

The Red Baron Flyers

Flying on Beer for 40 Years

Alex Vaver, President

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Flying on beer is really not the case, though with the price of fuel it might be cheaper if you could. This is the story of a flying club that has stood the test of time in the small southeastern Minnesota community of Caledonia. Celebrating its 40th anniversary, the Red Baron Flyers, Inc. is one of the oldest established flying clubs in Minnesota.

So what does beer have to do with a flying club? Read on.

The notion of forming a flying club came primarily from three local pilots; Jim Lawson, Vernon Fruechte and Glenn St Mary, who were flying out of La Crosse, Wisconsin and Waukon, Iowa in the 60s.

Aviation in the area really gained momentum when the State of Minnesota determined that an airport was needed in SE Minnesota. During this time period the Red Baron Flyers organization was incorporated on March 26th 1968 with ten founding members.

These ten licensed and prospective pilots pooled \$350 each and bought 8944D, a Piper Tri-Pacer for sale in Virginia. In the creative spirit that was to characterize the club from then on, two members bought a junk \$35 Buick, drove it to Virginia and flew the plane home never having flown a high wing before. The Buick was given to some astounded kid at the airport.

The members were so anxious to get in the air that they flew from the unpaved runway for several months. There was a low spot in the middle of the field which was often soft and muddy. The technique of hopping over this area on take off and landing was soon perfected! This activity drew attention from

local aviation minded citizens and the club began to grow.

Two hangers and eventually a third were built from typically scrounged materials and the combined expertise of the members. Underground fuel storage and a clubhouse were soon added. A Piper Colt was added as a trainer about this same time.

At last the big day arrived on September 21st, 1969 for the dedication of the completed Houston County Airport (CHU) with dignitaries and a huge crowd in attendance.

I personally recall this day very well. I was a young band teacher in Caledonia at the time and I brought the band out to be part of the dedication. Shortly there after a RBF member and band parent, Glenn St Mary gave me a ride. I started flying lessons two days later and have been flying ever since. Such is the joy of a small local airport.

So what of all this business about beer?

In 1969, a particularly astute member of the club, one Dean Foltz, suggested bidding on the beer tent at the Houston County Fair as a way to support the flying club. With members and family donating long hours of labor this became a wildly successful venture.

In a move typical of the entrepreneurial spirit of the club a large egg incubator was obtained, set up in the center of the fairgrounds building, cooling equipment added and 16 taps were installed to connect to 50 plus barrels stored inside. This was pure genius.

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Business was good to say the least and this allowed the club to prosper. A 69 Cardinal replaced the Tri-Pacer and a Skyhawk was added. These were subsequently traded for a new 75 Cardinal II and new 1980 Skyhawk. A C-150 trainer replaced the Colt as well.

Once the club was stable we discontinued involvement with the county fair in the 80s. Now we merely drink the stuff while hanger flying after putting the aircraft in the barn.

The RBF has had approximately 120 members over the years and now typically carries around 18 pilots. There is rarely an issue scheduling an aircraft. Members use the aircraft for business and pleasure throughout the U.S. and Canada. A full membership is only \$1350 as of this writing. Members can reserve a plane for two weeks or longer and only tach time is charged.

Many pilots have received their PPL and advanced ratings through the club. Several have gone on to instructor, military, corporate and airline positions.

The importance of having internal instructor pilots in the club can not be overstated. Vern Fruechte, Duane Deters and Dale Scobie's skill and dedication are a principal reason for our success.

Factors contributing to the longevity of the Red Baron Flyers include: location and convenience of the airport, available instruction, cost effective operations, well equipped and maintained aircraft, club structure and organization and enthusiastic members who contribute time and effort.

There was a time not long ago that the county was not supporting the airport as it should have and it was in a state of decline. There was talk that perhaps there was a different use for the airport property and it was costing too much. All the stereo-typical innuendos were in place to threaten this valuable resource.

The Red Baron Flyers, among others, were instrumental in turning this around. Research was done and it was revealed that the airport was not a drain on the taxpayers. County economic development interests were added to the mix, state monies were utilized, a county airport commission was created and attitudes changed.

The airport now has heated restrooms, 24/7 100LL and jet A as well as an ALP in place to lengthen the runway to accommodate business aircraft. It's a textbook case as to what a group of committed pilots can accomplish.

The club has an excellent website we invite you to visit. www.redbaronflyers.org. This contains detailed information on the club, photos of current aircraft, flight rules and constitution.

The club is a member of the umbrella pilots group at CHU, the Houston County Flyers, who put on a fly-in breakfast the last Sunday in June. We invite you all to fly on in and join us.