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THE AUTHOR'S SISTERS prepare to board the family Cessna 310 after visiting the C-Lazy-U Ranch in Granby, Colorado, during 1966.

UNCLE CARL'S ISLAND

A KID'S PERSPECTIVE ON FAMILY FLYING

My son, Austin, and I recently enjoyed some rare quality time together, reminiscing about our many family flying adventures when he was growing up. Although Austin went on to a professional piloting career and his brother Hannis did not, I suspect both will long relish those memories.

I too grew up in a flying family. During my formative years my parents owned a twin-engine Cessna 310. In it, my dad chauffeured us on flying vacations to the Rocky Mountains, the Caribbean islands, Canada, Mexico, and innumerable national parks. We visited rodeos, Mount Rushmore, the New York and Montreal world's fairs, countless scenic cities, and the Rockford Fly-in before it moved to Oshkosh. Most Saturdays, we flew somewhere for lunch.

We kids didn't view flying as novel—in fact one of us reportedly asked at the dinner table, “Do some families not have airplanes?” But it was indeed a big deal, as evidenced by the rich memories left behind.

Among our most-anticipated excursions was the annual journey from our Chicago home to “Uncle Carl's island,” in the West Arm of Ontario's Lake Nipissing. My folks would load us into the airplane, arm us with games and books in futile efforts to forestall pestering and fighting; and launch across lakes Michigan, Huron, and the Georgian Bay to Sudbury, Ontario.

Overflying all that water cast this journey as great overseas adventure, not to mention landing in Sudbury's barren moonscape carved by gargantuan nickel mines. From there, we'd pile into Uncle Carl and Aunt Edna's car for several hours, transfer to a boat at Trivet's Marina, and navigate labyrinthine lake passages to the island.

Although compact, the island featured a large main house, wood-fired sauna building, boathouse, and endless youthful diversions. Its great screened-in porch was perfectly oriented for savoring sunsets, and featured mysterious runes carved into its timbers. Prominent among them were the initials “JH,” supposedly etched by movie star Jean Harlow while partying in this house with Prohibition-era gangsters. (Uncle Carl always shared this detail with an enigmatic grin, causing us kids to question whether it was true or fiction. I now recognize his uneasy smile as that of a just-the-facts appeals judge uttering not provable legend.)

The island was too small for getting lost, so we were immediately freed upon arrival to play; explore; and angle for perch, walleye, and northern pike. Carl's aged Iroquois guide sometimes took us fishing in the boat; I can still see Isaac's deeply weathered face as he fileted our freshly caught fish in some remote cove and cooked them over a campfire for lunch. Other treasured memories include the sound of the well pump pulsing while I lay in bed, waiting to arise on frigid mornings until someone stoked the living-room fireplace, and the crackling sounds and aromas of the ancient kitchen wood stove preparing breakfast.

When space permitted, we invited along my pal Richard or my brother's buddy Paul (now an American Airlines captain, thanks to such flying adventures). Richard, of Swedish heritage, taught us to fish for crawfish from the boathouse pier using bits of liver tied to a string. After taunting my sisters and cousins Margot and Jodie with the writhing creatures, we'd cook them in a great

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bubbling dill- and salt-seasoned pot for our own private feast.

As preteens my brother and I graduated to commanding the outboard-powered boat (but not, of course, the speedboat). This was hardly less exciting than one day qualifying as pilots, as we could now captain our own fishing expeditions and navigate solo to Trivet's on important bait and candy-bar missions. When the time came to pile into the airplane for the two-and-a-half-hour flight back to suburban Chicago, we took comfort in knowing that next summer we'd be back. No one imagined that one day we'd unknowingly depart Uncle Carl's paradise for the last time.

I suppose my parents could have driven the 750 miles each way in 15 to 20 hours, but then I doubt we'd have repeatedly made this journey for a few days every summer. The airplane made it possible. I also wonder if my siblings and I fully recognized the resulting magic at the time, but we certainly do now. With my dad, Uncle Carl, Aunt Edna, Isaac, and the island all long gone from the family, we'll cherish those memories forever.

I share these reminiscences not because Uncle Carl's island was the best or most memorable aviation destination of my youth, but because it was one among many we enjoyed with my dad at the helm of the family 310. I could go on about being assigned our own horses at Colorado's C-Lazy-U ranch, or snorkeling in the Bahamas, or awaking to the strains of a bagpiper marching the flowered fields of Lake Louise, Alberta—perhaps the most beautiful place I've ever been. Best of all, there was always an airplane ride at either end.

Wondering what to do with that hard-earned pilot certificate? In these days of busy schedules and organized youth activities, piloting offers a rare avenue to shared family adventure. Fly those kids somewhere special while they're of an age to appreciate it, and deliver them and yourself never-to-be-forgotten memories—while the opportunity lasts. 🛩️

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year. Visit his website (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).
