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CLOUDS break up near Santa Fe, New Mexico.



THREE TIME ZONES

JOURNEY TO THE PAST

Be prepared to turn around,” I cautioned Jean as we launched under dark clouds. Keeping options open would be key to safely completing this long journey east. We were flying from Arizona to Illinois for my mother’s ninetieth birthday and a high school reunion. Unable to justify flying ourselves nine to 10 hours each way for a long weekend, we’d originally planned to go by airline.

But then we learned my mother would be gone over the reunion weekend, stretching our stay to a week. That changed everything. By *Flying Carpet* we could use the free time to visit long-missed friends, relatives, and locations. Yes, it’s a long flight to Chicago. But from there, many Midwestern destinations are only an hour or two away. Newly excited, we compiled a wish list encompassing three time zones and six destinations in four states. It was an ambitious itinerary, given the vagaries of spring weather.

Indeed, the forecasts were alarming as departure day approached. The Great Plains suffered near-daily tornados; showers were predicted throughout our Midwest stay; and two storm systems threatened Arizona. Rain hammered our roof the night before departure.

We awoke to dark, racing clouds, but

for the moment Flagstaff boasted a flyable 1,400-foot ceiling. From nearby Winslow east, Arizona featured fair weather. Northern New Mexico reported marginal visual flying conditions, with possible mountain obscuration. That might require staying over in Gallup, but we’d cross that bridge when the time came. For now the objective was to beat the storm out of Flagstaff. Snow flurries began as we drove to the airport.

Happily, brighter skies beckoned from the east after takeoff, and howling southwesterly winds urged us on our way. After skimming wooded hills for 10 miles under the low-hanging overcast, we surfed blue skies at 9,500 feet. But an hour later, cumulus congregated at the New Mexico border. Gallup, Grants, and Albuquerque reported clouds at 3,000 to 6,000 feet; although technically flyable

visually (VFR), nearby mountaintops were likely obscured.

Rather than descend below the clouds, I requested an instrument (IFR) clearance at 11,000 feet. That was above the freezing level, but with no icing reported I preferred to joust with scattered-to-broken clouds high above the terrain than dodge mountains down below. If we didn’t like it, we’d turn around or shoot an easy approach to land. Bolstered by supplemental oxygen at this rarified altitude, we soon surfed billowy clouds spiced with glimpses of New Mexico’s majestic terrain.

We reentered blue skies near Santa Fe, and, four and a half hours after takeoff, we approached Dodge City Regional Airport over the area’s trademark stockyards. Following a few polite “I’m here, where are you?” exchanges, an inbound Bonanza pilot asked, “Where did you fly from?” When I told him Arizona, he said, “I came from Colorado. That’s closer, so you land first.” He encouraged an inbound crop duster to precede him, too. We shook the gentleman pilot’s hand while our airplane was being refueled.

Today’s goal was to visit college friends Larry and Karen Howard in Unionville, Missouri. However, low ceilings shrouded northern Missouri. We’d chosen Dodge City because it was halfway and featured low fuel prices, and because touring the legendary Old West cow town might be interesting if we got stuck. I asked Jean about waiting here for better weather tomorrow.

“No, let’s continue as far as we can,” she replied.

Our engine hummed reassuringly over a sea of ivory clouds starting near Salina, Kansas. Barring a hole, we’d never get into

Unionville's VFR-only airport. Nearby Centerville Municipal Airport, Iowa, reported automated weather of 500 feet overcast and 10 miles, with temperature and dew point ominously equal.

As we approached, Centerville's ceiling dropped to 400 feet overcast. The airport's precision LPV GPS approach would guide us down to 250 feet, but given lowering ceilings I prepared myself to divert if necessary. Ottumwa and Kirksville featured better weather, and northern Iowa was entirely clear. At issue was whether we could land close enough to visit Larry and Karen.

Once cleared to descend, Jean and I implemented a two-pilot precision approach strategy: I'd stay on the gauges until she reported the airport in sight, or else miss the approach. Down we sank into cold, damp clouds. It's nerve-rattling, descending blind to a couple hundred feet above the ground, especially into an unfamiliar airport.

"Five hundred feet to go," I called, then "300 to go."

"There's the airport ahead to the left!" Jean said. I'd neglected to inform her that a 17-knot crosswind was crabbing us to the right. Rarely do precision approaches lead to airports without approach lights; it proved surprisingly difficult to see the field even in decent daytime visibility. We touched down on the right wheel and taxied to the windswept ramp. The high-tech approach had delivered us to an entirely empty airport.

"Glad I brought winter coats!" Jean said as we secured the airplane against the frigid gale. We waited, shivering, next to the skeletal airport fence, its chain-link teeth missing but its gate strangely intact, until a solitary pickup truck approached across flat farmland.

"That must be Larry and Karen," Jean said. We'd achieved stop one on our journey to the past, and would soon be warmed by the rich company of old friends unseen for 30 years. 🕒

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