

# Across the Country in the DA20

## Part 5 HOME

*By Gwen Graham*

### From Missoula to Salem

Even though I had been thinking of Missoula as the end of the Rockies, it really isn't. There's one more hour long section to cross. The route I wanted was Mullin Pass. The lowest areas available and the shortest time over the mountains. At the end of that section is Couer d'alene, Idaho (KCOE) and much lower terrain.

I was up early at Missoula (thanks to the train tracks next door and the first of several trains starting about 4:30am). The weather looked misty and low although blue sky was visible as the sun came up. I called ASOS and they reported 9000 scattered!

Okay, if that's the case, I wanted to be out there and ready to fly as soon as possible. It's always best to fly over the mountains in the morning anyway. The heat of the day warms the air and ground and the thermals begin. I'd had enough of those, so I wanted smooth air.

As I got closer to the airport, it was apparent that the flaw in automated weather was in play. Yes, straight up was 9000 scattered. But all around the hills of Missoula (it sits in a bowl of mountains) mist, fog and low clouds lingered. It was worse to the south (where my hotel was). West/northwest looked only a bit better. But not good enough to go through a pass in the Rockies.

So began the hurry up and wait game again.

An hour or so after I arrived at Minuteman Aviation, another man came in who was trying to get to Skagit County airport north of Seattle in a Cessna 180. He and his wife had been flying around the west and ended up in Missoula unable to continue due to weather. They had left their airplane at Missoula and used frequent flyer miles to get home; he used more to get back to pick up the plane. She was home phoning in weather updates, since he described himself as computer illiterate.

He and I began sharing weather updates from his wife as well as my frequent excursions into their flight planning room for the latest METARs (hourly weather reports.)

Mullin Pass VOR has an ASOS station associated with it. I hadn't noticed that at first but soon MLP became a frequent entry into my search for the latest information.

Initial reports at the pass indicated vertical visibility of only 100 feet! We both needed much better than that to be willing to try the trip.

After several hours of continued improvement, it had finally come up enough -- 2900 broken. The area around the airport had come up enough also that I was willing to try it. I could always do a 180 and come back to the airport.

The other man decided he was going to grab a bite to eat before he left so we said our good byes and wishes for each other's safe trip. I had preflighted about a half hour earlier in preparation for just such an improvement.

I said goodbye to Jo who was the receptionist/admin person at the FBO (very nice, helpful and a pleasure to talk with on and off throughout the morning.) I loaded the bags and fired up 8KB. It was time to tackle and conquer the final piece of the Rockies.

## Through the Pass

My flight plan was to follow the road through the pass. It had worked the previous day so there was no reason to change the strategy. The clouds were reported at MSO at 5000 broken. That's above ground level meaning that I should have at least a 1000 or more feet clearance through the majority of the trip to KCOE. My hope was that the clouds through the mountains mimicked the heights at MSO.

8KB and I headed northwest. It was about 1 o'clock now. I knew I'd hit more thermals than I cared to but at least I was homeward bound.

The valley was prominent and the road easy to spot. The cumulus clouds meant unstable air so I didn't want to get too close if I didn't need to do so. I spotted some VIRGA (variable intense rain gradient aloft) off to the right of the valley so I stayed to the left. I saw the road wind around the first big hill (okay, mountain) off to the left and the smaller road continue more northward.

I turned to follow I-90 on its northwest track. I looked back toward the north and the other valley. It looked like those clouds were higher than the clouds over the highway. Based on the map, I-90 bent around the mountains and would come out on the other side. Maybe I should "cut the corner" and take the north valley instead of the northwest valley above I-90.

I turned back to the north valley. I could pick up the highway at the other end.

VIRGA had me criss-crossing the valley with enough bumps to let me know the air was indeed unstable under these clouds. I progressed up the valley about 12 miles or so when I noticed the mountains weren't as low as I originally thought. In fact they were higher plus the clouds were dipping down to meet them. Uh oh. I clicked over to the terrain page. All yellow with some red at the north end. Yellow means I would be within 500 feet of the terrain at my current altitude; red meant I was below the terrain. The valley was about eight miles wide. The latest patch of VIRGA was to my right and now behind me. The foothills rose to my left. All the terrain sloped up ahead of me.

This is a typical box canyon that a pilot can get themselves into while flying around mountains. My own flight training and that which we teach our students came to mind -- slow your airspeed to achieve the smallest turning radius over the ground.

I powered back, edged the stick back just a bit to start draining that speed and began a turn to the left. I watched my ground track over the foothill below me. It was a nice, tight turn. I was heading back toward I-90.

I sighed. No more short cuts. I will follow the road.

I continued on, feeling stupid on one hand because I tried to short-cut; on the other hand I made the decision to turn around before it became critical.

The bumps increased here and there, the clouds were above me and didn't look any friendlier than those I'd come through the day before. I kept the road under me and stayed in the middle of the valleys. The GPS was set for Mullin Pass. About 20 miles from it, I was able to pick up the weather. Clear skies!? It doesn't look like it from here, but I'd take it. It also gave me a new altimeter setting so I reset the altimeter and looked for those clear skies ahead.

Just a few miles from the pass, there was the most narrow valley yet. Of course the clouds also came down too. I descended a bit and held my breath as I passed over the snow-dotted peaks. At points along that route, I was lower than some peaks. Again, if the winds at altitude had been anything more than they were (10 knots at most) it would not have worked. It seemed like I could count the limbs at some points and told Jim later that I'd picked out our Christmas tree.

At the pass, there were still clouds, but I could see lower terrain in the distance. 8KB purred on just as she'd always done on this trip. I maneuvered through a couple more valleys and finally there was more space opened between me and mountains. The clouds started to thin. Blue sky spread out in front of me.

I had made it! I saw the lakes around Coeur d'Alene and spotted the airport up ahead and on the right. No sense in heading for it; I really wanted to turn south toward Walla Walla. I reset my GPS for KALW and as soon as possible, I started to climb to an altitude I chose, not the weather. The view from 8500 was beautiful.

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## Walla Walla

I chose Walla Walla as my fuel stop between Missoula and Salem for one nostalgic reason (besides the weather reports): I took my first introductory flight lesson at that airport in the mid-70s. I figured it only appropriate, on this trip, to return even for a brief moment to where it all started.

For the first time since Rapid City, I was also able to get Flight Following. I started with Spokane Approach as I was abeam KCOE then was handed off to Chinook Approach. I couldn't understand the name of the approach when they first gave me the frequency change. I even asked them to repeat it and still couldn't make it out. There are two options available: go on over and listen for an extra minute to hear someone else say the name or check in with the generalized "Approach, Diamond 408KB, 8500. They'd say the name of their facility in their response. Either way, it works.

The former option ended up working and I understood the name in time to use it when I reported. I was eventually handed off to Walla Walla Tower. I had already begun my descent and the afternoon thermals kicked in below about 5500. Oh for crying out loud. Haven't I had enough of this!?!

The updrafts fought with the downdrafts and 8KB and I were in the middle of the it. I continued trying to coax her down to pattern altitude as I was given landing clearance for a straight-in runway 20.

Wouldn't you know it...this was the worse approach and landing I've ever done. Good grief. Of the 5600 or so

foot runway, I used it all! Yeah, I probably should have gone around but I didn't. A few hundred feet down the runway, I was still too fast and couldn't get within my final flap range. I tried pulling back a bit to bleed the airspeed but the gusts and updrafts caught me and seemed to counter-act everything I was doing. I eventually prevailed and landed in the last third of the runway. Thankfully 8KB lands slowly so it was only gentle braking needed to turn off at the other end of the runway.

## Home to Salem

I refueled, called Flight Service then Jim to let him know my ETA. Our cell phones cut out so I called Jennifer at the office to let her know that I'd be in about 5pm and asked her to pass it along to Jim.

I took off and headed west along with north shore of the Columbia River. The weather was beautiful, finally, and I was able to just enjoy the wonder of being airborne, the landscape of our two states and the pure joy of flying. Mt. Hood and its snow-covered majesty could be seen from miles and miles away. Such a wonderful day to fly.

I re-established flight following with good-old Chinook Departure then Seattle Center and finally handed off to Portland Approach when I was at Hood River.

They had me maintain 6500 as I made my turn south. A jet passed to my right inbound to PDX. The altitude restriction was lifted and the controller asked what altitude I wanted to descend to. I told him 4500 to begin and eased back the throttle a couple hundred RPM. A touch of the electric trim held me in a perfect 300 foot a minute descent.

Radar services were terminated just north of Aurora and I increased my descent.

I tuned in KSLE ATIS. Information Lima was current. Another few miles and I reported in. Jim in the tower gave me a right downwind for runway 31. I tweaked my headings and arrived at pattern altitude just a couple miles from the airport. Of all the places I didn't want to mess up the pattern and landing was at home base.

I was given traffic to follow then told "cleared to land 3-1."

Sweeter words have never been heard over that radio.

N408KB and I landed rather nicely and rolled out. Jim in the tower came on frequency again. "8KB turn left at Juliet, cross 3-4, then taxi to parking this frequency. Welcome home."

Home. Finally. After 10 days of working my way across the country, I was finally home.

My Jim was waiting for me and pointed to a parking spot. I pulled in and shut her down. Unlatching the canopy, Jim greeted me with a welcome home kiss.

What an incredible trip!

## Epilogue

Yes, I'm glad to be home. Yes, it was an arduous trip thanks to unusually bad weather. Yes, it was much longer than ever planned.

But it was also an incredible, wonderful and unique experience.

I felt my confidence surge to a new level to know that I can control an airplane under some pretty horrible conditions; I continued to learn more about flying with each hour; I know I can rely on my decision-making skills to keep me safe.

As I work on my certified flight instructor rating this summer, I hope to use this experience to the betterment of our students and pilots who fly with us.

Besides the trials and tribulations of cross country flying, what would I like for you to take from these travelogue?

The adventure, the experience, the fun. The people you meet, the memories you make, the skills you learn.

I now have about 28 hours in N408KB. We've bonded :)

She's a wonderful little airplane to fly. Responsive, fun and great visibility. Nothing against Cessnas. I have many, many hours of great flying in 172s and 182s. But it's always fun to have more options available from which to experience the world of aviation.

Bottom line, always be safe when flying. Know your personal limits. Have an out if the plan doesn't work. Be willing to stay on the ground (remember Rapid City?). Even during those times when I was more nervous than I cared to be in an airplane, I always had an out; I knew the conditions were realistic and workable; I knew I had a quality airplane around me and felt confident in my skills with her.

I don't want any of you to think that just because you have a pilot's license you can take off into mountainous terrain with lower than preferred clouds. If any one of the parameters had been different for this last several hundred miles, I would still be somewhere in the middle of the Rockies.

Just be safe and cautious. Please don't take chances. We want all of you to be old, bold pilots.

I've received many emails from all of you. Thanks so much for following my adventures and sending in your best wishes. I'm glad to hear that you have enjoyed the story.

Hope to see you at Graham Aviation soon to start or continue your flying adventure.