



January 2007

Commentary

Flying Carpet

Snipe hunt

This goose chase was for real

"Super Snipe?" Old Doc had to be kidding. Sure, some birds carry the name *snipe*, but like most former Boy Scouts I remembered only the pain of being duped into a ritual "snipe hunt" on my first troop campout. (Future Scouts avert your eyes to preserve your coming initiation.)

When Jean and I were newlyweds, her grandparents lived in tiny Juneau, Wisconsin. We flew there from Indiana by Cessna 172 to visit them as often as our budget would allow. Our usual mission was to hang out with family, but once a year we'd bundle into Grandpa's car after landing for a multigenerational road trip to "the Oshkosh fly-in."

I soon joined another annual excursion thanks to Gramps and Granny's next-door neighbors, "Doc" and Marge. Doc was a large-animal veterinarian who over the years had liberated numerous collectible cars from dusty corners of his patients' barns. Among them were a sporty 1939 Ford business coupe, a pair of tailfinned 1955 Plymouths, and a bulbous '51 Pontiac Eight. Although hardly rare, all were low-mileage cars and notably rust-free given Wisconsin's brutal winters.

Doc also mentioned something about a Humber Super Snipe, but I figured he was pulling my leg. After all, "snipe hunt" is a slang equivalent to "wild goose chase," and Doc was a master of straight-faced ribbing. Doc's own favorite ride was a good-enough-to-eat 1941 Lincoln Zephyr convertible — he'd share keys to his other autos, but reserved the Zephyr for himself.

I'd long been interested in old cars, ever since conducting unprintable adventures in those owned by friends and me during high school. (Keep in mind that my mother sometimes reads this column.) Anyway, it turned out that every year Doc took all his roadworthy cars on a 100-mile pilgrimage from Juneau to the annual Chicken Roast and Old Car Show in the yet-smaller town of Iola. To my delight Doc invited me to drive one of his cars in the upcoming procession. Accordingly Jean and I loaded friends into a flying-club Cessna and soared over Indiana cornfields, Chicago suburbs, and Wisconsin meadows to Juneau's Dodge County Airport.

That first year Doc assigned me his mint-metallic Pontiac Eight for the drive. Although plain in appearance, the old auto was vast and chromy. At first I was disappointed in my assignment, but while cruising Wisconsin's pastoral countryside with my friends I learned to appreciate the car's swooshy ride, slushy two-speed automatic transmission, and nifty steering-column prism for viewing stoplights blocked by the car's external sun visor. And who could resist transparent Chief Pontiac out front on the hood, where he illuminated with our headlights?

Northward we rumbled behind Doc's sparkling black Zephyr, past green fields, red barns, and mottled stone silos. The drive was oh-so-lazy until nearing Iola, where we were beckoned by the aroma of slow-roasting chicken. Sure enough, grills and rotisseries over endless charcoal pits lined the Old Car Show. Apparently the culinary custom began when show promoters invited attendees to "bring an old car and get a free half-chicken lunch." The result was a delicious nexus of antique cars, hot rods, and savory eating. We gorged our senses with autos and chicken, then meandered back to Juneau for a cold beer nightcap and Granny's hot apple pie.

I couldn't imagine the following year's Iola run being any better, but it was. Upon landing at Juneau that long-ago weekend I learned that Doc's 1963 Humber Super Snipe was real — and I was to drive it to Iola. My first encounter with the car was less than awe-inspiring. True, the British marque featured a plush burgundy leather interior trimmed with burl wood and fold-out passenger picnic tables. But this opulence was packaged in a bland approximation of a 1960 Rambler four-door — not the sort of dashing vehicle I pictured myself in. I soon discovered that the car handled nicely, however, and its three-on-the-column manual transmission was mated to a powerful straight-6 engine. The Super Snipe proved to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, and I soon roared past slower traffic on scenic Wisconsin byways. As the saying goes, the Humber wasn't pretty, but she had a great personality. By the time we reached Iola I'd become a fan.

Our schedule was tight for the following year's event, so Jean and I decided to meet Doc's caravan at the show. On the Green Bay Sectional chart I found a nearby airfield called Central County Airport. To our good fortune a fly-in there coincides with the car show and includes shuttle service between the two events. So for the first time, Jean and I took flight directly for Iola.

There's magic to grass strips like Central County Airport that's not to be found elsewhere. You phone ahead to learn where any runway soft spots are, and ask if there's a windsock. If not, ripples on a nearby pond can reveal wind direction, and homespun



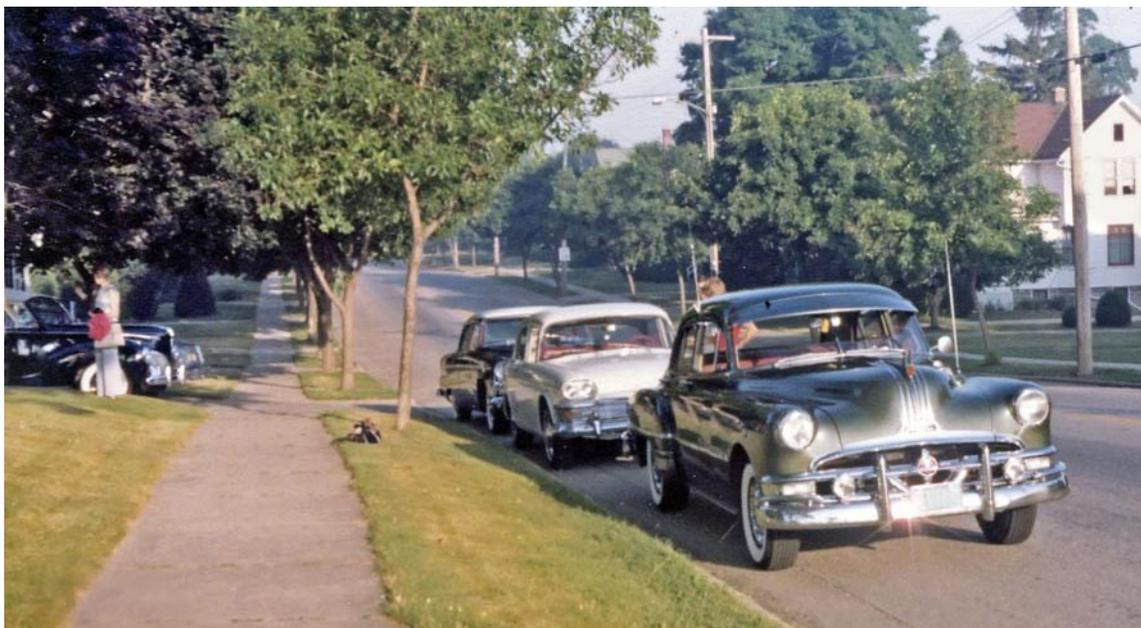
wisdom says cattle graze with their tails to the wind. Fly low over the runway to identify obstructions, wet spots, and wildlife. Then enjoy the softest touchdown you've ever made. Best of all, time stands still at grass strips; they're all about warm handshakes, old airplanes, and picnic lunches. Sharing our landing pattern when we arrived was an antique Stinson Tri-Motor airliner carrying sightseers. Airplanes parked next to ours had tents pitched beneath their wings.

As good as the Iola Old Car Show was that year, I've since realized that jaunting there in Doc's Super Snipe was the best of the best. Having been so initiated I've kept an eye out for Humbers over the years, but without success. Few people have heard of a Super Snipe, and to this day I've never seen another. Doc's gone now, but he got the last laugh, setting me off on a lifelong Snipe hunt.

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include Flying Carpet, The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, Job Hunting for Pilots, and You Can Fly! Visit his Web site, www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com. See the Iola Old Car Show Web site (www.iolaoldcarshow.com). Find more about Central County Airport at the Central County Flyers Association Web site (<http://netnet.net/~wjknjan/>).

By Greg Brown

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Doc's cars line up for the Iola run: the Pontiac Eight, the Super Snipe, a '55 Plymouth, and around the corner, the Lincoln Zephyr.



Doc's 1963 Humber Super Snipe. (Photo by Paul Luebke.)