



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

# The Pietenpol Air Camper

A little airplane that could

BY JEFF SKILES

**TO UNDERSTAND THE PIETENPOL** is to understand Bernard Pietenpol himself. He was a man of few pretenses, modest means, and singular focus. He was born in 1901 and grew up in Cherry Grove, Minnesota. Bernard had only a grammar school education but was exceedingly gifted in mechanical aptitude. As a young man, he dabbled with many machines — lawn mowers, motorcycles, tractors, and cars. And, like many of his contemporaries coming of age in the World War I era and the age of the Wright brothers, he had a burgeoning interest in machines that could fly.

But then, as today, airplanes were expensive and, at that time, very rarely seen over the farm fields of southern Minnesota. So, Bernard embarked on the path of designing an everyman's airplane, simple and affordable for all, that could be powered by readily available — and cheap — automobile engines. Over the course of the 1920s he, his father-in-law, W.J. Kreuger, and his two friends Don Finke and Orrin Hoopman experimented with various existing designs and some of their own. During this period, Bernard logged a few hours in a Lincoln Sport biplane that he built and later traded for a Curtiss Jenny to increase his flying experience and ability.

## BERNARD'S FIRST SUCCESS

Much trial and much error led to Bernard's first design, the Ace, powered by a conversion of the Ford Model T engine. The Ace was open cockpit in design and had a parasol wing popularized by another fledgling aircraft designer, Ed Heath. In a parasol design the fuselage hangs below the wing. Bernard was concerned about the complex skills — welding, for instance — required to build some of the airplanes of the day, so to make it simple to build, the Ace eschewed the common, for the day, steel tube fuselage. Instead it was made of wood, thus allowing construction by the average man with common tools. The Model T conversion engine produced only 30 hp, and while it could successfully take two people into the air and bring them back to earth, the Ace was nevertheless underpowered.

Fortunately for the future of Pietenpol aficionados, Henry Ford had by this time come out with the Ford Model A, and 40-hp Model A engines were beginning to show up in junkyards with increasing regularity. Bernard set immediately on converting a Model A engine for aviation use.



The successful marriage of a modified Ace airframe and Bernard's Ford Model A engine first flew in 1929 and was dubbed the Air Camper; this was the plane that became Bernard's masterpiece and has spawned so many progenies over the subsequent years.

#### THE AIR CAMPER

The Air Camper is a smallish aircraft by the standards of 21st century Americans. With a length of less than 18 feet, a wing-span of 28 feet, and a gross weight of only 1,080 pounds, it is a basic machine for two people with no extraneous frills.

A flight in an Air Camper is an exercise in minimalism. I am only 5-foot-11 and 170 pounds but still feel wedged into the front cockpit after a complex and critical sequence of careful hand and foot placements to shoehorn myself in. You wear a Pietenpol like a pair of trousers. But, you quickly forget all about the discomfort once in the air where the Piet acquaints you with flight like no other.

The Piet's lack of climb ability forestalls any attempt to separate yourself from the earth too dramatically. Excessive attention to calculating a proper VFR cruise altitude is probably not necessary; most Piets fly their entire lives at little more than 1,000 feet. Likewise, a Piet is not optimized for long-distance transportation. The laggardly cruise speed might seem like a negative at first, but Bernard Pietenpol had little need to travel far from Cherry Grove. Speed just wasn't a priority for him; maybe it shouldn't be for us either. Cruising at modest speed and altitude allows you to appreciate flight as no other can.

The Piet is about the experience, and you can be no closer to a bird than a dusky evening flight in a Piet. The wind in your hair — if you have hair — the kaleidoscopic farmland passing below, the refreshing chill breeze as evening falls after a hot August day all provide a level of aerial enticement unavailable in other ships. As they say, you can actually smell the freshly cut hay on the fields below.

#### THE SKY SCOUT

With design in hand, Pietenpol set to selling plans and kits to his burgeoning group of homebuilding followers. You could even buy a flyaway Piet at one time for only \$750! After a few years he expanded the product lineup by designing the single-place Sky Scout — a Piet that could be powered by the 30-hp Model T engine he originally tested on the Ace.

He experimented with further engines as well, and it's estimated that more than 30 different powerplants have found themselves bolted to the engine mount of a Piet. In the 1960s Bernard became interested in the air-cooled Chevy Corvair engine and modified the Air Camper design to incorporate the lightweight six-cylinder engine.

A Pietenpol can probably be built for around \$20,000 today. Aircraft Spruce even sells material kits for the Air Camper. Used Pietenpol Air Campers often trade for around \$12,000-\$14,000 when you find one for sale. In aeronautical terms, this certainly falls within the price range of the everyman for whom Bernard designed his Air Camper almost 90 years ago.



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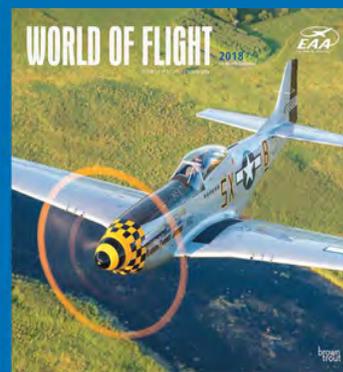
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### BRODHEAD PIETENPOL ASSOCIATION

Four decades ago a few teenage followers of these diminutive aircraft sent out letters to everyone they knew who owned, were building, or were simply interested in Pietenpols. Their goal was to gauge interest in what we today might call a type club. The Brodhead Pietenpol Association (find the link at [www.EAA.org/extras](http://www.EAA.org/extras)) was born. Every summer, much like the cliff swallows returning to Capistrano, the Piets converge on an idyllic grass field in southern Wisconsin to celebrate Bernard Pietenpol's creation.

Always scheduled the weekend leading into EAA AirVenture, the Pietenpol fly-in at Brodhead, Wisconsin, is on the way to Oshkosh from just about anywhere. The Piets array themselves along the line of trees by the EAA chapter hangars while the fly-in campers park their aircraft across the runway. Tents are distributed anywhere there is shade. It's a low-key affair with people ambling around discussing the finer points of the Pietenpol. A few construction forums mark the day. It seems as if just



### PERSONALIZED PIETENPOLS

about everyone is in some stage of building a Piet, if only preliminarily dreaming about it.

#### PERSONALIZE YOUR PIET

Unlike the clouds of kitbuilt aircraft assembling farther to the north at Oshkosh, there is plenty of latitude for a Piet owner to customize his or her creation. Water-cooled Model A engines, Corvairs, and low-powered Continental four-bangers seem to be the powerplant of choice, but occasionally others appear. The little airplanes are festooned with adornment only limited by the imaginations of their owners. Clown-like spiral "ah oo gah" horns, Curtiss Jenny cowling straps, even flying pig hood ornaments personalize each aircraft. Every Piet is unique.

EAA Chapter 431 provides food and support for the gathering on a predictable

schedule. Friday night brings a fish boil. Saturday is pork chop night. On Sunday morning, the celebration ends. Everyone packs up their tents on cue, and the Piets one by one lift off, many headed to Oshkosh and some for the long trip home, often several days away in the slow-moving Air Campers.

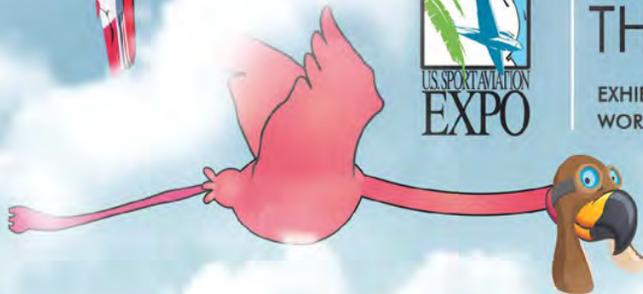
#### LEGACY

Bernard Pietenpol has been gone for decades now, but his dream of flight for everyman is alive and well. New plans are sold, Piets are built, and his Air Campers and Sky Scouts will continue to delight aviators for many years to come. *EAA*

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