

Featured Airstrip Sawmill Farms

This is our first featured airstrip article. One of the MPAOA's founders and former board member, Bob DeWitt and his wife Tina own Sawmill Farms. The strip is located in Maybee on their 40-acre farm. Their grass landing strip is 2100 feet long runs north and south and the ELEV 665' MSL. For some of you who may not be world travelers, Maybee is located in Monroe County tucked in below the DTW class B airspace, in the very southeastern corner of Michigan. Maybee is a nice little farming town, very small, you know, one flashing light, two bars, a bank, gas station and a farmer's co-op. One thing that you will find interesting, Maybee is no stranger to aviation for such a small place. There are five private airfields located within the town!



Bob has been a pilot since 1979. He learned to fly in an Aeronca Champ in Connecticut on a little grass strip. Bob has made aviation his career. He has towed gliders and banners, he has worked for several small Part 135 airlines, and is now a B747-400 Captain for Kalitta Air. He spends about half

the month flying around the world and the other half of the month he spends with his family and flying his own airplane, a 1974 Maule M4. We asked Bob to share with our readers their story of how he and his wife created their landing strip.

When we bought the farm, we definitely had an airfield in mind. The property runs about 700 feet east to west and 2600 feet north to south and it was flat. The place just cried out for an airport. There were a few problems that needed to be overcome though. The biggest one was that there were two county drainage ditches

that crossed the property; one ditch was about 1500 feet in from the road and the other ditch was about 2100 feet in. Another problem was the 40-foot power lines along the road to the south and the 70-foot high trees at the north end. We knew that we would be able to overcome the ditches but we would have to learn to live with the trees and wires.

When we decided it was time to put the airfield in we knew that we would need help. We were able to use some of our business contacts that we have developed over the years while running the farm and a small custom sawmill. First thing we needed to do was to lay out where the runway would be going. After taking a good look at our farm the only real option was a north south strip. Then we went online at the State of Michigan website to make an application for a private use airfield. The application process was really quite simple. All they needed was the application filled out; the lat/longs of the field and a topographical map of the area with the proposed runway drawn in. Then we needed to decide what to do about the two ditches that crossed the property.

So the next stop would be the County Drain Commission office. There, we were able to get the information on just what our options were. As we had expected, the only option was to install a culvert over the ditches. We applied for a permit to cover only the south ditch. (The northern ditch had a lot of issues that would have made much harder to cover). The commissioner had to send someone out to take a look at what we wanted to do. Then within about a week or so we were issued a permit for a culvert. The permit stated that we could either install a 3-foot cement pipe culvert or a 4-foot steel pipe culvert. We priced out both options through one of our business friends and found that the price was about same for either. We decided to go with the steel pipe because the cost of installing the steel pipe would be much lower. So with the southern ditch covered with an 80-foot culvert, we would be able to have a 2100-foot strip. That would be plenty of room for our Maule.

The next thing we needed to do was to find a contractor that could do the excavating work. We were able to make a deal with Dave Hoffman Inc. Dave's company would install the culvert, cut in a swale on both sides of the runway crown up the center so the rain water will drain off, and grade it smooth so we could plant the grass. Dave's final bill was very reasonable. After the excavating was complete we contracted with the Maybee Farmer's Co-op to spread grass seed and fertilizer. After the seed was down we ran a roller over it and the grass came in really nice. All and all we were very happy with the way the entire project came out.

Soon after we brought the plane home, we quickly realized that we needed a hanger. Owning a sawmill really came in handy for the hanger project. I designed the hanger with the help of a friend. I was able to produce almost all of the wood for the building myself. It goes without saying that this was a very big savings for us. The only building material we had to buy was hardware and the material and trusses for the roof. We even made our own 40' rollup door. The hanger is a 65'x 40' pole type structure. We put a steel roof on and sided it with 10" board and batten siding that we cut ourselves out of cottonwood



logs. Tina said, "We have been and continue to be very thankful that we have not had any issues at all with our neighbors. In fact, everyone around us has been great. We have received so many positive comments and interesting questions from our neighbors and people who just stop by to introduce themselves and chat for a while."

Bob and Tina's landing strip is not open to the public so if you would like to land there, other than an emergency, you must attain prior permission. If anyone would like to ask Bob and Tina any questions about their airfield or any of the resources they used or the process that they went through during their project, you can contact them by e-mail: l10capt@aol.com or telephone at (734) 604-3604.

If you would like to share your story, just email a short article about your airstrip and we will post it on our website. You are also encouraged to email comments or questions about any of the featured strips. Email us at zelconsult@gmail.com.