

WALKING TO AUBURN

By John S. Halbert

Late July, 1966:

"Let's fly to Auburn, John!"

My friend Don was suggesting that we rent an airplane and fly down-state to Auburn, Alabama, where he was going to enroll at Auburn University for the fall term. Don had been taking flying lessons for several months and was about ready for his big license test. "We can stir up the place, have some fun, and I can get in some cross-country flying hours."

It had been a hot, sultry summer and a few flying days out of town seemed like just the right idea.

Don prodded me. "What do you say?"

"I say . . . Y-e-s-s!"

* * *

A couple of mornings later found us at the airport readying a blue-and-white "*Cessna 150*" for the flight. Our plan was for Don to pilot the plane and I would be the spotter and navigator. Fortunately, it was a bright, sunshiny day, as "Visual Flight Rules" required us to be able to see the ground while aloft. Stuffing our luggage bags into the rear compartment and armed with navigation maps and binoculars, we were on our way.

As we flew along, I was impressed by how easy it was to keep track of ground-checkpoints. Not long after taking off we looked down and read '*DANVILLE*' on top of a barn near a highway that matched the map. Cross-country flying was turning out to be interesting (a lot of fun, actually) and I was once more regretting that I had stopped taking flying lessons a couple of years before. (It had been a choice between walking five miles to the airport for the lessons and back, or buying a car. I chose the car.) My friend, who had started his flying career at the same time as I had, was well on his way to becoming a commercial pilot with multi-engine ratings.

In a couple of hours we arrived in Auburn airspace. Scanning the ground below, I spotted the airport nestled between Auburn and nearby Opelika, alongside a broad thoroughfare that connected the two towns. Swooping down, we landed and taxied up to the ramp.

Because he was in a hurry to get to a noontime orientation session, I volunteered to tie-down the airplane and get it refueled for the return flight. Don sped off in a taxi, leaving me alone with the Cessna.

After taking care of the plane, I decided to head out on foot toward the town of Auburn. It seemed like a good day for a walk---from the air the landing field had appeared to be right at the edge of town---for sure a short, liesurely jaunt. I left my luggage in the plane, figuring I could walk to town, get a place to stay overnight, and hang-out for a while. Later in the day, I would hike back to the airport and retrieve it. Simple enough.

One thing about flying: when you're in an airplane, things down below usually look much closer to each other than they actually are. The landing field, which from the air had appeared to

be next to Auburn, was actually miles farther away! As it was now late-morning, the temperature had risen into the 'nineties, and before long I realized it had also been a big mistake to wear a long-sleeved shirt---I was becoming sweat-soaked and regretting not having ridden to town in a cab. Surely, I thought, as I plugged along the shoulder of the roadway, Auburn would show up soon---after all, from the air, hadn't it looked as if it was right by the airport? A couple of miles---no sign of town. Trudging, sweltering alongside the bustling thoroughfare I was becoming hotter, thirstier, dustier, sweatier and more exhausted by the minute. Twenty minutes and another mile---where *was* Auburn, for cryin' out loud? (I was about ready to do just that.) Cars and trucks roared past, blowing exhaust fumes into my face and stirring up more dust.

Finally, thankfully, I spotted a sign up ahead that welcomed me to Auburn. A few minutes later, I shuffled into what to looked be a downtown of sorts---a motley collection of stores and gas stations. A few blocks away, above the treetops, rose the hulking rim of the university's gargantuan football stadium. Practically surrounded by the sprawling school, the little 'burg looked as if it had been enveloped by a giant brick-and-asphalt amoeba. "What do people *do* here?" I wondered. A curved-roof, corrugated-metal movie theater, off by itself down the street at the edge of some woods, seemed to be the only entertainment source in the whole place.

At a drug store soda fountain, I attacked a Coke and tried to figure out things. Here I was in Auburn, home of the big university, the land of the gorgeous girls, with the opportunity of all time to connect with a gaggle of adoring coeds. But the whole place looked deserted! I hailed the soda guy. "Where *is* everybody?"

The fellow pushed his white peaked cap to the back of his head and grinned at me. "Friend," he chuckled, "this is the time of the year they close everything . . . most of the university is shut down!" He looked at my stricken face with amusement. "I take it you expected something else?"

Groaning, I turned and gaped in consternation through the big picture window at the vacant street outside. What now? No parties! No luscious babes! How was I ever going to pass the time in this cheerless place? I could be here for days waiting for Don with nothing to do! I shuffled back outside to the sidewalk and looked up and down the empty main street. My eyes focused on a small motel down on the next block. It occurred to me that it might be a good idea to make some overnight arrangements. At any rate, I had to have a place to stay if I was going to be stranded here in this bleak little town.

I explained to the bored-looking teenaged girl clerk that all my cash was still at the airport inside my luggage. Would she hold a room for me? Say, for an hour?

The girl shrugged, then purred in a sultry voice that she guessed so---but I would have to hurry right back. "There may be others who want your room!"

Sprinting outside, I spotted a taxi in the parking lot letting out a passenger. Flinging open the other rear door, I jumped into the back seat and told the surprised driver, "To the airport! And hurry!" The cabbie threw the car in gear, and in a flurry of dust and gravel we shot out of the driveway.

Fifteen minutes later, the taxi slithered to a stop in front of the terminal. "I'll be right back---wait for me!" I ran through the small building, then out to the airplane. In a minute, I returned with my luggage. "Let's get going!" Tires squealing, the cab swept around the other vehicles alongside the curb and we were again on our way.

"Say, Mac," the driver put in, glancing at me in the rear-view mirror, "you sure look like you're in a real hurry!"

Still puffing from the dash to and from the terminal, I gasped that my motel reservation would expire in a few minutes and would he please step on it?

"You've got it," the driver came back, swerving past a slow-moving truck. "By the way, did you know the place where you're stayin' is the only motel in this whole part of the country that's open right now?"

I wasn't surprised to hear this, since from the looks of things the townspeople had up and disappeared. Had there been a mass evacuation? Some sort of Civil Defense exercise? Maybe they had gone to wherever scholars go to recuperate from the rigors of teaching. I visualized busloads of tired professors leaving town in a convoy.

"The other motels will re-open next week when school starts," the fellow went on. "Then you'll see plenty of people. Lots of people. Thousands of people." He seemed almost amused that anyone would want to visit Auburn at this time. "What brings you here, anyway?"

"Registration . . ." I didn't really want to talk with the gabby cabbie, even though he seemed ready to keep the conversation going. As we raced back toward downtown, I squirmed in the seat with impatience. What if the girl should give away my room while I was gone?

A fretful fifteen minutes later, the taxi screeched to a stop. "Here we are!" the driver announced. I shoved the fare into his hand, snatched up my luggage bag and ran pell-mell back into the lobby.

"Well, you made it!" the girl said with a wry grin, pushing a registration form across the countertop. "Just in time, too---I was about to have to give your room reservation to somebody else!" Again, there was that smoky voice. While she twirled her dark, stringy hair, I scratched my signature onto the register, then took the key she handed me.

Tossing the bag onto the bed with a quick glance around the room, I headed back outside. "Okay, I have a room, but now what?" I thought aloud. Then I remembered the movie theater that I had spotted earlier.

"The picture show?" The cab driver, who was still parked in front of the motel, pointed down the street. "Right down there---two blocks to your right. You can't miss it." I headed off, and sure enough, three minutes later, I was standing in front of the metal theater building, whose marquee announced the feature of the week as *'THE GLASS BOTTOM BOAT'*, a Doris Day flick. I handed the girl at the box-office a dollar bill, went inside and took a seat in the darkened theater.

The film had been going only a few minutes when all of a sudden everything went dark. No movie, no lights, no sound---nothing. I hoped they had only blown a fuse, but after fidgeting in my seat in the pitch-dark theater for several minutes, I began to wonder if that the problem wasn't bigger than that.

A flickering light appeared down in front. Squinting, I made out a man standing on the stage waving a flashlight beam to-and-fro across the rows of empty seats. "Is anybody out there?" he called out. "Anyone there?"

"Over here!" I spoke up.

The beam swung about and shined in my face. "You're the only one in here!" the man said. "There's been a big power failure and it looks like the movie won't be on for a while." I groaned as he went on, "we can give you a free ticket to come back to see the picture show later!" I stumbled back up the pitch-dark aisle and out into the theater lobby, where a door to the outside was propped open. I groped and grasped my way back to the box office where the same girl who had taken my money earlier handed me a scribbled piece of paper that would get me in to the picture show when the lights came back on.

I had long since decided that Auburn was a strange place. First, the long, hot walk from the airport. Then, the vanished people. Now, no electricity. On top of everything else, I hadn't eaten

since breakfast, and it was now late afternoon. Back on the main street, I put my hands on my hips and looked about. "By golly!" Spotting a sign a block away, I broke into a run---it was the same combination drugstore-lunch counter where I had cooled-off that morning. Maybe there was hope for food after all, something that wouldn't require electricity to prepare.

"Back again? Ready for another Coke?"

I dropped onto a counter stool and huffed heavily for a few seconds. "Food . . . I need real food!"

The fountain fellow looked to be in thought, then snapped his fingers. Rummaging around in the pantry, he came up with a couple of tomatoes. "How about a tomato sandwich---tomatoes and bread don't need electricity to fix, and man, you look starved!"

I was so hungry by now, that I could probably have eaten just about anything---plant or animal.

"Here you go!" The young man plopped the plate onto the counter and slid another Coke in front of me. While I bit into the bread and tomato concoction, he walked over to the front window and opened the venetian blinds. With more light, for the first time, I noticed a picture of a football team---no doubt one of Auburn's---hanging on the wall.

The cook opened the darkened freezer. "If you would like it, I can throw on some scoops of ice cream for you---on the house, since it looks like it could melt before we get the juice back on."

I nodded. Who could argue with free ice cream in a heat wave? Between bites, I told him what had happened down at the theater. "I wonder where *is* the electricity?"

"Maybe there's a way to find out." The clerk reached under the counter and pulled out a small portable transistor radio. "Let's see if this thing works." The soda fellow fiddled with the radio, but the local station was off the air, probably because of the power failure, and it turned out the only station he could pick up was miles away in another town. Through the static, we learned there had been some sort of accident in a power station somewhere and half the state was in the dark. I cringed at the very thought of trying to endure a night in Auburn in total darkness. The announcer said repair crews were on the job, and maybe the electricity would be back on before long. We hoped he was right.

He again twisted the knob and a strident anti-Vietnam-War-protest-song burst from the tiny receiver. The fellow's face fell, and he changed stations in a hurry. "I have a brother over there," he muttered.

I told him that my former ROTC company commander at college had recently been killed in Vietnam.

The young man glanced around and leaned forward. "There are some rumors around here--- he lowered his voice---that they might start drafting college students! If they do that, a lot of guys here at Auburn will probably get called-up."

The fellow caught my blanched look. "I have a student deferment . . ." Were they really serious about cancelling my "2-S" student draft exemption? I filed away in my memory this startling information for verification when I returned home, hoping it wasn't true.

I paid the cook, who wished me good luck, and went back outside into the gathering gloom. With no street lights, the town took on a shadowy, ghostly look. Suppressing a shudder, I made my way back to the motel.

Just as I opened the door to my room, the lights suddenly came back on with a searing flash. "A-l-l-r-i-i-g-h-t!" I punched the air with my fist. "Now, we're getting somewhere!"

I decided to head back to the theater and finish "THE GLASS BOTTOM BOAT". I

double-timed the three blocks back to the movie house. This time, a few others had joined me for the showing, the first actual townspeople I had seen since I had arrived. Maybe there was a population, here, after all.

The talkative theater manager recognized me and offered to give me a tour of the place before the film started. The man seemed particularly proud of his projection equipment. "It's brand-new!" he boasted in a bleating voice. I agreed with him that the projectors looked really terrific, at the same time thinking to myself how otherwise outdated and uninspiring the galvanized building looked from the outside.

After the movie, dozens of bright street lights and lit-up store fronts guided my way from the theater back to the motel. This time, there was plenty of electricity.

As it had been a long and involved day, I wasted no time crashing into bed.

* * *

"Oh, my goodness! I didn't know you were still here!"

I opened my eyes. "Yipes!" What was this twenty-something, short-haired brunette doing standing over my bed in my motel room?

"Oh, I'm sorry!" the girl gasped, wide-eyed, hands over her mouth. "I thought you had already checked out! It's almost noon!" Red-faced, she backed-out the door. It was a good thing I had on my shorts, or the scene could have been really embarrassing. Did the girl say it was noon?

The phone rang. It was the front office, apologizing for the maid coming into my room by mistake. And, by the way, would I be checking out soon? I promised to go by the office in a few minutes.

I padded into the washroom and splashed cold water into my face. What next? I hadn't seen Don since he had ridden away from the airport in the taxi yesterday morning and so many things had happened since then, I could have sworn it had been longer ago than that. Wonder where he was?

I decided to check-out of the room, but have reservations for one more night, just in case. In the meantime, I would ask at the front desk if they could stash my luggage in the motel office while I tried to get everything straightened out.

Throwing on some clothes, I crammed my things into the bag and hustled from the room. The manager agreed to lock my things in a safe place, and said I could retrieve them later. That matter settled, I struck out again through sultry, deserted Auburn toward the lunch counter.

"You just can't do without our food, can you!" declared the same cook from the day before, and who by now probably looked at me as a regular customer. "Today, at least, we have lights!"

Hunger was again a major concern, and I resolved to shoot the works on food this time around. "Your biggest hamburger!" I ordered, "and fries and a shake!" Soon a fragrant sizzle came from the grill.

After downing the meal, food-fortified, I decided that, as long as I was stuck here, I would at least try to find something worthwhile to do. For the hundredth time, I wondered what Don was doing. He had to be around here, somewhere---after all, he had important business at the university. Perhaps this was his last day of registration, and we could get out of this strange town. What if he was trying to find me? Maybe I should go and look for him.

Leaving the diner, I headed out on foot toward the university campus. A few minutes later, I stepped through the main gate and turned down an empty street, where I soon found myself surrounded by huge, closed-up buildings that brooded in the bright sunshine. With their drapes

and blinds drawn, the structures looked blank and featureless; the whole institution, without students or faculty, gave a stark, almost surreal appearance. Even though it was a hot day, I shuddered---there was something uncanny---creepy, even---about the vast, silent place. Far down a long driveway, some men, the first actual people I had seen since entering the gate, were unloading office furniture at the rear of a classroom building. It was strange to realize that in just a few days, the campus would be jammed with tens of thousands of people. And Auburn University, in contrast to the town itself, was HUGE. At the end of a lonely lane, I came across a barn-like building that looked to be the headquarters of the campus bus line. This was a big school indeed, I thought, if the students had to catch the bus to travel between classes.

I decided I had seen enough of Auburn's deserted campus, and headed back toward the main gate. I had just arrived there when I felt a sudden jab on my ribs. Whirling around, I looked into the grinning face of---

"Don! Man, am I glad to see you !" I slapped his shoulder, "where have you been? I've been looking all over for you! I was just about ready to---"

"I'm finished!" He took a poke at my ribs. "No more tests! Let's do something in this town! Let's have some real action! Bring on the girls!"

"Ah, Don---"I didn't know how to break the news to him---"I hate to tell you this, but this place is like . . . dead."

"Dead?"

"Look around. Do you see anybody? All the girls are gone."

Don spun around and gaped in disbelief at the hibernating campus. "You mean---?"

I nodded at my crestfallen friend, who now had all the enthusiasm of a flat tire.

"But . . . what . . . where . . . how---?"

"I haven't figured it out, yet. Must be some kind of regular shutdown, or something. If you ask me, it 's time to go home."

"Let's talk about it over something to eat. I'm starved." Where's a food place?" I told him about the diner---the only eatery in all of Auburn that was open.

When we stepped into the drug store, the familiar cook at the soda fountain gave a grin."Well, now there are TWO of you! Ready for some more hamburgers?"

My friend said that a hamburger would hit the spot. Since I had already had lunch, I settled for a banana split.

Don listened while I told him all that had happened to me since we had last seen each other at the airport. He grinned when I came to the episode of the maid in the room. "You didn't ask her out?"

"I wasn't exactly dressed to go out!"

"Tell you what . . . we need to kill some time, so let's go see that movie and stay-over tonight in the the airplane. We'll save money by not staying in the motel and we can get an early start in the morning."

It sounded like a good idea to me, and in the meantime Don could stash his luggage with mine at the motel. By then it was late afternoon, so we finished eating and bade the friendly cook farewell. As we made our way up the deserted street, Don offered his personal opinion that---without people---Auburn was 'strange'".

For the third time, I stepped up to the metal movie house to see THE GLASS BOTTOM BOAT. As before, there were some actual Auburnites scattered about in the seats.

When the two of us came out of the picture show, it was already dark. At the motel lobby, we picked up our bags and hailed a cab to take us back to the airport. The taxi driver was the

same talkative fellow who had driven me to the airport the day before to pick up my luggage.

"Leaving us?" he asked, as the big vehicle rumbled through the night. Since we didn't want to divulge too much, Don mumbled something that he seemed to accept.

In a few minutes we were curbside underneath a fitful street-light in front of the terminal that was closed for the night. Out on the flight-line in the shadowy darkness, the Cessna was still parked where I had tied it down yesterday morning. Grasping our luggage, we hustled toward a gate in the fence that surrounded the flying field.

"What's this?" I pointed at a sign:

WARNING---FBI INVESTIGATES TRESPASSING

AT THIS AIRPORT. ARMED GUARDS ON DUTY

"Are you *sure* we want to do this?" The message was giving me second thoughts about sleeping in the airplane. Maybe it meant business. I had absolutely no desire to tangle with anyone with a gun.

"Don't be ridiculous---they're just trying to scare us!!" my friend retorted, "and, besides, we're saving the money we would've spent on a motel room." Don didn't seem too concerned as to whether or not the sign was for real, and, after all, it was *our* airplane, he reminded me, or at least the one of which we were in charge, so what was the worry? Although I still had misgivings, I swallowed hard and agreed to go along. We hunched down and loped out to the Cessna. While I unlocked the two main doors, Don stuffed our bags into the rear compartment. Both of us then clambered into the tiny cockpit. I reached for the handle and closed the door. Now for some shut-eye! In a few hours we would be out of this place and on our way home!

Just as we were congratulating ourselves on our apparent success, all at once the whole airplane was lit up in a blinding glare! A searchlight! The two of us ducked-down and hugged the floor. What was *this*? Were we about to encounter the armed guards about which the sign had warned? For long seconds, we dared not to breathe; our hearts racing. The shaft of light moved away and focused on the next aircraft, then on to the next. With quick, furtive glances we located the offending spotlight that was perched high atop a tower next to the terminal. It soon became evident that the fixture was on a timed search pattern, and we figured if we could predict the beam's return, we could avoid being seen. As for the armed guards, we didn't know where they were---if there really were any. Could they be watching us at this very moment? Perhaps they used hidden cameras! On the other hand, maybe the sign was bluffing. Regardless of the risks, now that we were already inside the airplane, it looked as if we had no choice but to lie low and try to not be spotted.

In any case, we would have to get situated and try to get some sleep. There was not much room in a "Cessna 150", a narrow two-seater intended mainly as a trainer, with barely enough room for a couple of (skinny) passengers to begin with. As for getting comfortable enough in it to stretch out and sleep---well, forget it. It didn't take us long to figure *that* out. When Don got himself arranged comfortably, I was pushed against the door. If I got into a position that was all right for me, he was cramped. The whole thing soon became a hopeless tangle. And all the while, we had to keep our heads down and out of the line of sight of the searchlight, which kept up its dazzling sweeps with clockwork precision.

Before long it became unbearably stuffy inside the plane---it was a warm and humid night. It soon became obvious that our arrangement just wasn't going to work.

What to do now? We were stuck inside a cramped, sweaty cubicle with lawmen supposedly all over the place. Taking advantage of the intervals when the searchlight was trained away from us, using caution we peered over the front instrument panel out the side cockpit windows. A possible solution presented itself about a hundred yards away, next to the outer fence, in the form of a fire truck. Don volunteered to run over there and to try to get inside the cab. If he could sleep on the seat, I would have the airplane to myself, and we would both be better off. Timing his departure to coordinate with the searchlight, he slipped from the cockpit and scampered over to the truck. In the shadows I saw him open the door and crawl inside. I soon found a position that was more or less tolerable, and was just drifting off to sleep . . .

"B-E-E-P!"

My eyes flew open. "What . . .?"

"B-E-E-P! "

The fire truck horn! Its raucous racket resounded and echoed throughout the hangars and outbuildings of the entire airfield! Some seconds later, I heard a rush of footsteps and a frantic knock on the airplane's left-side door. Outside the window in the gloom was the wide-eyed, panic-stricken face of Don! "Quick!" he croaked in a hoarse whisper, "let me in!"

I pushed open the door and he dived headfirst onto the seat.

"Get down!" he rasped between huffing breaths, "they're looking for me!"

"They'? Who? What happened?"

"The cops! I was almost asleep when my elbow banged the horn button and it went off! I bumped it again while I was getting out of the truck! Now, they're out there looking for me!" My fugitive friend peeped out. "I see flashlights all around the truck! And there's a police car!" He looked up and gasped. "Get down . . . here comes the light, again!"

The probing beam once more stopped on the Cessna and held the plane fixed squarely in its gaze. But this time, instead of moving on as it usually did, the light remained focused on our hiding place! On and on the light shined on our two-seater. With gasps of horror we were sure we knew the reason why: *The door was still wide-open from having let Don into the cockpit!* Both of us stared stupefied at the accusing entrance. Were the guards at that moment realizing that the airplane's left-side door, which had been closed earlier, was now hanging completely open? The next few seconds were an agonized eternity as our plane sat exposed in the merciless glare of the searchlight!

Finally, the shaft swung away. Don collapsed, choking, onto the floor, shaking with relief, and I let out a long breath. Carefully---ever so carefully---I reached out and S-L-O-W-L-Y pulled shut the door.

By now, it was past midnight, and it looked as if it was going to be a long night with no sleep. But at some point, both of us managed to somehow drop off into a fitful slumber.

* * *

The sputter of an airplane engine startled me awake. Numb with cramped fatigue, I yawned and looked out the window of the Cessna. The only thing I could see was an opaque half-light.

"Don! Wake up!" I jabbed him with my elbow in excitement. "Look---we're fogged-in!" My friend raised up, stretching and blinking. Sure enough, the airport was enveloped in a cloud so thick we couldn't even see the ends of the wings of our airplane!

"Let's get out of this crate while we can!" Don whispered. I knew at once what he meant: If we could escape from our winged hideout while no one could see us---we would be home-free! Grasping our bags and remembering to close the airplane's door, we stole away into the murky mist. "Got your luggage?"

"Right here." I patted the case to make sure it was okay. "Let's go outside the airport and come back like nothing happened. They'll never catch on . . . what a ploy!"

Concealed in the fog, the two phantom figures, Don and I, opened the gate and crept outside. Like ghostly apparitions, we tiptoed into the swirling silvery mist, walked about a block, turned around, then casually strolled up the sidewalk to the fog-bound terminal as if we had just arrived at the airport. As we strolled nonchantly into the lobby, two police officers nodded pleasant greetings to us.

The restaurant was just opening.
Breakfast never tasted better.

* * *

By the time we had finished eating, the fog had lifted and we took off.

We had been airborne only about half an hour, when I noticed a roiling gray cloud behind us that seemed to be getting closer. More trouble? I nudged Don, who took one look back at the towering cumulus and frowned. "We'll try to outrun it!" he shouted above the roar of the engine. But before long, it became obvious that the darkening thunderhead would overtake us no matter how much Don increased the engine's speed and jinked the airplane back-and-forth, as he tried to outdistance the onrushing storm. Despite all the efforts, in a few minutes the seething mass swallowed us up.

Remembering my own experience one time during a flying lesson when I had lost my bearings in a cloud and turned the airplane upside down, I paid particular attention to the artificial-horizon instrument. "Whoa!" Don gasped, as the airplane bounced upward in a thermal air pocket. I tightened my seat belt, then held onto the heaving hand-hold for dear life as the rocking aircraft dropped off in a vicious downdraft. Outside, both wings were flexing up-and-down in the tortured air currents. A burst of rain sprayed the windshield like a firehose for a few seconds, then stopped. After another battering minute of updrafts and downdrafts, while Don whip-sawed the controls in desperation trying to level the airplane, the air smoothed a little and the Cessna flew steadier. The blackest part of the cloud moved off ahead of us, but we were still inside the puffy, misty mass that was becoming several shades lighter as the storm moved away from us.

"Good thing this crate has a homing receiver," Don said, twisting a knob on the instrument panel. After watching a pointer on the dial for a few seconds and listening to a tone in our earphones, Don announced the station was Anniston Radio's *"Very-High-Frequency Omni-Range"* directional signal. "We'll head toward Anniston and then go around past Guntersville . . . from there, we can ride the beam all the way home."

Even though my friend was a capable cross-country pilot, we still couldn't see the ground, and we were supposed to be flying Visual Flight Rules. Pretty soon, we needed to be in clear air, or we could be in a real fix. More minutes passed, and our plane was still groping in the mist. Looking at the airmap, I knew tht by now we must be getting close to "Mount Cheaha", the tallest mountain in the state.

Just as I was about to mention this fact, there was a momentary break in the clouds, and

right in front of us, about a quarter of a mile ahead, was a television tower! We were headed straight toward a gangly, red-and-white steel structure thrusting hundreds of feet into the air from the peak of the mountain!

"Look out!"

With a cry, Ron jerked the wheel, kicked-down the rudder pedal and rammed the throttle to the firewall. Gravity shoved us into our seats as the startled, shrieking Cessna swung into an emergency turn! Ron gripped the control wheel like a vise as he banked the aircraft sharply to the left, while both of us held our breaths, eyes bulging, as our straining, clawing little airplane bore down on the huge tower that now filled the windshield!

Just as it seemed there was to be no escape from plowing into it, the immense vertical pylon shot past our upraised right wingtip with only a few feet to spare! Don and I gaped back, aghast, at the receding antenna, then at each other. We had almost flown into a television tower!

The cloud soon moved completely off and we had a steady, smooth ride the rest of the way. In a couple of hours, we were back at our home airfield.

As I was getting our bags out of the plane, and while Don was signing some papers, a mechanic came up to us. "You the guys in the Cessna?"

We nodded.

"Well, look at this." He held up a dipstick and pointed to the very end of it. "You must have flown some extra miles on the way back."

We told him about the clouds and the detour.

"You really used the fuel, then . . . you landed with only about a gallon left in the tank! Another five minutes, and you'd have run out of gas!"