

We rented an airplane for Fargo.

Four of us rented a small plane for a weekend trip to Fargo, North Dakota.

We were students at the University of Minnesota, in January 1965.

It wasn't my idea.

My buddy George talked me into it.

George knew an upperclassman, Jeff, that had a new pilot's license.

Jeff had a buddy, Don.

George had an older brother, Jim.

Jim was married, and owned a home in West Fargo.

Jeff could rent an airplane for 36 hours from the Crystal Airport for \$200.

Then fly to Fargo on Saturday morning.

Jim would pick us up at the Fargo Airport.

Jim had an extra car we could use.

We could sleep in Jim's basement Saturday night.

Then Jim would drop us back at the Fargo Airport on Sunday at noon.

We would have a pleasant afternoon flight home.

What could go wrong?

Fifty bucks was a lot of money in those days, but I thought it would be an adventure.

It was.

I drove to George's house at 6am.

He drove an old, odd, station wagon.

It was good in snow.

That becomes beneficial later in the story.

George drove us to the Crystal Airport, where we met Jeff and Don.

That was the first time I met them.

They were regular guys.

The rental was a typical small plane.

It had four seats, a small space for luggage, fixed landing wheels, and fuel enough to reach Fargo.

We were airborne by 8 a.m.

I brought a Minnesota Highway map so I could identify towns and sites from the air.

It was a beautiful, sunny, winter morning.

I did not ask Jeff what he was using as a guide, but several highways and railroad tracks headed toward Fargo.

The Freeways did not exist.

I was able to identify Osseo, Fletcher, Rogers, Albertville, and St. Cloud.

Alexandria and Fergus Falls were easily identified using my map.

It was a splendid ride.

It took roughly three hours total, with takeoff and landing.

The airport is in north Fargo, Jim's house was in West Fargo.

We called Jim from the airport and picked us up.



George's was like this, but old, beat up, and rusty.

Maybe a twenty-minute drive.

After lunch we used Jim's second car for sightseeing, then an evening movie, which I do not recall. Three of us were not yet 21, so after the movie our choices were limited, besides it was snowing heavily.

It was not a late night out.

Every car back then was rear wheel drive.

It was difficult to drive in even a few inches of snow.

By Sunday morning, we were in a three-day North Dakota prairie blizzard.

We were not prepared for that at all.

We were students on tight budgets, stranded without books.

We could not fly on Sunday, Monday, or Tuesday morning.

By Tuesday noon we were in a frozen frenzy.

Jeff kept in constant contact with the weather forecasters at the airport.

They felt the airport would be able to open Tuesday afternoon.

Jim dropped us at the airport with our scant luggage at 12:30 pm Tuesday.

Jim, his wife, and two young kids were wonderful about our prolonged stay, but I can imagine how happy they were to see us leave.

The weather was not settling down as fast as hoped.

Hour after hour slipped by.

Finally, Jeff got permission to take off around 3 p.m.

In hindsight, somebody should have considered in which direction we planned to go.

We got airborne about 4 pm.

It was already getting dark.

Our three-day blizzard was slowly moving eastward.

We caught up with the storm in minutes.

I doubt that Jeff was trained for instruments, only in daytime flying.

In 45 minutes, the plane was iced up, including the all-important windows.

Whatever window defrosting capabilities the plane had were overwhelmed by the storm.

It was now pitch black.

Jeff decided to try for a landing at the Fergus Falls airport.

Don was trying to reach that airport on the radio.

Jeff told us to watch for radio towers.

We didn't need to be told twice.

There were five or six around Fergus, and we were flying low.

George and I worked frantically to keep even a tiny patch ice-free on our windows.

Of course, there was no chance of finding the airport with runway lights.

The plane bounced violently in the wind, but who had time to notice?

Don got a response on the radio.

It was the airport manager.

The manager was at his home.



The airport had been closed since Sunday.

Jeff explained our situation.

The airport manager was pissed.

He must have lived close to the airport, because soon we found two rows of high intensity lights over pure white snow.

All this time Jeff was doing a terrific job of keeping us in the air amongst that bevy of radio towers.

The field was not plowed, of course.

It was patterned with drifts. The tallest were four feet high.

Jeff did a great job of bringing the airplane to near stall speed, heading into the wind.

The propeller was twisted when the plane nosed down into the drift that stopped us.

That drift also wrecked the landing gear.

Despite that, the impact of the final crash was not even memorable.

I just remember that I was happy to be stuck in a snow drift on the ground.

It was quite a distance to the illuminated office near the end of the runway.

I am sure it was a struggle to work through the drifts, but again it did not seem a big deal at the time.

The manager was screaming as we reached the door.

Among other things he promised Jeff that he would never fly again.

I don't know how that worked for Jeff, but except for major

lapses in judgement, his flying skills were good.

The manager dropped us at a motel.

George had borrowed cash from his brother, Jim. With that we rented a room.

That is the last I know of the plane, or the furious Fergus Falls airport manager.

We were not home yet.

In 1965 Greyhound buses ran everywhere, but most highways were closed by the blizzard.

The train ran through Fergus.

We inquired at the motel desk about the train schedule.

The depot was a few blocks away.

The next passenger train was scheduled for 6am.

We asked for a 5 a.m. wake-up call, dried our wet clothes, ate from vending machines, and got a good night's rest.



The train ride was fun.
This was my first legitimate train ride.
I had hopped on many box cars with our city cousins.
In the early 1950s they lived in a tenement building in Northeast Minneapolis.
The railroad ran through their back yard.
The train plowed through drifts easily and did not have to watch for antennae.
The Great Northern Depot in Minneapolis was grand, inside and out.

The blizzard had passed through the city.
In those days the snowplows waited until the snowstorm passed before venturing out.
The plows were much smaller and fewer.
We next needed to get to Crystal and George's car.
There were cabs at the depot, but they could not be bribed to take a fare to far-off Crystal.
Cars were spinning at every stop light.



Every intersection had a vehicle that slipped to the curve or was in imminent danger of bumping into a parked vehicle.
We made our way to Crystal by asking how far the driver could take us in that direction and then helping them get unstuck.
That took at least six rides.
George's old station wagon did not start.

We expected that because it was below zero.
That was common with cars of the time.
Every parking lot had a booster of some sort.
That worked with a shot of ether.

George's vehicle was heavy, that helped for traction.
We made it home without much trouble.
We pushed a couple of more cars, but we were good at that.
Never did see Jeff or Don again.

The trip was an adventure.
Tom.

