

Clipper Ship

The Presten Family Do-Everything Aerial Conveyance

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It's a fact that most folks have never seen a Piper Clipper on floats. Much less on amphibious floats. Much less on experimental amphibious floats mounted via a one-time, FAA approval. That's one reason so many of us got such a kick out of seeing the Presten family's Clipper at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2002.

You're probably familiar with the name Eric Presten. Within the antique/vintage community he's one of those writer/photographers who seems as if he's always been there. He and his camera have produced no less than four books on antique airplanes and four photo CDs. He's prolific, he's good, and at 38, he's still a relative kid. Much more important, he and the

family he has built up (his wife, Debbie, and sons Curtis and Ben) are the very embodiment of the spirit of grass-roots aviation. Eric himself is the embodiment of the spirit of freedom.

Eric is Eric. His life boils down to three things: airplanes, his family, and photography. Most people slave at one kind of job or another for years in the hopes that someday they will be able to immerse themselves in airplanes. Eric cut right to the bottom line and constructed a life around the things he loves, rather than tolerating a more normal, mundane life in the hopes he would someday wind up where he is now. Aviation isn't something he does. Aviation is what he is.



The Prestens have always walked to a different drummer, and they can already look back on an aviation background many people much older and wealthier would envy. For instance, most people daydream about the day they'll be able to hop in their airplane and take that one long cross-country every pilot feels he is entitled to. Eric on the other hand estimates he has made a minimum of 25 coast-to-coast trips, almost all of them while ferrying airplanes most of us hope we'll someday be able to get at least one flight in.

There was the New York to California trip in a Waco UPF-7. The

PT-19 he took from California to Florida. The Volmer Sportsman trip from Michigan to California ("I thought I'd never get there."). The Rose Parakeet that he ferried for four different owners from Detroit to California to Texas. You get the picture. Most of us would pay money for those kinds of experiences, but Eric has others pay him to do what they don't have the time or skill for.

Eric is the first to point out that he's addicted to aviation and unusual airplanes. And it's always been that way.

"My mom worked for NASA research at Moffett Field in California. So, there were always pictures of airplanes around," he says. "But, most of the stuff was modern, and for some reason I liked the older stuff better.

"My first real aviation event was going to the Reno Air Races in 1978 when I was 15. My folks took us (my brother and I), and I spent the day covering every inch of the grounds."





port, a longtime roost for lots of Bay area antiques.

"I don't remember how I found it the first time, but it was too far away, about 30 miles, to get my parents to take me over there when I wanted to go. So, I just started riding my bike. I was only 16 at the time and didn't know that most people would consider a 60-mile round trip on a bike to be pretty long."

It was at Hayward that he got his first serious initiation into the world of the antique airplane.

"I met Frank Ramos, a well-known local pilot, and he loaded me into his Fairchild 24 and took me up to Schellville airport," he almost laughs as he says it. "I couldn't believe all the antique airplanes. I was seriously in love."

At the time Eric was only 16 years old, and the exposure to one of the West Coast's hotbeds of antique airplane activity set a course for his life.

"It was about that time I became an honest to goodness airplane owner. Sort of, anyway," and he laughs again. "When I was taking the train into town, I caught a glimpse of an Ercoupe sitting behind a house in a residential neighborhood. I took the train back and forth a bunch of times until I could figure out exactly how to find it on surface streets. I knocked on the door, and the guy told me to go away. But, I

didn't. In fact, I kept bugging him until he let me start working on it. The deal was, I'd do the work for half ownership. Unfortunately, just as I was about done with the airplane, he decided to sell it out from under me.

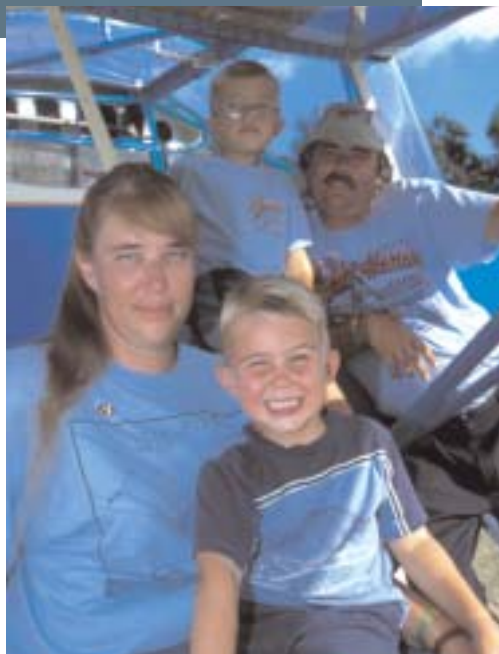
"A few years later," he says, "I went to Blakesburg for the first time with a friend. At the time I didn't know how to fly, but I was doing everything I could to remedy that

The Presten gang: parents Eric and Debbie with sons Curtis and Ben.

It was at about the same time that he discovered he could take airplanes home with him through the medium of photography.

"I borrowed a Canon AE-1 from my stepfather and began shooting pictures of every pre-1955 airplane I could find. Which reminds me: I have to remember to give that camera back to him."

He began haunting every airport in the area, camera in hand, searching for old airplanes, which, in his eyes, had more character than the new ones. It wasn't long before he discovered Hayward Executive Air-



situation. Then I ran into Gordon Bourland on the field. He had a Taperwing and a Waco EGC-8. In fact, the EGC was supposed to have belonged to Howard Hughes at one time. Anyway, we got to talking, and I was explaining how I really wanted to take flying lessons, but couldn't afford it. He said 'Come on down and mow grass, and I'll teach you.'

It was the kind of a deal no serious av-addict would pass up, and Eric says he did more flying than he did mowing, plus the job definitely had its perks.

"When I had about 72 hours, Gordon turned me loose in his Taperwing. To top it all off, I never paid a cent for my flying. It was a total work-to-fly program."

When it came time to go to college, Eric went to Central Missouri State where he graduated with a degree in aeronautics. During one of his summer vacations he was working for his father at his vineyard in northern California when he met one of his dad's friends.

"He had put out a couple of books on the history of Fords, and we started talking about what it took to produce books. By that time I had a ton of antique airplane photographs. I showed some of them to him, and he convinced me I should start publishing my own books. I was 23 years old at the time, and it was 1986. I had no idea how much effect those conversations would have on me. I started putting together books and have been at it since.

"I met Debbie in Missouri, and she has always supported me on any crazy airplane thing I've wanted to do. Well, most of them anyway."

The Clipper came into their life right after they were married in 1990.



Eric based the Clipper's unique float installation on the struts used on the float-equipped Cessna 150.



The six instruments required for basic VFR flight (the fuel gauge is in the middle of the tank) plus a slip/skid indicator are all Eric installed in his non-electrical Clipper. To raise and lower the landing gear mounted on the amphibious Murphy floats, a manual hydraulic pump, bolted between the front seats, is used.

Eric says, "Yep, we got married, and nine months later we had an airplane."

Any airplane they bought had to be something they could afford, which meant it had to be something in which Eric's mechanical ability and sheer tenacity would make up for a less than perfect condition.

"I found it sitting in an open-face hangar in Dade County, Florida. It was a flying airplane, but it had been stored in that open hangar for 18 years, so it was in rowdy shape. But, it was all there, and it wasn't as rusty as you'd expect, considering the environment it was in. In fact, on that first rebuild, it was obvious the wings were in serious need of TLC, so I ordered a complete set of Univair ribs and stripped them down to nothing and brought them back up. The second rebuild focused on the fuselage, and we were pleased to find that the door frames and about 6 feet of longerons was all the steel that had to be replaced."

The Prestens weren't looking for a show quality airplane. What they wanted was a practical piece of transportation that they could afford and trust. Plus, it was going to be a working airplane and the mount for Eric's photo missions. For that reason, they never did what most people would consider a complete restoration on the airplane.

"Our approach has been to restore, fly, restore, fly, and work on the airplane in sections. We've owned it 13 years, and during that time it has been down for a total of four-and-a-half years, but the downtime hasn't been all at once. The longest time it was down was while doing the fuselage, and that took 23 months.

"You're always looking for more performance out of any airplane, and a Clipper with the original O-235 flies just fine, but it's not a rocket-ship. I couldn't afford a bigger engine at the time, so I started looking around for an Aeromatic prop, figuring that might be a way to get cheap performance.

"I put the prop on, and I'd fly it for a while. Then I'd change something, maybe the counterweights. Then I'd fly it some more and change something else. I played with the prop for a long time. Then one day I said, 'I'm tired of messing with this thing. I'm going to take it off.' I took it off and put the fixed-pitch prop back on it and flew it exactly one time and went back to the Aeromatic. Because I'd been flying it so long with that prop while making subtle changes here and there I hadn't realized how much performance it had actually given me. One flight with the old prop showed me what a radical difference it had made.

"In the first place, the prop is an



F200-00-74E, so not only is it long, but the 'E' signifies it has extra blade width, so I guess it's probably considered a seaplane prop. Anyway, that one flight with the old prop showed that the Aeromatic had cut the takeoff run in half and nearly doubled the rate of climb. I don't think I'll be using a fixed-pitch prop again on this airplane."

Eric's Clipper got another major performance boost when he stumbled across a new engine for it.

"I was in New Zealand shooting pictures and found a 150-hp, O-320 at a price I couldn't turn down. So, now not only do I have the Aeromatic, but the O-320 as well, and the combination makes this into a different airplane. It also makes it much easier to fly with the floats."

Incidentally, Eric points out that he flew the airplane for 1,000 hours before putting the floats on it, and it had the one-piece, seaplane door during most of that time.

"I put the swing-up door on it because it works so well for photography. It gives me a big open space to shoot out of."

The decision to put the airplane on floats wasn't an easy one.

"As much as I like flying on floats, it's really a little impractical because it limits the places you can go. The only way for it to really be practical is to use amphibious floats. But amphibians cost more than a Clipper is worth. Besides, you don't often see amphibians for an airplane this small.

"I suppose what made the idea work for me was the availability of the Murphy 1800s. They were the right displacement and were avail-

able in kit form. So, I got my hands on a kit and started building. I didn't expect it to take so long to build them, however. There are 14,000 rivets in the two of them, and we quickly realized I'd never get them finished unless I made them a first priority. So, I dedicated eight hours a day, over and above the normal work stuff, to the floats. It took exactly a year, or about 2,000 hours, to build and mount the floats.

"I engineered the mounting system using Cessna 150 lift struts. I was fortunate in finding an original Clipper ventral fin, and I've been told they only built a handful of those. I did a really thorough job of documenting all the engineering and then applied for a one-time field approval. The FAA crawled all over it, studied the paperwork, and gave me the approval."

As is always the case with any airplane on which amphibious floats are mounted, the useful load of the airplane suffers. In this case, Eric says it lowered the useful load to 582. But he had if not a fix, then at least a Band-Aid for that.

"If you notice, there is no interior at all in the airplane. None. The only instruments are those that are absolutely needed, and we don't even have a GPS. A super-simple, manual hydraulic pump actuates the gear, and there is no electric system at all. I had to get this airplane as light as humanly possible. We made it a hard and fast rule: If it doesn't help this airplane fly or float, it doesn't have it. The airplane

A Lycoming O-235 and an Aeromatic prop combine to give Eric a takeoff time of 17 seconds on the water, or it will use about 700 feet of runway when flown off pavement.

may look a little crude, but that's one of the trade-offs required to fly floats. Even with the floats on it, the empty weight is only 1,156 pounds. I'm proud of that."

So, how does the Presten all-purpose aerial conveyance fly?

"It flies surprisingly well considering all that stuff hanging out there. It'll get off a runway in about 700 feet and off water in 17 seconds with no wind. It still climbs at 500 feet per minute at gross, and most of the time it's at gross because you don't have any choice. On cross-countries we flight plan it at 110 miles per hour, which is fast enough. We're in no hurry."

They made their trip to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2002 an epic journey, as they flew the full length of the Mississippi River (approximately 2,550 miles) and turned their month-long trip into 104.3 hours of flying, 1,000 gallons of gas burned while crossing 21 states. Deb does part of the flying, as she soloed in the airplane and flies it regularly—this is only fair since she also did much of the fabric and Poly-Fiber finish work.

There were a lot of fancier airplanes on the line at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2002 (although it did win the Outstanding Piper award at Oshkosh 2002), but it's doubtful if there was another airplane on the field that represented as much determination and sheer love for aviation as the Presten Clipper. Young Ben and Curtis will come of age not only knowing aviation from the ground up, but also having a better appreciation for it than most. They will understand that regardless of popular opinion, aviation does *not* run on money. Real aviation is based on passion, and nowhere is that more evident than the Presten Clipper. 