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The 38th
Annual
Sentimental
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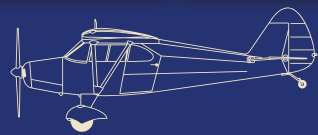
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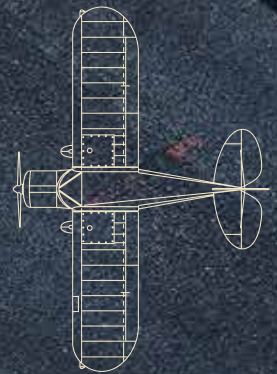
Cover: Piper PA-22/20 Pacer.
Photo Matthew McDaniel.



My First Year With a

Piper





MATTHEW MCDANIEL describes how "the honeymoon stage" of owning and flying a vintage taildragger has its ups and downs.

Piper

Piper Pacer

In the April and May 2024 issues of this magazine, Matthew McDaniel detailed his decision to purchase his first airplane after 30 years as a professional pilot (see “Setting The Pace: 2,000 Miles in a 1958 Pacer”). He explained how he came to that point in his life, as well as how he decided upon a tailwheel-converted Piper PA-22/20 Pacer. We followed along on his 2,000-mile journey ferrying it from southern California to his home in Wisconsin.

After a full year of ownership, what follows are his reflections upon those decisions and lessons learned so far.

The mission forecast

With a year of ownership experience under my belt, the most obvious thing to reflect upon was my original decision of what type of airplane to buy. All sorts of factors played into that decision, not the least of which was financial. However, there were additional ingredients.

I wanted an antique taildragger, and it needed to have four seats so I could share the experience. While I did not require (nor even want, really) a show plane, I also didn't want a beater whose physical appearance would scare away the family and friends I hoped to carry aloft.

With plans to visit the many public-use grass strips in Wisconsin, I desired reasonable STOL capabilities, but didn't require any true backcountry pedigree. Basic IFR capabilities were a must, as well. Anticipating occasional two- to three-hour cross-country flights, I wanted the ability to file IFR and fly an instrument approach for such flights, if soft IFR conditions might require.

My wife and kids were intrigued by the prospect of summer weekend outings to small Wisconsin towns and partaking in fly-in pancake breakfasts.

Did I pick the right airplane for my mission? So far, that's a resounding “YES!”

My IFR-capable Pacer is no beauty queen, but also no hangar queen. So far, every passenger invited has willingly climbed aboard. I've flown with my two nearly adult kids multiple times and introduced our foreign exchange student to the joys of General Aviation in the U.S. She loved it enough to work through her airsickness and ask to go again and again.

The Pacer and I have visited a dozen grass strips I'd previously deemed unsuitable for the other GA aircraft I still regularly fly. The Cirrus SR-22s I have access to are amazing cross-country

machines, and do great on grass, too. But with their small, tightly faired tires, the grass must be well-manicured and, of course, the strip itself long enough.

I have a few other options to fly, but neither of them is suitable for most grass strips. I manage a highly modified Globe Super Swift, and we limit it to smooth grass only to protect its 78-year-old retractable gear system and low-slung airframe.

The Grumman AA-5 Traveler I fly monthly isn't ideal for many of the shortest/bumpiest strips either, with its casting nosewheel, low wing, and airfoil optimized for cruise (versus takeoff) performance.

My small-tired (6.00-6s) Pacer with no VGs and a cruise prop (61-inch pitch), on the other hand, has been perfectly happy on hilly, bumpy, overgrown, and obstructed strips as short as 1,000 feet. Obviously, I pay attention to density altitude, weight and balance, and other factors, as required.

The Pacer has taken my wife and me to southern Indiana to visit friends/family and multiple trips across Wisconsin to watch our daughter's college musical performances. A few flights were on IFR flight plans, with one culminating in a





The author with his daughter, Norah (right) and her friend, Ingrid (left), after a Pacer ride over from Eau Claire, Wisconsin (KEAU). Both are students at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire.



Taildraggers and grass are a perfect match. McDaniel's Pacer at the tiny (all grass) Jana Airport (58C) outside of Edgerton, Wisconsin.



Stopped to collect an airport passport stamp at the historic Waunakee Airport (6P3) in the northwest suburbs of Madison, Wisconsin.



The author at Wisconsin's most southeastern public-use grass strip, Camp Lake Airport (49C).



Circling for altitude after departing Wisconsin's Washington Island Airport (2P2), the northernmost airport of the picturesque Door County.



A sunrise flight over Wisconsin's Door County. Kangaroo Lake under the wingtip with Lake Michigan stretching out to the horizon and beyond.

near-minimums approach through a low (but thin) overcast into my home base.

Mostly, however, I've operated VFR. I've even used the plane for several short business trips. However, my wife would tell you she's yet to visit any quaint little towns or eat a single pancake!

The promise

One reason I waited so long to buy a plane was because I've always felt that with aircraft ownership comes certain responsibilities I didn't think I could adhere to earlier in life. The finances to ensure proper maintenance was one. More significant, however, was the responsibility to stay proficient in type.

For me, that means having both the time and finances to log no less than 100 hours per year in type. As an active CFI for the past 32 years, I've seen that 100 hours seems to be a common division threshold among my clientele. Those who fly at least that many hours annually (in type) generally display acceptable proficiency levels during recurrency training with me. Those who fly less almost always

I promised myself that if I couldn't find the time and resources to fly my airplane at least 100 hours per year, then I had no legitimate reason to own one.

have deficiencies in one or more areas that require attention to return to minimum standards.

I didn't want to be in the latter category. So, I promised myself that if I couldn't find the time and resources to fly my airplane at least 100 hours per year, then I had no legitimate reason to own one.

Adhering to my promise started off on the right foot with nearly 20 hours of flying required for the local shakedown flights in California and the ferry flight to Wisconsin. Prime flying season was in full swing when I arrived home in early August. I quickly made friends with some hangar

neighbors at my airport and fellow Pacer owners in the general area.

Of equal importance, I established relationships with several mechanics and maintenance shops, as I had no intention of doing my own maintenance beyond very basic preventive items. I rejoined EAA Chapter 838 in Racine, Wisconsin, to stay engaged with the membership and their fly-out events. Community is one of the best ways to find reasons to fly.

I became dedicated to regular practice flights, which often consisted of nothing more than pattern work. I've found the Pacer very easy to fly (in general) but quite challenging to fly well. It's a very forgiving platform but is also a short-coupled, narrow-gear taildragger, with a short wing that requires careful attention to management of high sink rates and over-banking tendencies. Thus, forcing myself to go out in challenging winds became a regular thing.

MVFR weather days that made long cross-countries impractical (and which quieted airport traffic patterns) proved ideal practice conditions for me. I took

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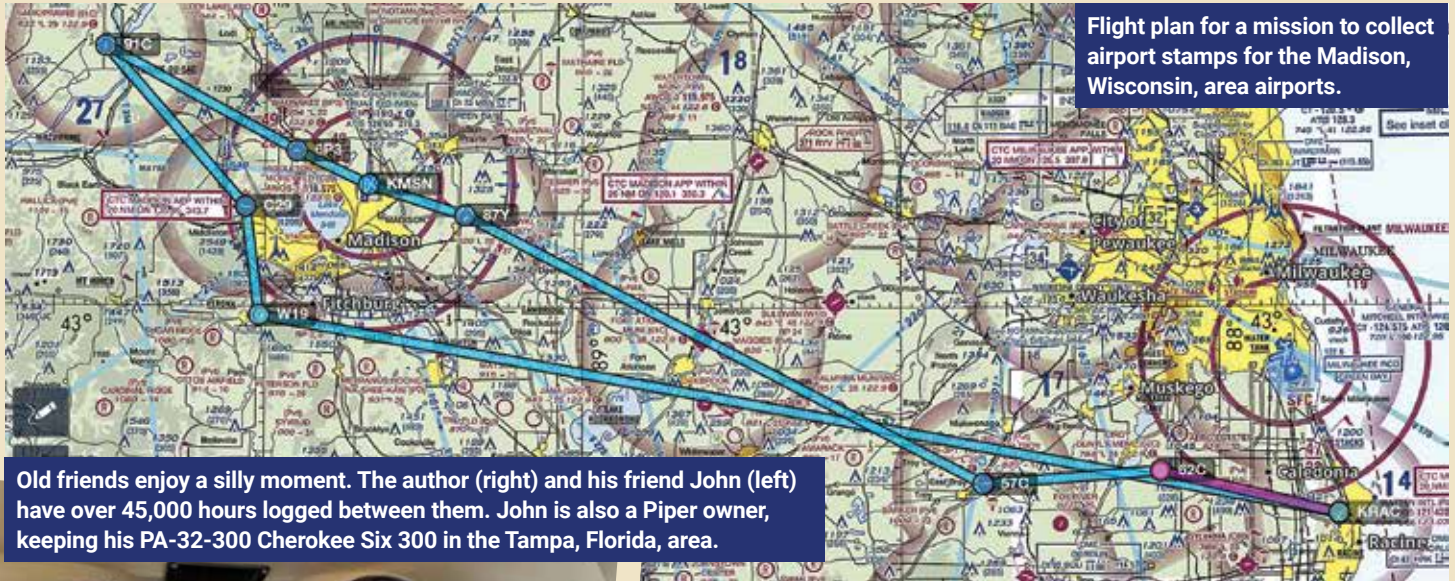


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Piper Pacer



Flight plan for a mission to collect airport stamps for the Madison, Wisconsin, area airports.

Old friends enjoy a silly moment. The author (right) and his friend John (left) have over 45,000 hours logged between them. John is also a Piper owner, keeping his PA-32-300 Cherokee Six 300 in the Tampa, Florida, area.



advantage of this whenever possible, sometimes for flights as short as 30 minutes when my time was limited but I needed to drive past the airport that day anyway.

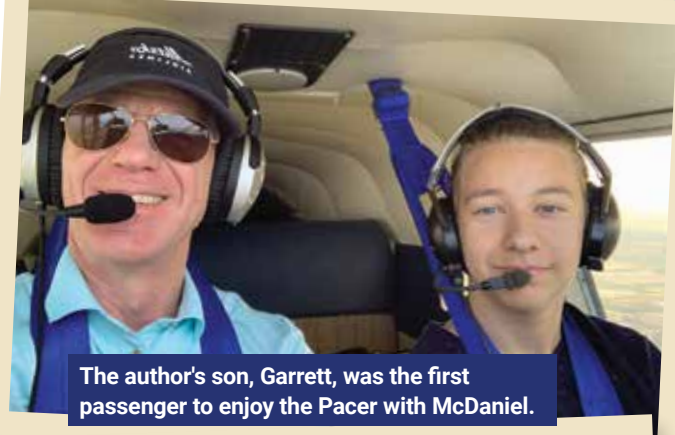
of life. Even after 22,000 logged hours, I still love to fly and challenge myself. Flying something as simple as the Pacer is therapeutic for me, both as a stress reliever and in keeping me connected with my aviation roots (which are deeply within GA aircraft and airports).

As I write this, I'm one week shy of a year from picking the airplane up in California. I fly airliners for a living, which keeps me on the road for about half of every month. In typical antique airplane fashion, I lost about 10 weeks to maintenance-induced downtime (scheduled and unscheduled).

However, make no mistake: 100-plus hours per year does not happen without a commitment to make it so. As such, occasionally flying because I know both my plane and I need to, versus just want to, is part of that equation.

Fly Wisconsin!

One hundred hours might seem like a lot to an owner who flies mainly for enjoyment. However, another contributing factor helped me accomplish that goal.



The author's son, Garrett, was the first passenger to enjoy the Pacer with McDaniel.

Yet, I've still managed to keep my 100-hours-per-year promise to myself by logging about 115 hours in it so far (an average of 4.5 hours per week for the weeks I was home, and the plane wasn't in maintenance, including weather-out days).



Is that pace of flying sustainable beyond the "honeymoon phase" of ownership? It's hard to know for sure, but I think it's possible as I approach the "empty nester" stage



The author's foreign exchange student, Alina, enjoyed multiple flights in the Pacer before returning home to Germany.

Flight plan for a mission to collect airport stamps for southeast Wisconsin's public-use grass strips.



Like many states, Wisconsin has an active Airport Passport Program, administered by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. Once registered, a paper "passport" book is issued. Inside the book are blocks representing every public-use airport in the state. Each airport is issued a unique rubber stamp (with the airport's identifier in the stamp

design) and an ink pad.

Pilots land, locate the stamp, and mark the appropriate block within their passport. Such programs encourage pilots to explore and patronize their state's airports and often provide a specific mission to fly. Of course, it also helps airports boost their operation counts, which can help them maintain funding. That can sometimes be

the difference between a smaller airport remaining operational or closing.

I'd held my Airport Passport for several years before buying my Pacer. However, I'd rarely bothered to add stamps to it, as my flying within the state had usually consisted of instructing, where my clients' training needs always took precedence over stopping to collect a stamp. But with

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the arrival of my Pacer, I dove into the Passport Program with vigor.

The different airports and their varied terrain, facilities, conditions, and challenges make for a great practice/training regimen in and of themselves. I highly encourage every pilot to look for such programs in their home or neighboring states. Registration is easy, and participation is both fun and engaging. While not every state yet has an Airport Passport program, many do.

To date, I've collected every airport (paved and turf) in the southeastern quarter of Wisconsin and about half of the 126 or so airports currently in the program, statewide. To be fair, I did have maybe 20 random stamps in my passport before the Pacer entered my life.

The first 50

One of my early goals after getting the Pacer home was to organize all of its paperwork (a future article will cover this topic in depth). Like many antiques, mine carries multiple updates and improvements. I wanted those mods to be well-documented for easy reference.

As a history buff, I also wanted to learn everything I could about my Pacer's life before I became its caretaker. The documents detailing all that (and much more) are now protected and tabbed within three-ring binders.

My airplane is subjected to two recurring Airworthiness Directives: the muffler and exhaust system require a 50-hour inspection, and the fuel selector requires a 100-hour/annual inspection. So, I decided early on to have my chosen shop do the 50-hour AD in conjunction with a routine oil change. After all, they could peer inside the muffler via borescopes without removing and disassembling it to inspect its interior.

At that time, I also decided to change over to an oil type that better suited year-round usage in my climate zone and begin an oil analysis routine.

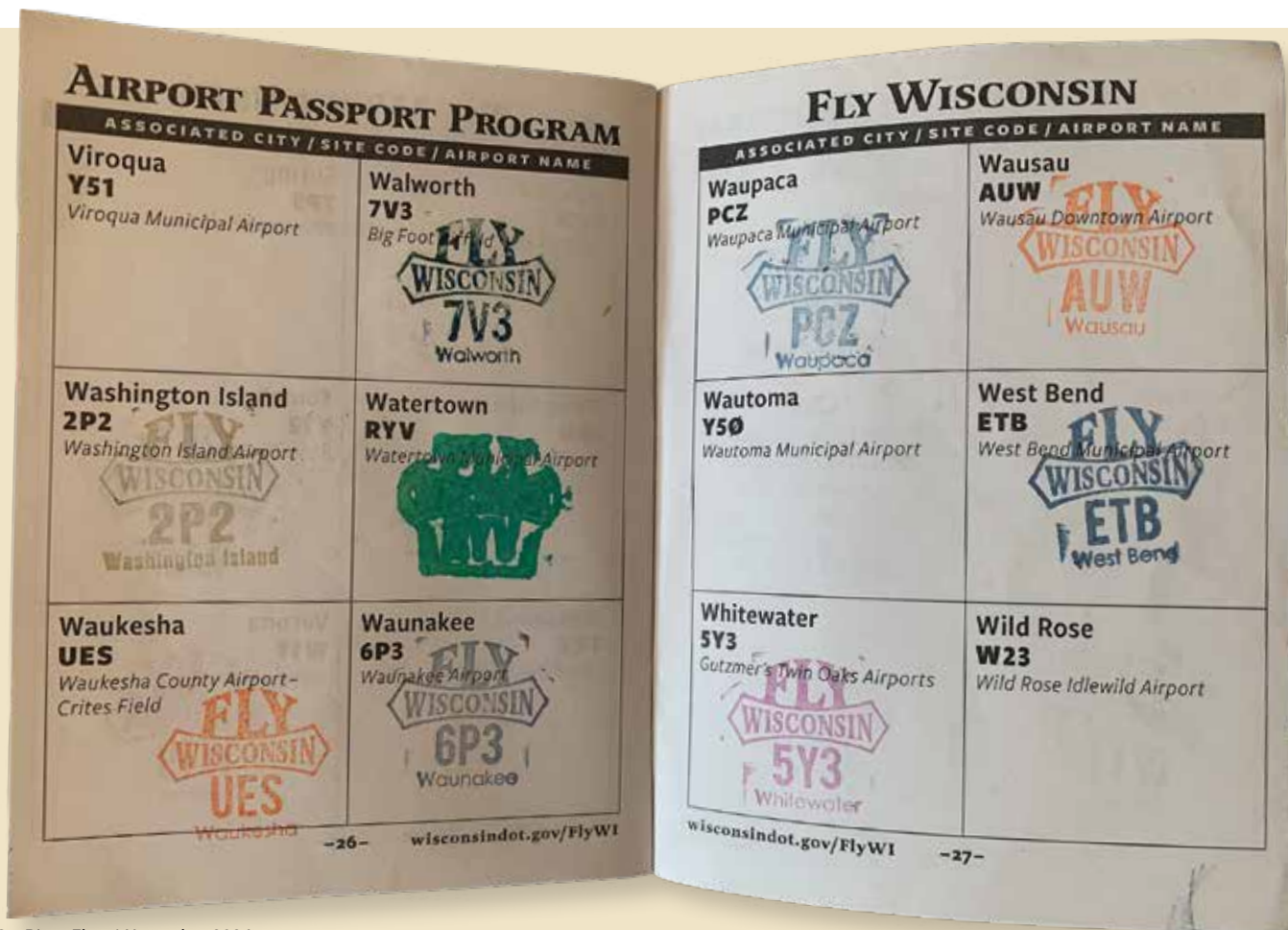
That first 50-hour inspection addressed several minor squawks I'd noted, none of which were airworthiness items. I elected to have the main tires rotated to equalize wear patterns, as I was doing copious landing practice and wanted to extract maximum life from them.

I had the ignition harness (which was cobbled together from four separate harnesses over the years) replaced with a new unit. Soon after, I also participated in a borescope inspection of all the cylinders to get a better feel for my engine's internal condition.

With the 50-hour inspection complete, I was ready for winter flying (despite the Pacer's limited heater capabilities). And winter flying I did, down to temps in the single digits (F)! This included a fair bit of time taxiing around airport snow piles.

The 100-hour/annual inspection

By early May, I'd put another 40 hours on the trusty Pacer (almost 90 total since I'd purchased it 10 months earlier). On a return business trip from Green Bay (KGRB), I noted I could not get the fuel flow as high as in the past. Long story short, a fuel feed issue made me decide to put the plane into annual about 10 flight hours (and a month) earlier than planned. I grounded the aircraft to solve that issue and to address some engine temperature inconsistencies I'd seen.



The annual went smoothly overall, with some surprises and some anticipated issues too. The 50-hour exhaust AD proved its validity, as a hole hidden behind a bracket was detected (that had not been there 40 hours earlier). The carburetor was discovered to be the wrong model for my engine type, and I replaced it with a freshly overhauled unit.

A small kink in a fuel line was identified. When the shop had a hard time getting the engine to idle properly, an induction leak from a manifold pressure line was found to be the culprit. Correction of those items solved both the fuel feed and engine temp issues I'd experienced.

Several other minor issues were corrected, and non-mandatory improvements were made at my request. Some were preventive in nature, and others were personal preferences. The plane is now quite active again and enjoying its second summer and fall exploring the Great Lakes region.

Thus far, I've not had any significant buyer's remorse and have immensely enjoyed the overall aircraft ownership experience. I've put on another 25 hours



post-annual, including trips associated with airport stamp collecting, pattern work, joyriding with friends, and joining my wife at a continuing-education conference in Door County in Wisconsin (a touristy area jutting out into Lake Michigan, complete with three public-use GA airports).

My closing remark is one spoken ad nauseam among aircraft owners regarding budget: "Whatever you think it is going to cost, double it!" I went in thinking I'd already done so. I made spreadsheets to track every penny spent throughout the acquisition process and for the care, maintenance, and operational expenses.

Now, with the first year of ownership swirling in my mighty Pacer's wake

turbulence, I can tell you precisely what I've spent to add this new element to my life.

That "doubled" amount I'd already accounted for? Yeah, I doubled that, too!

Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 34 years of flying, he has logged nearly 22,000 hours total and 6,000 hours of instruction given. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services LLC (progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001 yet retains a passion for teaching in and learning about antique taildraggers. Currently, he's also a Boeing 737-series Captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 140 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for 11 consecutive two-year terms. He owns a 1958 Piper Pacer which he enjoys flying with his wife, two children, and friends. Send questions and comments to editor@piperflyer.com.

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