



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Pancake Breakfast

An EAA chapter mainstay

BY JEFF SKILES

IT'S EXACTLY TWO MINUTES to 6 as I pull my car off Airport Road and down the gravel drive. The welcome crunching of stones under my tires only stops when I park on the grass by the white-painted fence. From the east the sun seems to irradiate the airfield with its warm light casting the green grass, trees, and hangars in a wondrous glow while an unbelievably splendid blue sky stretches from horizon to horizon.

Six may seem like the crack of dawn to some, but technically dawn cracked about a half hour ago on this Sunday in late May. I am hardly the first to arrive on the field, though. The hangar door is already open, and people are setting out tables and chairs in the grass. Two men are carrying out the white barriers to denote where cars should park, and various people are milling about intent on their errands. The main work of cleaning, mowing, and repairing was accomplished at yesterday's chapter work day. Today, our EAA

chapter's pancake breakfast is about to begin.

EAA Chapter 431 has been putting on pancake breakfasts for so long that its members just naturally fall into their roles. No one really needs to direct the process, although Sue calmly oversees the entire affair letting people know where things are located and making a list for the next run to the grocery store.

EVERYBODY HAS A PLACE

I've noticed that some people are very specific in their job selection at our pancake breakfasts, while others prefer to fill in the

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gaps. Year after year the same people man the pancake griddle while others in turn choose to make eggs, cook sausages, or mix pancake batter. I do whatever needs doing. Right now heating the sausages and firing up the array of 30-cup coffee makers seem to be the most pressing activities yet undone. Once the coffee urns have perked their last they will be poured into a couple of even larger 100-cup insulated dispensers. At this hour of the morning, more than a few cups are siphoned off by the chapter volunteers to help expedite their labors.

Syrup and butter must be distributed around to all the tables located in the hangar, on the grass, and atop the picnic tables in the pavilion next door. I industriously apply myself to the task, and only after completion do I realize that I forgot the salt and pepper shakers and must go around to all again.

The weather has blessed us today with a perfect blue sky and highs in the low 70s. With this beautiful day the pent-up aeronautical fervor here in the northern Midwest should lead to a good turnout, hopefully even better than our record-breaking 502 breakfasts served last year.

WHO STARTED ALL OF THIS

I wonder briefly who it was that began this tradition of EAA chapters? Where was the first chapter pancake breakfast? And how long exactly has this been going on? Pancakes and airplanes seem like an unlikely combination at first blush, yet they have been a staple of the chapter scene for many decades.

At 6:30 I can hear an aircraft engine overhead signaling the first arrival of the morning, but I am too busy arranging trash cans strategically around the property to pay much attention. The chapter volunteer count has swelled to about 15 now, and all are working hard to get ready for that first breakfast to be sold.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

By 7 a.m. many more airplanes have arrived, adding their color to the landscape as they park under the trees around the club hangars. Some years it seems as if more people drive in than fly in. Today, though, even before the first pancake begins to sizzle on the griddle, we already have a healthy complement of aircraft on the field. The line of

prospective diners has formed at the corner of the hangar, and at the appointed time we are open for business. Pancakes, eggs, sausages, and coffee over and over again.

“Sugar-free syrup? Yes, we have that somewhere.”

“Orange juice and milk are to the right of the decaf.”

The kitchen is a beehive of activity as the chapter members keep the serving line in the hangar supplied. Gene mixes the pancake batter in a 5-gallon bucket with an electric drill and a paint mixer. Gene always mixes the pancake batter because he’s the only one who can do it adequately. I don’t really understand the process but apparently lumps can be a significant impediment to production at the two big propane pancake griddles. Too many lumps can make the pancake batter dispensers clog, and then the pancake flippers howl with displeasure.

PLANES JUST KEEP COMING

The line outside has grown considerably by 8 and extends all the way to the gravel drive—certainly a couple hundred feet. Airplanes begin parking on the south side of the field, and we must enlist the assistance of a few people for parking control. But the planes just keep coming; antiques, homebuilts, and ultralights all flying to this rather bucolic setting of three grass runways for breakfast, conversation, and fellowship.

The line has not relented by 9 as we seem to have a full-blown fly-in on hand. People are roaming around chatting with proud owners of Pietenpols, Cassutts, and one-off homebuilts. I spot an odd-looking airplane while venturing out to empty trash barrels. A Dornier something or other. Big—obviously designed for STOL operations—geared engine. I wonder where you get parts. I have trouble enough with my Cessna.

An aircraft spotter reports 96 airplanes on the field so far, but two significant arrivals have reserved parking places in a place of honor right in front of the fire pit. Brodhead was formed right after World War II by former B-24 pilot Bill Earleywine. The field was then known as Bill’s Airpark, and, among many other things, Bill’s Airpark was both a Taylorcraft and an Ercoupe dealer. Today, in Brodhead’s 70th year, one example of each has returned to the field from which

they were originally sold all those years ago. Both are obviously very pampered examples that couldn’t possibly have looked this nice brand new.

RUNNING OUT OF FOOD

By 9:30 a significant problem presents itself: We are running out of food. The chapter had planned for 700 knowing the weather would be excellent, but we will exceed those numbers long before noon. Fortunately, this difficulty was expressed within earshot of a member of EAA Chapter 22 from nearby Cottonwood Airport. Its pancake breakfast the previous weekend was somewhat lightly attended, leaving the chapter with an excess of food. An aircraft is dispatched posthaste for sausages and eggs while the rest of us pray that supplies will hold out until its return.

People waiting in line are pleasant and jovial about the wait for breakfast realizing, I’m sure, that this is not something we do every day. They occupy themselves by looking at the many antique planes of the Kelch Aviation Museum, which has its exhibit aircraft out in the sunshine on display. It is such a festival atmosphere that people don’t seem to want to leave. They are just hanging around talking airplanes and telling stories.

Just as we are scraping the last of the eggs out of the Nesco roaster the sound of yet another engine overhead signals the arrival of our desperately needed supplies. More eggs and sausages to carry this pancake breakfast through to the end. At noon the food line is shut down, but the fellowship continues on.

RECORD-BREAKING EVENT

This pancake breakfast is yet another successful EAA event providing the general aviation community a reason to fly and join together with people of common interest and purpose. Chapter 431 is just one of the close to 1,000 EAA chapters that support aviation in their communities within the United States, Canada, and increasingly around the world. Oh, and the final tally for the day set a new record for the chapter—872 breakfasts served! **EAA**

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, has been a pilot for 40 years. He currently flies a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.