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# HIGH FLYIN' TIMES: ADVENTURES IN A PIPER CUB PA-12 SUPERCRUISER AND A PIPER TRI-PACER

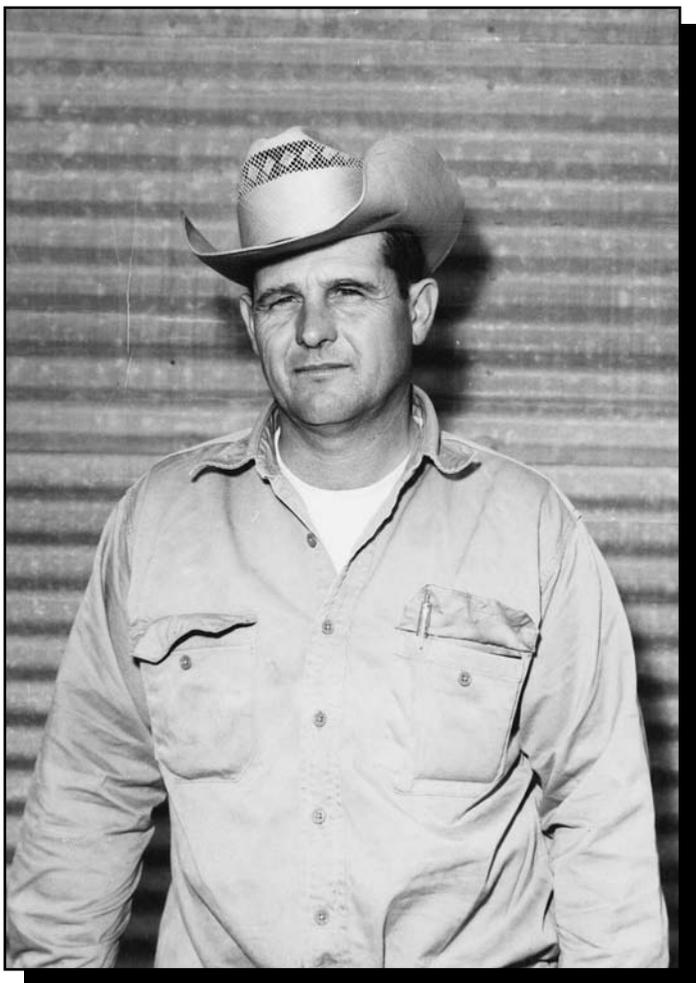
by Barbara Pybas



Our High Flyin' times were good years, the late 1950s and early '60s, a healthy, optimistic, happy era. Even with the Cuban Crisis and Kennedy's death, this ten-year folklore period seemed less complicated and stressful than the ensuing decades of the Vietnam War and national turmoil. Perhaps, to the young, obstacles are undaunting and overcome readily. This account is neither about barnstorming nor acrobatics, but for the pure enjoyment of flying and a good excuse to use it in a farming-ranching operation. DFW Airport was non-existent and the rigid FAA rules not in place; even a radio was not a requirement. VFR (visual flight rules) was sufficient for little planes.

Jay Pybas was bit by the flying bug in his mid-thirties. After returning from World War II Marine Corps service, completing a stint with GI Bill college time and marrying an Oklahoma A&M co-ed, he found his way back to Texas. For ten years he struggled to revive a Red River bottomland farm released by the U.S. Government. This Cooke County area had been used as the infantry and artillery training area for Camp Howze during the war. It had grown to a jungle with disuse but, nevertheless, was fertile and promising. By hard work, stamina and extreme fortitude, in ten years the valley became beautifully productive.

Jay probably needed an outlet, a diversion from the farming operation and being a confined family man (five baby girls in eight years!). Surviving the drought of the '50s, he needed a positive focus. Finally, when the rains came and cattle prices were up, there was time for optimism and enjoyment. He hung around the Gainesville Airport and talked to pilots who kept their light planes there, listening to their tales of adventure and flying times. He



**Jordan Ed (Jay) Pybas, 1967**

made friends with James Whaley, who had been a flight instructor in World War II. James was back, farming his family farm, working at the airport, and giving flight instructions as well.

Jay asked Whaley, “How much do you get for flight instructions?”

Removing his cigar, the instructor told him, “\$2.00 for lessons and \$8.00 for plane rental.”

What a deal! After a few sessions, Jay figured he could save the cost of plane rental if he owned his own plane. With James’ help,

he found a '48 PA-12, SuperCruiser for the princely sum of \$1,200. What a beautiful little tail-dragger with an extra wide wingspan. It had a 110-horsepower engine and was stick-controlled. The two-place came with another seat behind the pilot. Although there were dual controls, James said he probably would not need to use it. He sat quietly in the back, giving the best advice for flying time, constantly chewing on an unlighted cigar.

Jay was a quick study and even before the required eight hours of instruction, James let him practice slips, stalls, and even a spin or two. Sometimes he would cut the throttle, saying, "Forced landing! Find a place to put 'er down." Jay soon completed his solo and was on his own. He enjoyed the camaraderie with other private pilots who owned small planes at the airport. Soon, he built a shed on the river bottom farm and kept the little plane handy for takeoff and landing, only flying in to Gainesville Airport to refuel.

That fall, Jay bought several hundred steers and placed them on grain pasture near Yukon, Oklahoma. It was a breeze for him to fly up, land on the wheat pasture, and taxi around looking at the steers. He left early one morning and it was rather late evening when he returned.

"How was the flight?" I asked him. He reluctantly told me that he had an engine failure and was forced to a dead-stick landing! He told me:

I took off with a north wind. Climbing up to 300 or 400 feet the engine started vibrating so bad, I thought it would break the motor mounts. Then it started throwing oil all over the windshield. I took one look and spied a wheat field. It was only a few miles from the airport. I chopped the throttle, sideslipped with no flaps to ease it down and landed on an incline, an uphill landing. I never made a prettier landing, dead-stick and all. I probably didn't roll a hundred yards.

I walked over to the road that runs from Lindsay to Marysville and caught a ride to the airport. I

told James what happened. He frowned and chewed on his cigar. He said, "Well, let's go see about it." We got in his pickup and drove to the wheat field where the plane rested. There was not a scratch on it. He said it was a perfect landing. We took the fence down, lifted up the tail and turned the plane around. We put the tail in the pickup and pulled the plane out on the county road. The wingspans just fit over both lanes. Then we proceeded to pull it all the way to Highway 82. Again, we had to take a fence down along the south end of the airport, and crossed over to the runway.

Well, we opened her up and found out the engine had eat a valve, broke off the top of the jug, and was throwing oil. So I just parked it and started hunting another engine. I studied the Trade-A-Plane catalog and found one that had just been overhauled in Kansas. I drove up there in the family station wagon to get it, the mechanic at the Gainesville Airport installed it, and I was ready to fly again.



Landing in the pasture: Jay Pybas with two of his aunts, 1961

### SOLO FLIGHT SURPRISE

Jay's enthusiasm and high adrenalin were contagious. He soon sweet-talked me into taking flying lessons as a backup for when we were flying together. James Whaley agreed to take me as a student. We left the PiperCub at the airport until I was checked out as a student pilot. I had a great summer; a neighboring teenager came to stay with our four little girls while I spent the mornings at the airport and in the air. It was best to fly early before the temperature and updrafts rose, bouncing the little plane around and requiring more concentration.

James put me through the eight-hour requirement for solo. We practiced takeoff and landings, turn and banks, and a stall recovery. I learned every inch of the plane and engine. I read all the controls, especially the altimeter and RPM (revolutions per minute). However, this little plane did not have a radio, so the flights were all VFR (visual flight rules). I had to be knowledgeable about correct flight paths and elevation. I memorized the FAA rules.

James did not tell me in advance that he would solo a student. One beautiful October morning he said, "OK, you're ready." I did all the checks—flaps, prop, engine, fuel—the same as each routine lesson flight. He had no more instructions, and away I flew. What a gorgeous day—fluffy cumulus clouds and a blue sky. I headed out toward the Red River and over our bottom place. The red brown channel snaked its way around two river bends. Perfectly at ease and happy, I practiced the turn and bank and swept down over a neighbor's house. I made a wide perimeter and it took longer than I had anticipated. Heading back for the airport, I circled for the downwind leg and made my final approach. The touch-down was a little bumpy but soon caught and landed smoothly, and I taxied confidently toward the hangar.

As I approached the apron, there was James, chewing on his cigar, with my husband Jay, nervously pushing his hands deep in his pockets. Each seemed to have a somewhat serious, concerned expression. They had expected my solo to be much shorter, and I

had given them a few qualms and fearful minutes wondering if I had trouble. I climbed down the step and smiled and waved as they approached. "We were beginning to worry about you," Jay mumbled. But James was nodding, as if approving of my performance.

One bit of information I neglected to tell them before my momentous achievement, was the news that I was pregnant again, for the fifth time. Would they be surprised! However, considering their concern, I decided to save and savor that news for the next trip.

### LANDING ON THE LBJ AIRPORT

Jay was first and foremost a cattleman, but incorporated flying into his business ventures. The semen sales representative for Central Ohio Breeders Association (COBA) invited him on a scouting trip to various Hill Country ranches using artificial insemination. Jay had been checking on AI usage for a set of heifers he had recently purchased. Charlie Golightly suggested he meet the COBA plane at the Johnson City airport. Accompanying him were Dr. O.D. Butler, head of the animal science department, and Dr. Tony Sorenson, head of the animal reproduction and physiology research, both of Texas A&M University.

Jay flew down to meet them, flying the PA-12, still on his student license. Breezing along easily with plenty of time, he spotted the Johnson City airport and made a good landing. Suddenly, he was surrounded by Secret Service men, who demanded he hold up his hands as he climbed out of the plane. They interrogated him for his permission to be there. Jay's explanation that he was meeting a COBA plane at the Johnson City airport was ineffective.

"Well, stupid, that is at Fredericksburg," the officer barked at him. "This is the LBJ Airport; don't you read your NOTEMS (Notice to airmen, posted at each airport)?"

Jay tried to tell him that he was a cow pasture pilot and didn't take off from an airport. After frisking him and taking a perfunctory look inside the little plane the security officer chided him angrily, "This airport is closed to private planes. It is a federally

regulated facility. Don't you know Lyndon Johnson is the Vice-president of the United States?"

After a few unsettling minutes, thinking he would be taken into custody, Jay was granted permission to take off. Taxiing out and off as quickly as possible, in minutes he landed at Fredericksburg where the COBA Beach Bonanza was waiting. The friends enjoyed a good laugh about Jay dropping in on Lyndon Baines Johnson.

### SECOND PLANE: THE PIPER TRI-PACER

Jay was getting more gung-ho about the enjoyment of his flying time and used the business excuse to look for a larger plane. He found a Piper Tri-pacer, a four-place with a tricycle landing gear. It had 150 horses and a radio, OMNI, and a radio direction finder. He was flying to see about cattle in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and sometimes Kansas, finding more projects to justify his new means of travel. It also proved to be a wonderful way to include all his offspring, now *five* little girls.

He proposed a week off, a flying trip to Florida, for just the two of us. How romantic! His mother agreed to stay with the girls even though the baby was only a few months old. We studied the charts and marked our way, filed a flight plan and refueled at Gainesville. The day was bright and sunny and we took turns at the controls. Past Arkansas, the ceiling was really getting low. Landing at Monroe, Louisiana, we waited until the clouds lifted. Flying at a low altitude we followed the Mississippi, viewing the plantation houses and sugar cane fields. What fun! We skirted Lake Ponchartrain.

The New Orleans Airport and the Naval Air Station landing strips were close together. Jay radioed for landing and talked to the tower. He was approved for the downwind leg. "Now proceeding on final approach," Jay told the flight controller.

"I don't see you," he responded. "Uh, oh! Pull up, pull up, you are on the Naval Air Station!" He advised us to go around about three miles for New Orleans. "That's not the first time

somebody's tried that landing." He laughed and was very helpful, and we were very relieved.

We hired a taxi, went downtown and registered at the Monteleon Hotel for the first night of our trip. We walked and shopped in the French Quarter, ate oysters at an oyster bar, had Pousse-Café and Hurricane drinks at Pat O'Brien's, spent some time bar-hopping on Bourbon Street, and found ourselves on top of the Roosevelt Hotel for a live broadcast of radio station WWL at 4:00 A.M.

The next morning we decided to call home. Mammy said that the baby had cried all night, and the girls were more than she could handle. Disappointed, we took a taxi back to the airport, arriving home about dark after only a one-night trip. "The best laid plans of mice or men, gang aft a'glee"—Bobby Burns.

#### FLIGHT TO PLAINVIEW FOR PLOW DISKS

Cotton root rot was a problem in the Red River bottom, but with deep plowing it might be eradicated. Jay wanted to put in 300 acres of alfalfa and had hired a dozer track-tractor to pull it. For ultimate success and depth, he needed very heavy plow disks, which were at the plant in Plainview, Texas. Telephoning the manufacturer for the weight of the disks, he felt they could be transported with the Tri-pacer. The plant manager said they would deliver them to the airport by three o'clock.

Jack Jenkins, extension economics specialist from the District 4 office, happened by the ranch. Jay said, "Jack, you want to take a little trip to Plainview? It's about 350 miles. We'll be back by dark." Jack agreed to a pleasant afternoon diversion. The flight to Plainview was smooth and enjoyable. After that it was a downhill experience, one that Jack Jenkins would never forget. He probably asked himself a thousand times, "Why did I ever agree to come with Jay Pybas after hearing some of his bad luck stories?"

The disks were not at the airport by three. After many calls, the delivery came about 5:00. Extra care was necessary to load them into the luggage compartment, roping them securely to prevent any shift in the weight. It was getting dark very soon after takeoff.

Trying the cabin light, Jay found it was not working. He remembered it had needed a fuse. He told Jack to get the flashlight from the map case. "It's not here," Jack told him with a catch in his voice. He was getting a little shook up.

The lights of Wichita Falls were on the horizon. Jay assured him he could follow Highway 82 to Gainesville Airport even though he could not see the compass. But after following the highway for ten or fifteen minutes, without any familiar lights or landmarks, he told Jack, "I think we are going the wrong way." He asked Jack to light a match so that he could see the compass. "My God, we are going south, heading toward Ft. Worth." They were definitely lost.

Trying to make a turn, Jay said he was completely disoriented. Fortunately, the radio was in working order. He finally reached the Wichita Falls controller and told him he was lost but could see lights. The traffic tower told him, "Test your landing lights, keep blinking them and I'll find you." Jack was really getting nervous.

The Wichita Falls Municipal Airport for private planes was also the Sheppard Air Force Base training field. Immediately, they began getting the training planes farther away from the runway. They also cleared and alerted any air traffic. Jay was still circling, hoping to find some place to land. It was pitch dark. He kept blinking the landing lights. Finally, the controller came in, "I see you, now. We'll get you down." He gave the direction and the altitude and how to proceed. Jack, almost in a panic, shook as he held a match to read the altimeter as they began to let down. Suddenly, the big strobe lights of the airfield began shooting up and down the runway, leading them in. What a relief!

After they were settled in, they thought they should call their wives. It was probably difficult for Jack to tell his wife in Denton of his ordeal with a crazy pilot that might have been a sad finish for him. He would not be home that night. Jack must have spread the story around. For years, as Jay ran into other Extension agents and specialists, they'd say, "So, you're the one Jack had the wild, hairy airplane trip that almost got him killed."

**FITTING THE WHOLE FAMILY IN THE TRI-PACER—  
DESTINATION: MATAGORDA BEACH**

Jay's parents had purchased a beachfront house on the peninsula at Matagorda, Texas. Because of severe allergies, his father spent the summers away from any growing broadleaf plants, with only the ocean, sand dunes, and salt grass alleviating his serious skin condition. A small grass landing strip lay behind the line of beach-front cabins. This was ideal for our destination, as the children would tumble out as soon as we landed and race toward their grandparents' special house, high on piers overlooking the surf.

Wrapping up a ranching project or completing an alfalfa hay crop, Jay would say, "Get ready to go to the beach!" Stashing a small amount of luggage under the fuselage, we settled four little girls in the back seat of the Tri-pacer, putting two in each of the two seatbelts. I held the baby on my lap. Gathering the dizzying speed, rushing upwind, lifting up and off the pasture strip, they shivered, squealed and laughed. Soon, though, we were settled on the straight and level.

Jay picked up the mike to file a flight plan. Contacting the Ardmore, Oklahoma, airport he stated, "Departure, Gainesville, 800 hours: destination, Matagorda Peninsula, grass strip; Piper Tri-pacer 11P; pilot, J. E. Pybas, six passengers."

"Repeat," the controller would say. "How many passengers?" The Tri-pacer was only a four-place plane. He thought there was some mistake; there couldn't be six passengers. "Repeat passengers, again," he insisted.

Jay came in, "One adult, five children, nine months to nine years, all strapped in, not exceeding weight limit!"

One fine Sunday morning, Jay readied the plane for our departure for Matagorda as the rest of us attended an early church service. Quickly, upon our return, we shed our church clothes and rushed to climb aboard. I noticed a neighbor's vehicle coming up the driveway. As they came to a stop, I told my friend, Sue, that we were just leaving, sorry that I could not ask them in.

Sue smiled and said, "I thought you might have forgotten something." I couldn't think what it might be, when suddenly Lou Ann, our four-year-old, came wiggling out of the back seat! "She was asleep on the front pew when you left the church," she laughed. Our daughter, now an OU Pharmacy professor, says (humorously?) she was definitely marked by this experience.

### DAD'S LAST FLIGHT TO THE ROFF RANCH

After dry land farming for thirty years, fighting the elements, my Dad sold out and found a ranch he had always dreamed of in mid-Oklahoma, near the town of Roff. There was outstanding grazing for cattle, generous rainfall, an abundant bluestem hay meadow, good ponds, a lovely two-story home, a fruit orchard, barns and facilities for horses that he had wanted for a long time. It was an oasis. He purchased an outstanding stallion and kept mares for the breeding. Soon there were colts capering in the pasture. Jay and I enjoyed landing on his pastures, bringing the grandchildren for Sunday dinner.

But in 1956, we were all devastated by the diagnosis that Dad had leukemia. He said, "It's just like somebody hitting me in the head with a hammer." However, he continued with his projects and was stoic in staying active and alert. He began his visits to the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation at Oklahoma City, which focused on treatment for leukemia. "I'm going up for my rejuvenation," he would always say.

The research hospital had only fourteen beds. Sometimes he was required to stay for treatment. There was also a family room for those who could be up and dressed. Jay and I would fly up and land at the Downtown Airpark. Mother picked us up to visit awhile; perhaps we'd play a few games of Pitch, his favorite game.

Beginning with the New Year, 1962, Dad was a resident patient at the Research Foundation, quite ill, but still up and dressed for short periods. By March, spring was on the way. The grass was greening and the trees getting a good leaf. We flew up to

see him, arriving about 11:00 A.M. After visiting a few minutes, he surprised us by asking, "Do you suppose we could fly down over the ranch?"

Although it was a chilly morning, the sun was bright. Jay said, "Sure, let's go." We drove through downtown Oklahoma City to the airpark and were soon settled in the Tri-pacer. Mother and I were in the back seat. She was wearing a heavy coat. Dad mustered strength to climb into the front. Somewhat apprehensive but quite joyful, we were glad he seemed eager to make the short flight. The countryside was quite colorful from the air. After twenty minutes, Jay said, "Well, there it is." He pointed as we flew over their house.

"Fly down over the south pasture," Dad told him. "Maybe there are some spring calves down there." Jay swooped down, turned, and banked and slid in for the view. Then he pulled up to circle another pasture.

"There's Joe San in that paddock." Dad was happy to see the stallion. Down we dropped again, making a turn, then leveling out, quite low. Keeping steady, Jay pulled up and circled again.

"Let's see if the meadow is greening up." Dad wanted to see all he could. He was enjoying it thoroughly.

Suddenly Mother said, "Oh, I'm hot!" She pushed her coat off her shoulders. Her face was flushed. "Oh, I'm going to be sick." Quickly, I placed the half-gallon milk carton for her, one we kept in readiness. The entire turning and circling had made her airsick. We turned back toward Oklahoma City, Dad looking closely at the countryside and in quite good shape.

My father was at the Medical Research Foundation from that time on. His flight in March was the last time he saw his beloved ranch. He died May 2, 1962.

Now, in 2007, the decade of this flying account (the mid-1950s and the 1960s) becomes part of true folklore. It cannot be repeated again. It lies before fast-paced technology, exacting governmental regulations, strict national safeguards, and monitoring of each flight activity. The present generation seems to thrive on



**Barbara Pybas, 2006**

computerized accomplishment and excitement. (Folklore fifty years hence?) Perhaps future generations' focus and requirements will not quell the personal freedoms and exuberance we happily experienced during our "High Flyin' Times."



**The author riding in the Hottern Hell  
Hundred, Wichita Falls, Texas**