



From left to right, Joe Nelsen, Morton Brown, Harry Clements, Obed Wells, E.B. "Fritz" Feutz, and Joe Latas pose in front of N5000A, the first production 172.

1956
50
2006

A 172 reunion

If by some chance you've never flown a Cessna 172, then you probably know someone who has. After 50 years and nearly 40,000 built to date, it would be next to impossible to know exactly how many pilots have had some kind of 172 experience, but it's safe to bet that it's a pretty big club. But have you ever wondered about the charter members—the first 172 pilots?

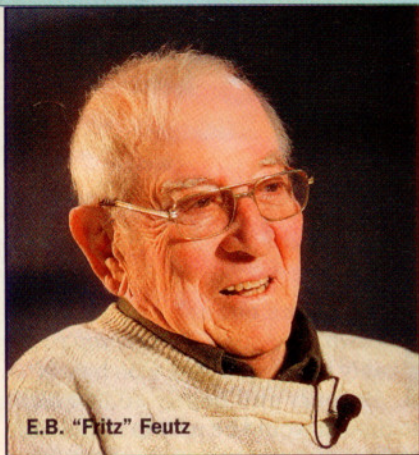
*Cessna test pilots
reunite for a
long-awaited look at
the first 172*

BY DAVID W. ROBB

These honors go to Cessna test pilots E.B. "Fritz" Feutz, who made the first flight of the original prototype 172 more than five decades ago, and Morton Brown, who made the first flight of the first production model 172 off the line (see "The Skyhawk Turns 50," page 70) just months later.

Reunion participants gathered in Wichita (left) to see the first 172. Joe Nelsen (below, center), current owner of N5000A, had plenty of questions for members of the original engineering team.





E.B. "Fritz" Feutz

The first (and only) 172 prototype was in fact a conventional-gear 170C model secretly modified with a tricycle landing gear. And the very first flight of a 172 was a ferry mission on June 12, 1955, to take this top-secret prototype to a "clandestine" testing base just outside of Wichita and out of sight from the competition, namely Beech Aircraft Corp. and Piper Aircraft Corp.

Does Feutz remember that first flight?

"Yes, vividly," Feutz recalled during a recent interview. "Marketing was paranoid about the public being aware of the [tricycle gear] modification so we had to set up a secret base at Kingman, Kansas, which was a grass strip and a barn for a hangar. The first flight was made at sunup on a Sunday morning."

After working at Beech Aircraft Corp. as an aerodynamics engineer, Feutz jumped at the opportunity to fly for Cessna and in 1953 joined Cessna Aircraft Co. as an experimental test pilot.

Another key figure in the development of the 172, Obed Wells, also remembers that first prototype flight clearly. Wells, now 89, was Cessna's chief project engineer in charge of the 172, as well as other airplane programs, and worked at Cessna for 41 years, ultimately as executive engineer.

"I flew chase plane [in a Cessna 180] on the first flight" of the prototype 172, Wells remembered. "Beech always seemed to know when we were going to fly a new model and had a plane overhead to watch. So we thought we'd fix that and rented a hangar at Kingman field.

"As I recall, we didn't get much above 500 feet on that flight. We took off at first light, flew the plane to Kingman, put it in the hangar, and locked the door—we were back in Wichita before 9 a.m."

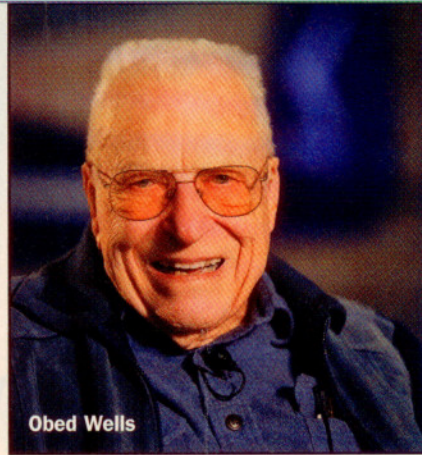
The notation in Wells' logbook for that flight on June 12, 1955: "Observed new 172 in flight."



Morton Brown

Tricycle gear comes of age

In 1955, Cessna Aircraft Co. was a beehive of activity, as were many general aviation



Obed Wells

manufacturers. Piper in particular was making headlines with its tricycle-gear Tri-Pacer, and Cessna felt intense pres-

Top of its class

Reflections from my classroom—the Cessna Skyhawk

By Kirby Ortega

In 1956 two significant events occurred that had a profound impact on the aviation industry. One, I was born and, two, the Skyhawk went from the drawing board to a mass-produced airplane. Since then not only have I aged, but the airplane has matured as well.

My introduction to the Skyhawk took place when I was 12, in 1968. My father was in the U.S. Air Force in Panama, where he also turned wrenches on an Aero Club fleet in the evenings. My inability to see over the dash or touch the rudder pedals kept me from flying, but I did learn a lot about the inner workings of airplanes by helping Dad take off inspection plates. My reward would be to fly on the test hop.

My first logbook entry as captain of a 172 was February 23, 1976, in N80118, a Cessna Employees Flying Club airplane. At that time, I typically landed in a three-point attitude, causing the airplane to swivel around the nose-wheel and make for some interesting flat spotting of the main tires. In the summer of 1976 I literally lived in the Skyhawk while in Tulsa obtaining my instrument rating and commercial and CFI certificates at Ross School of Aviation based at Riverside Airport (now Richard Lloyd Jones Jr. Airport).

Mark Hopp was the student on my first revenue-producing flight, on November 9, 1976, the day the 172 became my classroom. It was now up to me, with 330 hours and hair down to my shoulders, to help others appreciate the wonder of flight. Since that day I have lost hair, gained years and pounds, and added another 7,000 hours of Skyhawk time to my logbook.

During the winter of 1978 I logged a lot of actual IFR with my instrument students. Since the 172 in my book was "all weather" because

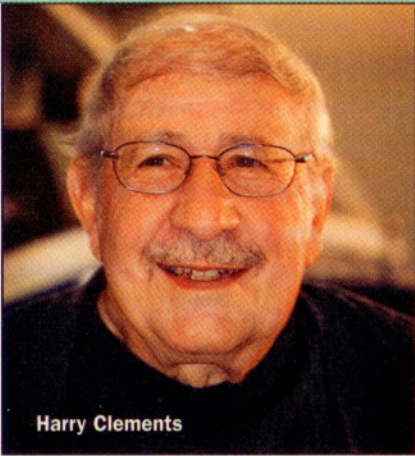
it had pitot heat, we didn't cancel too many flights. With the opportunity to show my students how to recognize airframe ice, N1554E became the unlucky mount. Somewhere on a VOR approach to Runway 3 at Hutchinson,



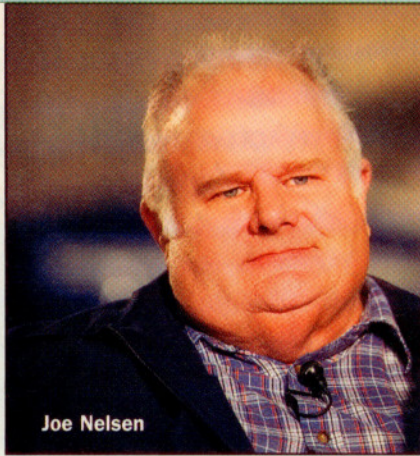
Kansas, we picked up ice, lots of it. It was on the wings, struts, spinner, wheel fairings, and, somehow, the towbar. I recall the struts vibrating and shaking while crossing the final approach fix, or maybe it was just me. With a forgiving wing that continued to produce positive lift until touchdown, we were able to avoid being the opening story on the local 6 o'clock news.

As a highly knowledgeable CFII, I pass on the following lesson: Do not fly a Skyhawk in icing conditions even with pitot heat. Leave the really stupid things for me to do.

The Cessna Employees Flying Club was a Part 141 school in those days, with a fleet of new 172s, and it made me an assistant chief flight instructor. Cliff Donnelly was the chief production test pilot for Cessna then and also my boss as chief flight instructor at the club. After Donnelly retired, my authority was elevated: I became an airman certification representative. The school had examiner authority; with the last lesson of the curriculum the student



Harry Clements



Joe Nelsen



Joe Lastas

sure to respond with its own nosewheel single. Cessna engineers had been experimenting with a tricycle-gear single-en-

gine mockup on their own.

Cessna had just certified the C model of the 170, with conventional gear, and

was planning to roll it out as the 1956 model of what was a popular and successful airplane. Instead, Cessna management privately and abruptly cancelled the 170 altogether and directed its engineering department to proceed posthaste and in all secrecy with a tricycle-gear single.

was awarded his certificate. I had gone from student to teacher to The Hangman.

The day the music died was during the summer of 1986. I had seen Skyhawks birthed at Strother Field in Winfield, Kansas, and when production dropped with sales, production moved to the east side of Wichita's Pawnee Field (now Cessna Aircraft Field). Its final nest was at Wichita Mid-Continent Airport, and it was a very sad day when both production of my 'Hawks and the lights of the facility were shut off. The last "new" Skyhawk I flew in 1986 was N9400L. My classroom was gone.

When the flying club's board met with then-Cessna President Bill Van Sant, we asked the question, "How can we call ourselves a flying club when we don't have any airplanes?" His edict was to do like everyone else: Buy used! We went on a crusade to find pristine Skyhawks, and I first flew N66431 in August 1986. We still have 431 on our ramp today, with more than 10,000 hours' training Cessna employees.

After nearly 10 years of Skyhawk suppression, Cessna's Russ Meyer and AOPA managed to get the General Aviation Revitalization Act passed. Meyer soon was turning over dirt at the site of the new single-engine capital of the world, Independence, Kansas. In September 1996 I returned, to my new classroom, N172NU, one of the first new Cessnas.

In October 2005, I was assigned to an AOPA photo mission to take pictures of both the very first 172, N5000A, and the newest Skyhawk SP while flying over the Independence plant. The owner of 00A was nice enough to bring it up from Texas for the photo shoot. Our company policy requires that only qualified Cessna pilots fly formation during company shoots. The owner reluctantly handed over the keys with a very suspicious look.

You would have thought he was giving me the hand of his 14-year-old daughter to take to her first prom.

The following month I must have done something to upset my boss because he sent me back to Independence on temporary assignment, to fly first flights on brand-spanking-new Cessnas. I had never before taken a newly built airplane on its first flight, so what a thrill! On top of that, the recent flight in 00A was still a fresh memory.

For my first test flight I lined up on Runway 35 at Independence in N4234K, serial number 172S100018. I had reached a new appreciation for the Skyhawk as it accelerated down the centerline. The Skyhawk is the perfect trainer, personal transport, and ideal platform for the new Garmin G1000 glass panel. Even though it's a 50-year-old airframe design, it has been exceptional to serve as my classroom.

My students are now airline pilots, test pilots, and military jet jockeys. My students are friends and family members (I taught my son how to fly in N441CA). My students have two things in common: They learned in the best classroom, the Skyhawk, and I shared the thrill of flight with them.

Of my more than 14,000 hours as a CFI, about half have been in my classroom—the 172. I'm sure that when I depart westbound for my final flight there is a real good chance 34K will have served as a classroom for some lucky student, CFI, and pilot examiner. Fifty years from today, happy birthday!

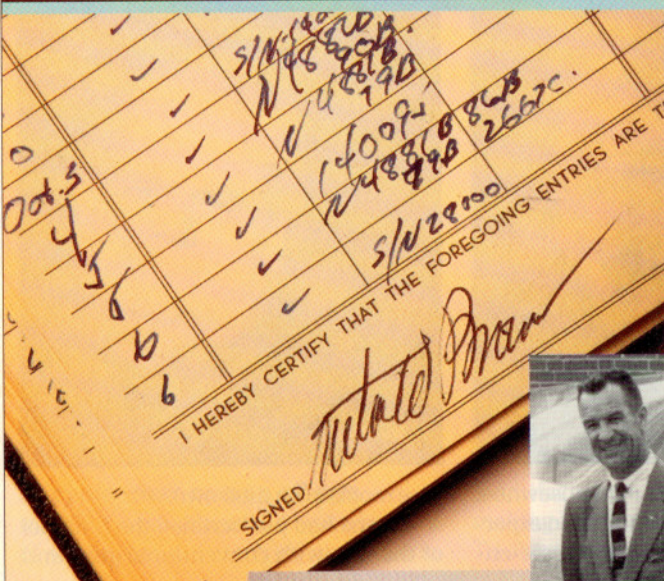
Kirby Ortega, AOPA 1195127, is flight training supervisor, Air Transportation Department, at Cessna Aircraft Co. in Wichita. In 2002, the FAA recognized Ortega as the National Flight Instructor of the Year.

"I got a call at home asking if I would come out to the plant [one Saturday] afternoon," recalled Wells. "When I arrived at the engineering department, Vice President Tom Salter and Chief Engineer Jerry Gerteis announced that we were going to come up with a new airplane that would be tricycle geared, and that it was to be designed and built as a secret project."

Thus, without fanfare, the now-ubiquitous 172 was launched.

Earlier this year, the original production model 172, N5000A (serial number 28000), took part in its own secret mission back to Wichita. Current owner Joe Nelsen agreed to fly the airplane to Kansas from his home base in Texas with friend and copilot John Delashaw. The airplane, with its distinctive square tail, was carefully tucked away in the corner of a large corporate hangar at Colonel James Jabara Airport to await its reunion with some of the men responsible for its development. With help from former Cessna engineer Joe Lastas, Feutz, Brown, Wells, and Clements were invited by AOPA Pilot to come see their "first born" and reflect on its remarkable 50-year run.

As the group gathered on the appointed morning at Jabara, there was an air of expectation and celebration. While these pilots and engineers had worked closely together at Cessna on the 172 and other airplane programs, all are retired and many hadn't seen each other for years. Family and friends were on hand for the event as well.



Morton Brown's logbook (left) records the first flight of N5000A, the first production 172 (serial number 28000) on October 6, 1955. E.B. "Fritz" Feutz, Morton Brown (inset, 1957), Obed Wells, and Harry Clements, their first time together in many

years, reminisce about events, people, and places (below).



By nature or training, professional test pilots tend to be unemotional and matter-of-fact about all things aviation (at least on the exterior). But when this group laid eyes on N5000A after so many years, even these "hardened" professionals couldn't help themselves.



"It's beautiful," exclaimed Wells.

"It's been a long time since I've seen that one," said Brown with a smile. "That's a class airplane." Brown first flew the airplane on October 6, 1955, as chief of production-flight test. During his 35-year career at Cessna, he was responsible for releasing more than 85,000 airplanes, out of which he personally logged more than 14,000 first flights.

Now 97 years old, the details of that first 172 flight have blended with his other "13,999" first flights. But Brown remembers the essence of his job: to make sure they "fly right, perform right, and look right," he said proudly, looking at the airplane he had flown so many years ago.

So, what is it about the Cessna 172 that has made it the most popular single-engine airplane of all time? After five decades, Brown still has a quick opinion: "It was easy to handle, it had good performance for what a private owner would be looking for, and the tricycle gear made it easy to land and easy to take off. It's a rare airplane, in my opinion. It performs well, and you don't have to be in a hurry with it."

Harry Clements, the Cessna aerodynamicist who optimized the 170's

"square tail," which was later adopted for the first 172, summed it up this way: "To me, the big breakthrough was in a business sense," Clements said. "Up to that point, we had been designing airplanes for people who were already pilots." With the 172, "we opened up a whole new category of people who could use an airplane for business and leisure transportation who would not have even thought of that given how much harder it was to fly a tailwheel airplane."

What did this veteran group of engineers and pilots think about the Cessna 172 five decades and 39,400 units later? We'll give the group the last word.

"The airplane to me is just as good after 50 years," Feutz declared. "I hope the 172 makes it to 40,000...I think it will."

"It's good to see airplanes last so long," Brown said, and added, "They should."

"I'm proud of the fact that the 172 is still being built," Wells said. "There's been a lot of changes, but it's still a 172." **AOPA**

i To see video of the 172 reunion, visit AOPA Online (www.aopa.org/c172).

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