

Classic aircraft

Time machine

Tracing the stories of a Cessna 120

BY JULIE K. BOATMAN



On November 26, 1946, a Cessna Aircraft Company test pilot named H.C. Jackson walked across the ramp at Cessna Field in Wichita to a Cessna 120 just off the assembly line. After 30 minutes of taking the polished metal flier through its paces in the late-fall Kansas air, he signed off the flight in the aircraft's first logbook. NC77140 had emerged from the nest.

Like a game of telephone played over the years, the pilot-owners of this sprightly, approachable airplane have added pieces to the conversation, creating not only an airplane that differs significantly from the one that Jackson first flew, but one that has collected the legacies of its owners behind each rivet and every stitch.

Now, 56 years, four engine overhauls, and 2,300 hours later, 77140 wears red feathers and scouts the Pacific North-

west with its latest owner, David Hamby. A commercial-certificated pilot based at Corvallis, Oregon, Hamby purchased the 120 in 2001. While poring over the aircraft's several logbooks and records, he wondered about the stories behind each signature. So he sought out these tales by tracing the 120 back to its original owner, Harry Resch.

Resch bought the airplane from one of the first Cessna aircraft dealerships, Clinton Aviation. Lou Clinton, owner of the business once based at now-defunct Stapleton Airport in Denver, recalls his first agreement with Dwane Wallace, then president of Cessna. "Dwane said, 'You have to make up your mind today. We're going to become the biggest manufacturer of light airplanes in the country, so you'd better get on board now,'" Clinton says. "It was a fun business because there was nothing out there." Clinton sold 120s to a number of farmers, but Resch took delivery of the

spanking-new aluminum 120 with red trim to help launch his company, St. Francis Flying Service.

Resch bought the airplane for roughly \$2,845, a good deal of money back then. "My banker loved me!" says Resch. He used the airplane to teach GIs after World War II at the St. Francis Municipal Airport in Kansas, now Cheyenne County Municipal Airport. Along with the 120, he owned a Cessna 140 and 170, an Aeronca 7-AC, and a Piper J-3 Cub. "I was running about 30 students full time. They all got their private licenses there. I drew them from Colorado, Nebraska, and of course most from Kansas." Through his work to develop the airport, Resch was instrumental in helping gain approval from the Civil Aeronautics Authority (predecessor to the FAA) to use St. Francis airport as a GI training base.

Resch logged his hours in the 120 first in speedy 100-hour chunks in the aircraft logbook, putting on nearly 338





Resch sold the 120 to Bud's Flying Service in Yuma, Colorado, in November 1947, almost one year after he purchased it new. The airplane remained a Colorado bird through two subsequent owners in

New regulations required that the N number be put on both sides of the fuselage in 1965. And housekeeping tasks are also reflected in the log's yellow pages: Elliott dutifully cleaned out mouse droppings in 1969 and removed the Narco VHT-2 in 1970. He performed his last annual on the airplane on August 30, 1971, at 1,698 hours, prior to selling the 120 to a couple in Montana in

Once the airplane was his, the 120 became a good project for Herrick. He removed the wings in March 1983 for recovering with Stits fabric, and he found no corrosion "other than where a few mouse nests had been." Mice, it seems, had an affinity for this 120.

Herrick wanted to preserve the airplane's original aluminum exterior, but

An airplane is like a wish with wings—some pilots buy one with the intention of flying it often, yet life's obligations crowd the time.

[illegible]

A dataplate (far left) and a single logbook entry mark the origins of 77140. Its first owner, Harry Resch, is shown in a photo taken about the same time he owned the airplane, in the late 1940s. Resch is still living in Kansas.

East Colfax Airpark, now Aurora Airpark, was developed as general aviation pilots grew tired of fighting the traffic at ever-growing Stapleton to the west, according to Clinton. From 1954 to 1971 Elliott kept the airplane in a private hangar there and signed off on many of its annual inspections himself. Elliott owned the 120 longer than anyone else on the FAA records, and during that time he cared well for it and upgraded it significantly. Elliott died in 1995, but the logbooks show these details.

He installed an electrical system, which allowed for the subsequent addition of a Narco Super Homer radio and transmitter, starter, generator, and battery, at 1,087 hours in August 1955. He recovered the wings and overhauled the engine in 1957; new TSOed seat belts came in 1959; a new windshield ap-

Dan Prudek (kneeling), David Hamby (center), and Tom Bedell (right) share stories of 77140, an airplane each has owned, in front of the old hangar at the Corvallis, Oregon, airport.

the fall of 1971. In 17 years of ownership he had logged 560 hours in the airplane, flying an average of 33 hours a year like so many of us pilots who fly for pleasure.

The airplane languished for nearly a decade, adding little more than 100 hours to its books during that time. An airplane is like a wish with wings—some pilots buy one with the intention of flying it often, yet life's obligations crowd the time. "This airplane had been sitting on the tarmac at Missoula's Johnson Bell Field for a number of years with its tires flat," says Rodney Herrick, a longtime Montana pilot. The eruption of Mount St. Helens in May 1980 also left its mark in dust coating the airplane. Luckily for 77140, this quiet period ended in 1981 when Herrick came on the scene.

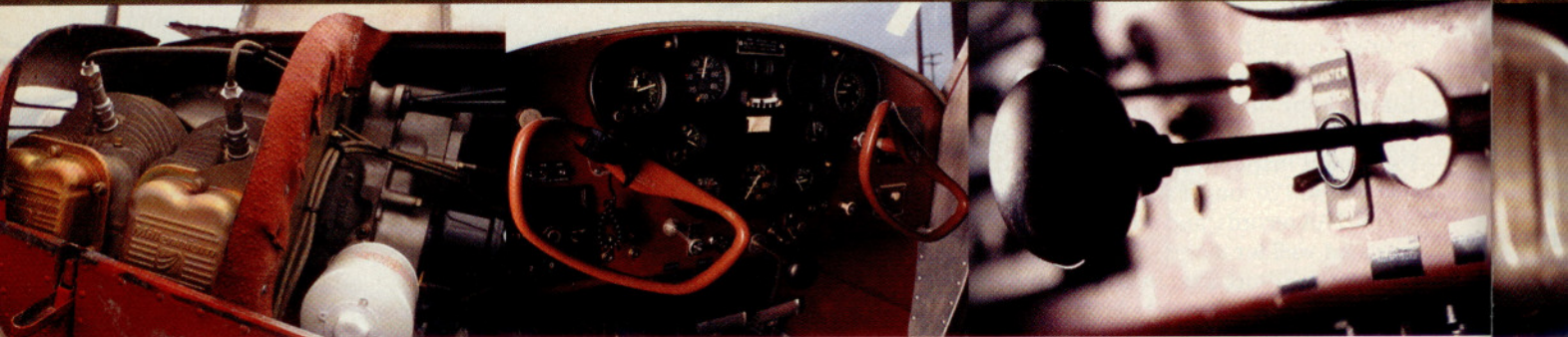
He traded his 1941 Piper J-3 Cub for the 120 at what was then Shook's Mountain Inn's grass strip outside of Hamilton, Montana. It wasn't an exact trade: "I got some money as well," says Herrick. "Shook's [strip] was quite short but I had no trouble clearing the trees. [I] practiced some slow flight and stalls before

no matter how much he polished the airplane, it would no longer shine. "Something had happened to the Alclad," says Herrick. (Alclad, used

in most GA aircraft, is aluminum alloy coated with corrosion-resistant pure aluminum.) He primed and painted 77140 with a cherry-red industrial enamel, as he was unable to afford Imron or a similar aircraft paint. He replaced the original brakes with Cleveland brakes, redid the interior, and rebuilt the starter, generator, and carburetor. He had the 120 back in the air by July the next year, and happily flew the airplane for five years. "I flew with a lot of kids—Cub Scout troops, on career day. I didn't have a lot of money to fly long cross-countries." He sold the 120 in July 1989 to another pilot from Hamilton.

From 1989 through 1992 the 120 acquired a supplemental type certificate for auto fuel, and the tailwheel bracket was replaced.

Then, in 1992, a commercial pilot from Spokane, Washington, bought the 120 for \$10,000 to use as a commuter airplane. Dan Prudek, who based the air-



plane at Felts Field, built part of his aviation experience flying for the Civil Air Patrol. Just before purchasing 77140 he had found work flying parachute jumpers in a Cessna 182 from Willard Field in Tekoa, about 28 nm southeast of Spokane.

During the short hops to Tekoa and around southeastern Washington, Prudek logged about 90 hours in his three years of ownership. Like Herrick, he spent a good deal of his time with the airplane cleaning and restoring it, and

he found the process relaxing. He recalls that the prop had red tips to match the striking paint when he owned it. Prudek added the Cessna decal that still graces the tail, a cosmetic upgrade he found at Aircraft Spruce & Specialty. He also installed an adapter so that subsequently a modern spin-on oil filter could be used.

Now a software engineer at Agilent in the Spokane area, Prudek sold the 120 in 1995. "It needed to fly," he says. Flight

instructor Cass Monnin brought 77140 to his home base at Omak, Washington, about 95 nm northwest of Spokane in the Okanogan River Valley, where he kept it for five years and installed a new Sigtronics intercom.

Flying steadily, the 120 spent the next five years in Monnin's care, after which it was sold to Tom Bedell of Corvallis. Bedell had collected Cessna tailwheel aircraft over the years, and 77140 was Bedell's second 120. He had owned one—

On the ownership trail

Researching the records for information on your airplane

When purchasing an airplane, the prudent pilot devotes some effort to researching its pedigree. But while an examination of the logbooks for the presence of airworthiness directives and damage history is a must, few go beyond this process to get in touch with previous owners—unless there is a problem.

Hamby found a wealth of knowledge and a great deal of satisfaction through establishing contact with prior owners of his Cessna 120. While the experience is potentially gratifying, it should be handled with care.

"We always recommend AOPA's Title & Escrow service," says Rob Hackman, manager of technical services in AOPA's Aviation Services department. Go to the Web site for specific instructions on accessing a chain of title report (www.aopa.org/info/certified/tne/PreBuy.htm). "This report provides the FAA history on all of the previous owners and makes the project much easier," says Hackman. This research, coupled with some basic Internet searches, can usually find contact information for the listed owners.

When contacting prior owners, be clear about your intentions. Establishing a link is best accomplished in the spirit of education, or better yet, a new aviation friendship. Some owners have found common ground that enriches their ownership experience, such as Sharon Hasslinger discovered about her Luscombe: "Three women in a row have owned my airplane. [The first] worked in a paint and interior shop...had the airplane painted to match a favorite china pattern and changed the N number to honor her father," says Hasslinger. The second female owner had the interior done in leather to match the exterior, and added a red flower painted on the new black lacquer panel. Hasslinger now calls the airplane *Gracie*, after Gracie Allen: "She's painted to match a china pattern, so she's gotta be an airhead. But she's got a glideslope, so she's smart. And she is a child of grace."

—JKB



his first airplane—when he and his wife, Gretchen, also a pilot, were newly married, but the couple's expanding array of camping equipment soon overgrewed the little airplane, and the pair stepped up to a Cessna 170. But Bedell liked the feel of the 120 so much he wanted to fly one again for a while. And he did.

However, Bedell already owned a Grumman Super Cheetah and soon came into another Cessna 170B project. Once more, 77140 wasn't flying as much

as an airplane should, and Bedell looked for a new owner for what Gretchen had christened—for no good reason—*The Red Terror*.

He didn't have to look far.

Hamby, like Bedell a professor at Oregon State University in Corvallis, had owned a Cessna 172 in the early 1990s in which he completed his instrument rating. He had sold that airplane for 10 percent more than the purchase price after owning it roughly a year—and starting a

While the engine (far left) has undergone several overhauls and the interior has been upgraded, many features of 77140 remain virtually unchanged by time. However, one owner added the Cessna logo on the tail (above) only 10 years ago.

family. Hamby had about 500 hours but no tailwheel experience when he approached Bedell in 2001 about buying the airplane. "I remember being scared of it in the beginning—I wouldn't even

taxi it," says Hamby. Soon it was his for \$16,000.

He caught up quickly, putting 100 hours on the airplane in the first eight months. Hamby bought the airplane for sheer pleasure flying—and to introduce people to aviation. He now uses it to recruit pilots for the OSU flying club he belongs to, from which he also rents an IFR-equipped 172RG from time to time. "I really haven't flown the 120 that far—it's for low and slow, and going into grass strips," says Hamby. He secures permission to land at private airfields in the

"I feel like if I take my headset off I could easily be in the 1940s—nothing has changed that much."

area by calling ahead to the owners. "Many are old-timers with 10,000 hours. Most say, 'I learned to fly in a 140,'" says Hamby. All are happy to visit with a new friend in an old airplane whose paint is unfaded: The sun isn't that bright in the Northwest, after all. Hamby purchased headsets with red ear cups to match the fuselage, and his kids have nicknamed the airplane *Big Red*.

Hamby has done his share of work on the airplane, putting an estimated \$18,000 into it for a new engine and mount, a prop overhaul, and a new com radio and transponder. With the hangar at \$1,000 annually, and \$700 a year for insurance, upkeep on the airplane is now within reach of a pilot with moderate means. He changes the oil himself, but leaves the rest to the professionals.

Hamby has learned quite a bit from his correspondence with past owners. From Herrick he learned tricks for closing up the cowling in winter. "The engine never ran hot enough [last winter] and I had a bit of condensation in the oil," says Hamby.

He has explored new boundaries in the 120, including spins. "I was apprehensive of spins," but the instructor from whom he logged his requisite 10 hours of dual to please the insurance company insisted that he become competent in the maneuver. He doesn't ven-

ture into other aerobatics, given both the airplane's design limits and its vintage. Hamby has thought about a Pitts, but "it doesn't have the nostalgia."

Indeed, the connection to history he feels while flying the airplane is what Hamby enjoys most. "I feel like if I take my headset off I could easily be in the 1940s—nothing has changed that much. Resch said in one of his notes that he and a student went up on one Easter morning; they got above the clouds and there was a beautiful rainbow. Then he said something about always chasing that rainbow, but not

i Links to additional information about Cessna 120 and 140 aircraft may be found on AOPA Online (www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml). Keyword search: Cessna.

being able to see it again (and knowing now that he certainly won't). I know just what he means about chasing that rainbow. And the day that I see it, I will know for sure that he's right there beside me."

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