tales over dinner that night of traveling Iraq by airplane and helicopter, directing military pharmacy operations. Ever since the four of us once flew from Phoenix to Sedona, Brett has considered becoming a pilot. He asked about our fuel cost flying from Arizona. I explained that flying alone generally costs more than an airline ticket, but with two or more people aboard we save money.

After takeoff the next morning, I couldn’t resist one more “city tour,” re-photographing my old college haunts, plus Wright’s Monona Terrace. Flying had allowed us to make this memorable Mad City side trip, and to visit special people and places impractical to see by airline or driving. Now we bid goodbye to this chapter of the past, and steered southeasterly toward Galt Airport near Jean’s hometown. 🍷

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