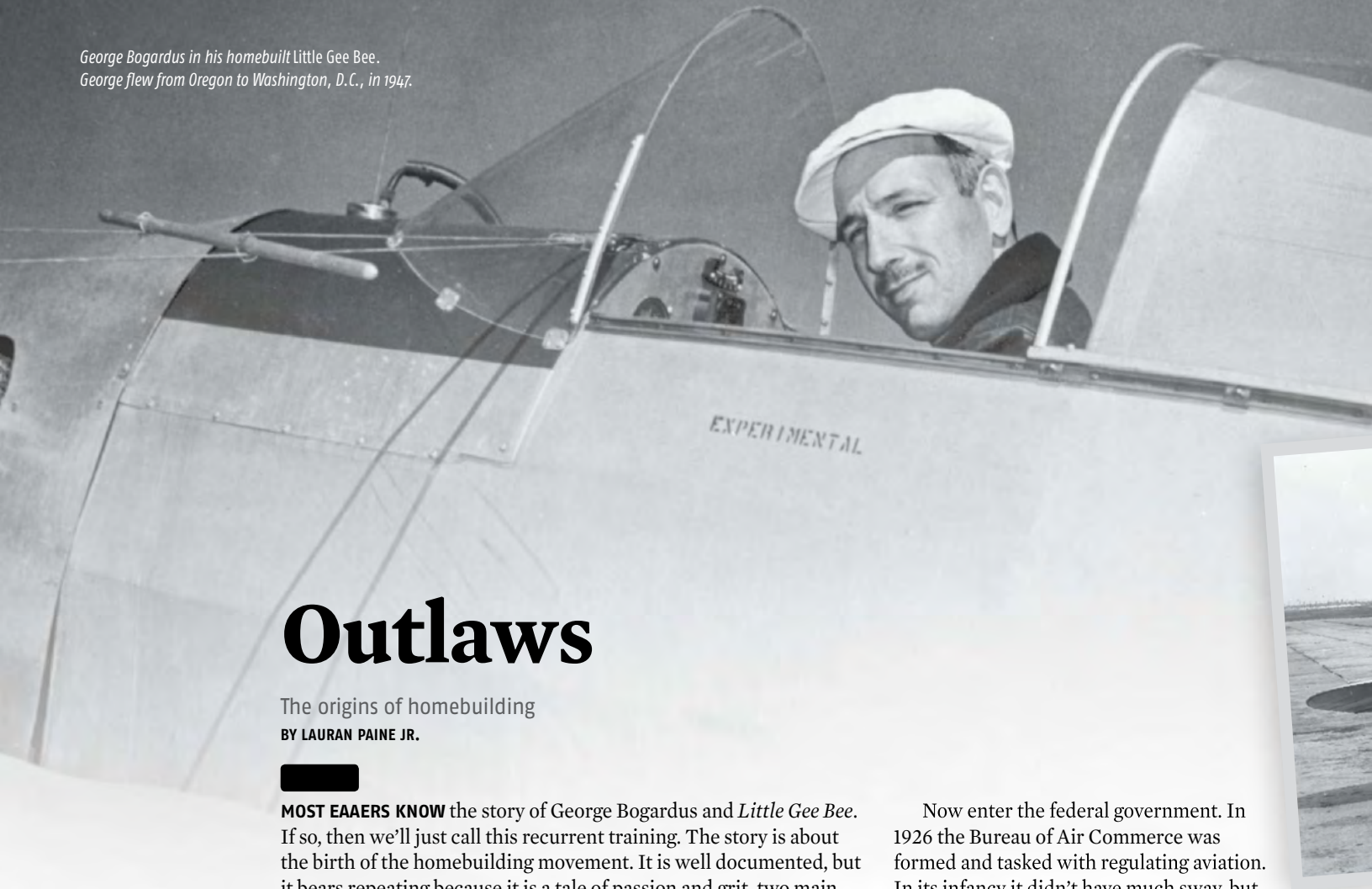




LAURAN PAINE JR.

COMMENTARY / PLANE TALK

George Bogardus in his homebuilt Little Gee Bee.
George flew from Oregon to Washington, D.C., in 1947.



Outlaws

The origins of homebuilding

BY LAURAN PAINE JR.

MOST EAAERS KNOW the story of George Bogardus and *Little Gee Bee*. If so, then we'll just call this recurrent training. The story is about the birth of the homebuilding movement. It is well documented, but it bears repeating because it is a tale of passion and grit, two main staples of EAA.

The short story is that George, in 1947, hopped in his homebuilt aircraft and flew from Oregon to Washington, D.C., and met with aviation officials and convinced them to certify amateur-built aircraft as legal to fly. That right there took some grit: fly a tiny airplane across the country to meet with the powers that be. *Little Gee Bee* versus Goliath. But, hey, you guessed it — there's a bit more to the story. There is a whole lot of passion, perseverance, and personality involved, too. And that's the part I like to get into.

Airplanes played a big part in World War I so, after the war, interest in airplanes was quite the rage. Tinkering and building and experimenting were a great pastime. Wood, fabric, glue, and an engine and away ya go! But, then entered officialdom. In 1921, Oregon created a State Board of Aeronautics tasked with issuing pilot and aircraft licenses. For \$10 you got an inspection and a license plate with a number that you fastened to the airplane. Presto, you're legal. One of the state officials was quite friendly toward aviation so Oregon homebuilding flourished. Several communities were involved, but the largest was located at Bernard Field near Beaverton, Oregon.

Now enter the federal government. In 1926 the Bureau of Air Commerce was formed and tasked with regulating aviation. In its infancy it didn't have much sway, but it led to the creation of the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) (later to be the FAA), and regulators began flexing some muscle. One of the things they pretty much left out of their regulations was amateur homebuilding. Their only mention was one-of-a-kind designs could be given a 30-day period for testing. While in testing, they would be designated "NX" for experimental.

But all the while this was going on, back in Oregon, there were active groups of people still building and flying their own airplanes, legal activity according to Oregon law. When the CAA started poking their regulatory noses around Oregon they were either ignored or, it is rumored in some cases, physically removed from the airport premises. This was the wild west of aviation! Oregon pilots said, "We're regulated by the state." The CAA said, "No, we do that, and we don't certify homebuilts."

So there you have it: regulatory purgatory. You can imagine the fur that sometimes flew. (There was, of course, a lawsuit, but it's boring and was eventually dismissed.)

The group in Beaverton kept flying and became known as the "Beaverton Outlaws." And they were proud of it. Ya gotta love it, by my way of thinking. If they had just folded their tents, the movement would have been set decades back. One of the ring-leaders was Les Long, pretty much recognized as "the father of homebuilding" in these parts. After experimenting with different wing configurations, he built a nifty little low-wing, 30-hp airplane he named *Wimpy*. Liking that design, a man named Tom Story built a very similar airplane. But then an international impasse occurred: the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, much of civil aviation was grounded, and America went to war, including many of the Beaverton Outlaws.

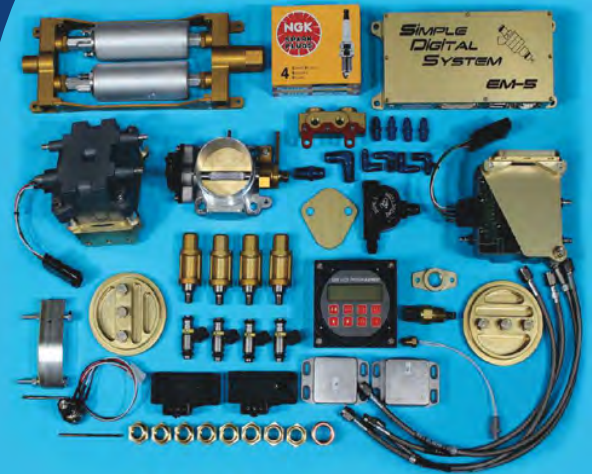


Little Gee Bee was a single-seat variant of Les Long's last design.

The war concluded, and Americans were eager to get back to work and to what they were doing before the war. Aviation was no exception to that attitude. After all, the advances in aviation during the war were incredible. Back home in Oregon, aircraft homebuilding was as passionate as ever, and the Beaverton Outlaws were eager to band together again and experience some of the freedoms they had been fighting for. However, the federal government presence seemed to loom even larger now. The Outlaws were as passionate as ever, but now they *had* to deal with the CAA and its counterpart, the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB).

Here is where I have to interject a personal note. In 2003, a gentleman wandered into my hangar and stuck out his hand and said, "Howdy. Name's Buswell. Myron. But everybody calls me Buzz. Most everybody knows me. Probably more than I want them to." He was right; everybody does know him, me included. We'd never been formally introduced (that's seldom necessary among airport bums), but I knew Buzz had flown 42 B-24 missions in the Pacific. *And* he was a Beaverton Outlaw before and after the war.

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LAURAN PAINE JR.

I was meeting and listening to history; it was a happenstance that I treasure to this day. He talked about the B-24. He was proud of his service — as he should be. And he added, “Learned a lot of what I needed to know about airplanes from the Outlaws. We learned stuff about flying because we wanted to and we had to. We were kinda villains, really. Oh, it was a fun time. Lotta passion and sharing. We were doing what was right, promoting aviation.” He knew Les Long. He knew Tom, George, and a bunch of the others. He actually owned and flew *Wimpy* in the late 1930s. So when I write about the Outlaws, Buzz’s vignettes about them are included. That’s what I mean by this story becoming personal to me.

After the war, George acquired Tom’s airplane. He put a 65-hp Continental engine on it, added a canopy, and named it *Little Gee Bee* (the Gee Bee for his initials). Les died in early 1945. In October of 1945, the CAA published Safety Regulation No. 194. It stated that aircraft used for air racing and exhibition would be eligible for experimental certification. The amateur homebuilder was still left out of the equation. George took up the homebuilding cause in earnest. He wrote letter after letter to state and federal officials. He put out a newsletter and formed the American Airmen’s Association. No doubt due to his letter writing persistence, a man named John Geisse, an assistant for personal flying development at the CAA, invited George to visit him in Washington. Early in 1946, and not having a legal airplane to fly outside of Oregon, George drove his 1937 Chevy to Washington. He *drove* on two-lane roads, with manual transmission, no air conditioning, maybe an AM radio, and no GPS at 50 mph for nearly 3,000 miles. Along the way he met with aviation people and garnered support for his mission. In Washington he met with officials and stated his case for airplane homebuilding. Respecting what he had to say, officials asked that he fine-tune his ideas and return the next year.

In March of 1947, the CAA published Safety Regulation No. 236, allowing CAA officials to issue airworthiness certificates to homebuilts. But it gave no real guidelines on how to do it, and it wasn’t permanent. Still, it was *movement*. Then, in May of 1947, George was issued his NX number with this caveat: He had to fly his airplane 50 hours before going cross-country. Those hours completed, George left Swan Island airport (Portland) in *Little Gee Bee* again for Washington, D.C. Cross-country in a homebuilt! He arrived in late August proving his point: Amateur homebuilts are safe to fly. Talks went well, but the wheels of government grind slowly. George made another trip in 1951. Finally, in late 1952, the CAA published *Civil Aeronautics Manual No. 1* allowing for the certification of amateur-built aircraft. It defined them as an “individual group,” built for educational and recreational purposes. Those principles stand today.

George’s American Airmen’s Association never gained much traction, but in 1953 a fella named Paul Poberezny founded the Experimental Aircraft Association. (Buzz had a two-digit membership number, if my memory serves me.) George was initially wary of EAA, but that thought must have been fleeting because when he died in 1997 he left the bulk of his estate to the local EAA chapter.



Dick VanGrunsven applying covering to the Little Gee Bee's metal frame during the 2007 restoration.



Restored Little Gee Bee.

After George's death, *Little Gee Bee* fell into neglect. In 2007, Dick VanGrunsven, EAA Lifetime 3204, and a loyal band of volunteers from Chapter 105, including Tom's son, Mike, restored *Little Gee Bee*. It now has an honored place — fittingly — in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

Look at that airplane for a minute and think about it. Imagine from whence it came; imagine what it represents. Imagine a 6-foot tall George climbing into it, 19 feet long, roughly 220 pounds empty weight, flying across the United States at 100 mph (on a good day) with 65 hp, no GPS, eight instruments, no radio, rudimentary weather reporting, driven by the notion that amateur homebuilding had a rightful place in American aviation. In the air, cramped and sometimes cold, he had a lot of time to think about it. And he did it twice!

What if George hadn't done it? If the Outlaws hadn't been such a pesky and dedicated bunch? I'm not going to speculate. The fact is that he *did* do it and that, in large part, is why you and I are members of EAA today. We're honoring the passion.

Thank you to Stan Loer, EAA 22047, of Grants Pass, Oregon, for suggesting we rekindle the story of the Beaverton Outlaws to keep the history alive. "It's important," he said. I agree. **EAA**

Lauran Paine Jr., EAA 582274, is a retired military pilot and retired airline pilot. He built and flies an RV-8 and has owned a Stearman and a Champ. Learn more about Lauran at his website, www.ThunderBumper.com.



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