



September 2009

Commentary

Flying Carpet: You Flew Where?

Journey to a town that time forgot

You're flying where for your birthday?" asked my son, Hannis. "I gas up at Needles when I'm driving Interstate 40. It's like 'the town that time forgot' - the perfect setting for a *Twilight Zone* episode."

It wasn't the last time I'd be met with surprise when describing my special day. To freeway travelers, Needles is just a sizzling and dusty desert fuel stop. But mine was a worthy mission.

When the transcontinental railroad crossed the Southwest in the 1880s, it nurtured remote towns like Winslow, Arizona, and Needles, California. Soon afterward, entrepreneur Fred Harvey built a chain of high-style "Harvey House" hotels to serve the passengers. Route 66 brought more Harvey House visitors, as did early airliners landing to refuel. Then came the demise of passenger trains. When Interstate 40 and long-range aircraft bypassed the isolated communities, few Harvey hotels survived, one notable exception being Winslow's beautifully restored La Posada Hotel. After the long-vacant Seligman Harvey House was recently demolished, I wondered if many more remained.



Then I read in a newspaper footnote that La Posada owners Dan Lutzick and Alan Affeldt were reviving another Harvey House: the 1908 El Garces Hotel in Needles. Intrigued that a grand historic structure might survive in such an out-of-the-way place, I requested information. When Dan called back, he was pleased to learn that Jean and I are architecture buffs.

"I'll be glad to show you the hotel," he said, delighted at the prospect of flying there in an hour versus his customary four-hour drive. "And I've always wanted to photograph El Garces from the air!" Dan also wanted to scout an archaeological landmark called Mystic Maze. "Apparently it's best seen from aloft. Although widely known in the past, no one I've talked to knows exactly where it is." A few phone calls later, Needles Airport manager Glenn Sims offered me pilot's-eye directions to the prehistoric maze.

"Why would anyone want to get off the train in Needles?" I asked Dan when we launched from Flagstaff on my birthday morning.

"Back then the trains ran only in daytime, and they offered no meals. Passengers gladly disembarked to eat and sleep - imagine crossing the Mojave Desert in 110-degree heat, assailed by the noise, smoke, and cinders of a steam engine.

"Prior to Fred Harvey, the train crews frequently colluded with locals to scam the passengers. They'd discharge travelers in a town, collect their money, and serve food - then sound the train whistle, forcing everyone to leave without finishing. The proprietors then served the same food to subsequent trainloads of passengers, with illness often resulting.

"Harvey changed all that. He built this chain of luxury railroad hotels and staffed them with unmarried women from out East. These 'Harvey Girls' worked six days a week and lived in supervised dormitories. It's said that Fred Harvey brought civilization to the Southwest. Generically that refers to requiring coats and ties at dinner, but practically speaking Harvey imported these many educated women to the 'Wild West,' who upon marrying unschooled ranchers and cowboys demanded schools and culture.

"Harvey efficiencies were legendary. Approaching dining stops, the train conductors would ask, 'How many chicken dinners? How many steak dinners?' and so on. The engineers blew a coded dinner count with the train whistle so the food would be ready when the passengers arrived, and Harvey waiters configured the restaurants' table settings to match diners with their selected meals."

Dan filmed the scenery as we descended from forested 7,000-foot-elevation Flagstaff to barren 983-foot Needles. Crossing the Colorado River, we photographed the football-field-sized El Garces Hotel, followed by Mystic Maze and the Topock Gorge pinnacles for which the town is named. Glenn Sims and a solitary Cessna 150 greeted us in front of Needles Airport's original 1933 adobe terminal. Although few aircraft are based here, it's a convenient and affordable refueling stop for pilots traveling cross-country.

Needles Chamber of Commerce Director Susan Godnick delivered us to our imposing destination. Although battered and stripped to its shell for renovation, hints of El Garces Hotel's once-and-future grandeur remained: huge two-story ionic

colonnades, sculpted interior wall panels, and ornate decorative ceilings in what once had been elegant restaurants.

"At El Garces the biggest problem was escaping the heat," explained Dan. "Summertime guests fled their tiny rooms seeking relief on the covered porches that envelope the building." Among Dan's construction challenges are resolving irregular floors and columns. "Mojave Indians poured these concrete walls using buckets," he explained, noting dry lines in the concrete. "The place is structurally sound, but we've reinforced the foundation and framing to meet today's seismic codes."

Along with the neoclassical features, state of disrepair, and monumental size of the place, Jean and I were stunned by its proximity to the tracks. From a future guest-room balcony we gazed down upon passing locomotives.

"How could anyone sleep here?" I asked.

"Keep in mind that this was also the station," said Dan, "so it had to abut the tracks. But you're right; the trackside rooms were originally the least desirable in the place - only staff and lower-paying passengers stayed there. It's funny; nowadays trackside rooms are in high demand among train buffs. Still, with 109 trains a day we're shifting guest rooms to the interior of each suite to minimize noise."

Dan offered to buy lunch, but with skyrocketing temperatures it was time to depart for Flagstaff. (Today's high at Needles would be 104 degrees Fahrenheit, versus 83 degrees at Flagstaff.)

Back at old-time Needles Airport, a silver turbo Cirrus rocketed out ahead of us like an alien returning to the future. Hannis is right - this place is like *The Twilight Zone*. Then again, maybe that's what makes it a worthy birthday destination. We may return next year for El Garces Hotel's grand reopening.

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 www.elgarceshotel.com and www.laposada.org.

By Greg Brown

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