

Matheson, Gretchen

By Ian Henley



My friend Gretchen passed away peacefully at Penticton Regional Hospital on October 24th, 2006 at age 78. Her husband, Gordon, and three daughters, Renee, Jane and Jodi and sister-in-law Anna Marie Mathers, survive her.

I first knew Gretchen Mathers as she was then known, at the University of BC. She had burst onto the scene as the Frosh Queen in 1946 as a young woman whose beauty was only second to her amazing charm and radiant personality with a touch of shyness. She became a fashion model and a student pilot with the fledgling UBC Flying Club. Oh, how I envied 'Gretchen' for her glamorous life of flying.

I knew her during my University years and later through mutual friends as a person to be respected and admired. I followed her career in aviation learning of her move to Wetaskwin AB where she became a flight instructor in 1953. It was there that she met Gordy Matheson whom she taught to fly and later married. He later became a corporate pilot with Canadian Pacific Airlines, but she was a woman and CPA did not want to employ her as the first female pilot.

She came to my attention again in 1963 when she appeared in a newspaper photograph standing beside a cockpit door with her father, Fred Mathers, a corporate executive, in the left hand seat having just obtained his Pilot License as Gretchen's student. She later taught her mother Gladys to fly. Shortly after my 60th birthday, I was looking for a flying school and visited Pacific Flying Club at Boundary Bay and found Gretchen there as CFI. Any school with Gretchen as CFI had to be first class and I figured if she could teach her father, she could teach me. I acquired *Queenie*, my C150, and together with Gretchen we learned to fly.

Harry Bauer, a pilot, instructor and author from California said in his book, *The Flying Mystique: In all cases we must invest our total identity into the activity if we are to find the magic it might hold for us. If we are to reach the delight that comes with the joyful exercise of well-developed skills, we must endure times of complete frustration. Unless we wish to be mere dilettantes, this is the price we pay. Those who do, find themselves and pay willingly.* Gretchen found the magic and spent a lifetime helping others to find the joy, the mystique and for many the vocational fulfillment of flying.

Anyone who has flown or worked with Gretchen would instantly become aware that she was a gentle person. Her students would become aware of her very special talent. She was able to explain what was required and then in her calm way would direct correction or instruction from the right hand seat with just a slight movement of her hands seen out of the corner of the student's eye. This could be explained by the fact that Gretchen loved horses and riding which was an important part of her life from the early years in Naramata, BC. The student, like the horse, becomes sensitive to the subtle direction of a skilled and competent person.

I recall a lesson with Gretchen when I was learning to do spins and spiral dives. I told her I was not happy with the prospect. She responded, "Oh, I love spins!" She was lucky *Queenie* did not return with my lunch all over the inside of the cockpit!

Gretchen retired from Pacific Flying Club in 1992 and returned to Naramata where she continued to do instructing and was Designated Flight Examiner for Transport Canada. During her 50-year career in aviation, she flew over 13,000 hours. That's a lot of take-offs and landings and hanging about waiting for the weather to break.

The following is a list of some of Gretchen's accomplishments:

1951 - First flight

1952 - Private Pilot's License

1953-1956 - At Central Aviation, Wetaskwin, AB she obtained her Class 2 and Class 3 Instructor's Rating and met Gordon Matheson who was one of her students. She became Chief Flying Instructor (CFI) in 1956.

1956-1961 - She was an instructor at the Calgary Flying Club. She was a ferry pilot for Piper Aircraft and did charter work for the Sun Oil Company and Alberta Government

1962-1977 - While raising a family, she taught Air Cadets at Chilliwack and Pitt Meadows during the summer months.

1971 - Gretchen obtained her Class 1 Instructor's Rating

1977-1992 - Gretchen was an Instructor and CFI for Pacific Flying Club which is one of the largest flying schools in Western Canada.

2001 - Gretchen retired from Stage Air and from her flying career.

This is the rest of the story!

1977-1978 - Chair of Vancouver Branch of Canadian Aeronautics and Space Industries Assoc.

1975-1981 - Director, Abbotsford International Air show Association

1981 - Awarded the Amelia Earhart Achievement Award by the International Northwest Aviation Council

1982-1984 - Director of BC Aviation Council, Co-chair of Training and Safety Committee. Awarded the Back and Beavington Safety Award

1982-1986 - Membership Chair of the Ninety-Nines, an organization for women pilots. Gretchen was a director of Canadian Owners and Pilots association for many years and a columnist for Canadian General Aviation News.

1985-1986 - Committee member for Canadian Business Aviation Association at Expo '86

1992 - Gretchen had a chapter dedicated to her in Shirley Bender's book *No Place for a Lady* which celebrated women pilots. Bender says about Gretchen, "her philosophy was: always ignore unhelpful comments."

At the presentation of Gretchen's Lifetime Achievement Award, I commented, "Like Sherwood said in Paul St Pierre's book, *Smith and Other Event*: May you enjoy many days, immense, grand, huge, beyond your imagination. Fill each with a little bit of wonder - just as you have done for so many of your students."

Gretchen, I believe you lived that life. Happy Landings - wherever you are!