



GALT FIELD PILOTS gather for a celebratory gift photo, presented to new owners Claude and Diane Sunday.

RENAISSANCE FIELD

THE AIRPORT THAT SAVED ITSELF



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The *Chicago Tribune* headline trumpeted, “Galt Airport scheduled for auction block.” Jean and I had patronized this cozy country airport throughout dating, marriage, and kids. Sure, my grade school, “stinkin’ Lincoln,” is long gone. And my childhood home yielded to a parking lot. But dying airports are rarely replaced with new ones. One more sky haven, one more community of aviators, lost...Dejected, I phoned Galt.

“I can’t imagine it won’t continue as an airport,” said manager Justin Cleland, subscribing me to the *Galt Traffic* newsletter for updates. I’ve heard such optimism before, however, rarely with happy endings. After all, this airport was \$16 million in the hole. In my funk, I jotted memories for an “In Memoriam” column.

I was just a college kid when I met this cute girl from Woodstock, Illinois. Unlike other girls I had dated, Jean thought flying was cool rather than scary, and viewed my piloting as a positive credential. (“Want to fly on Saturday?” I asked one girl before Jean came along. “Sorry,” she replied, “I always do my laundry on Saturdays.” I proposed other days, but apparently she maintained a pristine wardrobe.)

In January 1975, just two months after our first date, I flew Jean from Campaign to visit her parents at Woodstock. My sectional chart indicated that Galt’s main runway was paved and, at 2,800 feet, plenty long enough for a Piper Cherokee. I didn’t know until arriving that in those days the main runway was hardly wider

than a two-lane road; a hangar impinged on one side, and tall trees obstructed the end. It was to be the first of many aerial journeys from central Illinois, Indiana, and ultimately Arizona to tiny Galt Airport.

Soon after, my father volunteered to retrieve Jean from Galt in his twin-engine Cessna 310. “Jean will have to get home another way,” he curtly informed me afterward. Dad was no wallflower, but the short, narrow, obstructed runway was mighty tight for such a hot airplane.

After we married, Jean determined that I’d readily endure in-law visits if we flew there. In summer 1981, I delivered her



GALT FIELD, Illinois, as it appears today.

with our 8-day-old firstborn son to Galt Airport to meet his grandparents. Piloting our growing family there became a treasured tradition. But with Jean’s dad gone and her mother relocated, I last landed there in 2003.

Countless flights to Galt’s pencil-thin runway over the intervening 28 years honed my crosswind-landing skills and imparted valuable lessons.

Once we raced a thunderstorm to the field and rolled suddenly and unexpectedly on final to what seemed a 90-degree bank. Instead of diverting elsewhere, I foolishly continued, radioing unicom for help at the tiedowns securing the airplane. After researching the cause I never again challenged “first gust” from an approaching thunderstorm.

Upon earning cloud credentials, I “mastered” the far-from-precision instrument approach off Northbrook VOR. After tracking 21.6 eternal miles outbound, crossing two fuzzy intersections defined by another faraway VOR, and squelching confusion over various bodies of water, Jean and I would peer for the airstrip just beyond Wonder Lake. Radial spread so far from the VOR meant you could be up to a mile on either side of the airport. Add the vagaries of timed approaches, and it took ratcheting heads and keen eyes to find the tiny runway. I remember asking myself throughout each approach, *Have we passed the airport?* and then oozing

TOP: INGRID KAROLEWSKI BOTTOM: JUSTIN CLELAND

relief when we spotted it. The challenge was amplified in wintertime, when snow camouflaged the lake among surrounding farm fields.

But Galt was deteriorating. Arriving from Scottsdale in a retractable-gear Cessna, we were forced to park in tall grass. Over our two-day visit, birds nested in the engine cowl, gear wells, and tail cone. I engaged a mechanic to help disassemble and clean it all out.

In my memory, Galt Field remains a narrow country airstrip, with an encroaching hangar, tall-grass tiedowns, and a friendly red-flannel-shirted bunch working the office. Our many family adventures made me sad to see it go. But Galt's story wasn't over. Reading *Galt Traffic* each month, I learned that, although imperiled, the airport now was far more vibrant than when Jean and I frequented the place.


"We have some unbelievably exciting news to report..." Cleland wrote one year after the bankruptcy. "Galt's very own Claude and Diane Sunday purchased our airport at auction Thursday, June 20." I phoned around to divine what alchemy saved this airport when so many others fail. I learned about the recent hangars, runway extension and widening to 50 feet, taxiway improvements, concert pavilion, and stocked fishing pond and rental cabin.

"Galt is the coolest airport around!" gushed pilot Howie Stock. "Anyone who likes flying would be blessed to find such an airport. Everyone here from flight students to airline pilots loves aviation, and all do 'their thing': from radio-controlled airplanes, to aerobatics, and tons of antique aircraft. There are no cliques; whatever's happening, 'stop on by!'"


"Go out on any day, and you'll find open hangars and people grilling," said Mooney owner Eric Rehm. "When Justin took

over as general manager and chief flight instructor, and Brian Spiro as director of maintenance, they proved to be friendly, trustworthy, tireless workers who quickly became 'the face of Galt,' winning people over. To lure people to the airport they formed FOG (Friends of Galt) with the local EAA chapter, and began hosting monthly events. These included non-aviation activities such as Murder Mystery night and a Hawaiian luau to engage non-pilot spouses, meeting people, and having a good time. Four years later Justin and Brian are beloved by everyone, and pilots are relocating here from other airports."

Fifty years ago at age 16, Claude Sunday bought his first airplane for \$825—a Piper Cub. He still owns it. Says Sunday, "Purchasing the airport is a social thing for us. Diane and I really like the generosity and volunteerism of the people. And buying Galt preserves something. We hope to make it last as long as people fly." Sunday commutes by air to his Harley-Davidson dealership in Dekalb. His motorcycle career has taught him that "people are always looking for neat things to do. Along with expanding and improving our flight training and rental offerings, I'm always seeking new ideas."

If Galt Field was still the way Jean and I remember it, no one would have bought it. You might call it the Dark Ages versus the Renaissance. It's one thing to abandon decaying pavement, but quite another to abandon a growing community. Next time you fly northern Illinois, drop by, shake some friendly hands, and invest in a little fuel. Because this little airport is far from dead. 

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year.

 Visit his website (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).

TRAVEL LOG: GALT FIELD (10C)

Runways: 9/27, 2,802-by-36 feet, asphalt; 18/36, 2,141-by-125 feet, turf, grass, sod

Elevation: 875 feet

Location: One mile north of Greenwood/Wonder Lake

Extra: Galt's history is detailed in *One Zero Charlie: Adventures in Grass Roots Aviation*, by Laurence Gonzales