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| Life of a Cessna 140  | PDF | Print | E-mail |

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| *Cessna Owner*, June 2008Roger Jones; photos by Jim Lawrence     |
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| The welds look like old scars running around a forearm, like deep rope burns healed years ago. There are four visible welds under the slick white paint, neatly bubbled arcs around the oblong circumference of the strut. They mark the angled ends of two pieces of larger tubing grafted over the smaller diameter originals. The repaired strut is under the left wing of a 1946 Cessna 140. It’s a two-piece strut, a long “A” with its apex at the bottom of the fuselage and legs high in the wing. Everything–strut, wing and fuselage–is slick and white.The welds are part of a repair carried out in July of 1956 by Virl Vogan, chief mechanic at the Howell Airport in Blue Island, Ill., just north of Chicago. Virl repaired more than just the strut: He replaced ribs in both wings and the whole left wingtip, straightening both leading edges before recovering the wings with fabric and finishing with nitrate dope. He replaced the horizontal and vertical stabilizers with used units repaired by the Mid-States Aviation Corporation, housed at Sky Harbor Airport in nearby Northbrook. Virl also mounted a reconditioned McCauley propeller, straightened the cowl, sealed in a new windshield and replaced the radio antenna. Joe Sanchez and his 140Joe Sanchez and his 140Albert Pivonka paid for all of this after purchasing the airplane on July 6 from Lester W. Cotton. Cotton had flown the airplane 55 hours in 1954 and 46 in 1955. Based on the repairs, we can assume the last hour ended badly.The rest of this information is on a compact disc labeled with the seal of the Civil Aviation Registry, dated 01/26/2006 at 10:05:10, referencing aircraft N-Number 89326. The CD came from the FAA in Oklahoma City. My friend Joseph San­chez, the current co-owner of this particular Cessna 140, paid five dollars and sent for it. Everything the FAA knows about NC89326 is on this CD: a complete list of bills of sale, registrations, equipment additions, removals and replacements, major repairs. Simply put, there are pages and pages of information.Joe sent for the FAA’s records on his Cessna 140 because he deeply cares about the airplane. He is very invested in flying and in his airplane. Understanding what he has invested and why tells what an airplane and flying can mean to somebody. Looking at Joe’s records tells how many somebody’s can be involved in the life of an airplane.Joe grew up on a sheep ranch outside Taos, N.M. The youngest of six children, he is 23 years younger than his oldest sibling. His mother died when he was young and his father was a silent, capable man who could fix almost anything and butcher a sheep in two minutes flat. Joe grew up largely on his own, riding a horse with the sheep to summer pastures, riding miles to visit his friends, once riding a steer through a barbed wire fence. When Joe was 15 years old a pair of barnstormers landed a C-47 in a field and offered rides for $2 apiece. Joe bought a ride and took off with nine others to see the countryside from 3000 feet. His first airplane ride set the stage for his future endeavors.After graduating from high school, Joe enlisted in the Air Force, aiming for aircraft maintenance. He had never been more than 50 miles from home. He trained on F-100 Super Sabres at Amarillo Air Force Base in Texas. They were easy planes to work on; four big bolts held the tail cone in place. With those bolts removed, the tail cone would hinge down and the whole engine could be slid out on rails.At King Salmon Air Force Base in Alaska, Joe maintained F-102s in weather so cold the hy­draulic seals would become brittle if an aircraft was left too long on the ramp. In Okinawa the weather was so hot tires melted into the blacktop. At Andrews in Washington, D.C., he got his fourth stripe and became a maintenance supervisor. On summer nights, majors and colonels who sat in offices all day would look for back-seaters to fly with them on instrument currency flights, and Joe was always willing.Cessna 140Joe stayed in the Air Force for nine years. Once married, he took a job with McDonnell-Douglas out in California, spending time riveting components of a forward cabin door. He found assembly-line work constrictive, and when a friend offered him a job repairing Speed Queen appliances, he took a chance at a new career. Ten years, two children and two jobs later he found himself in Richmond, Ky., in business for himself. He had the McDonald’s account in eight Kentucky counties for a while, repairing microwaves on short notice.Joe decided to learn to fly when he was sixty years old, going out to a local farm strip with 2,000 feet of undulating turf, a two-holer outhouse and an ex-Navy carrier instructor. After three years, two check rides, and a designated ability exam to certify fragile vision in one eye, he was a pilot. He calls the path to his private certificate “the hardest thing” he has ever done. Building hours and experience, Joe flew a jump plane for the local skydiving club for two seasons. He taught himself to fly ultralights. But the airplane that would really open up his flying was Cessna 140 NC89326.The FAA’s records describe a Cessna 140 signed off on May 16, 1946 at the Cessna factory in Wichita, Kan., by Sher­man B. Graves, the Designated Manu­facturing Inspection Representative for the Civil Aeronautics Administration (predecessor to the FAA). Graves had to ap­prove no fewer than six documents to get the new airplane out the door. He ap­proved the Application for an Air­worthiness Certificate (signed by Del Roskaw, production manager for Cessna), the actual Airworthiness Certificate, the Operating Limitations placard, and the initial Inspection Report, which included detailed, separately signed-off Weight and Balance Reports and Equipment Lists. This last showed (via initialed line-throughs on a standard Equipment List) that the airplane was certificated without a radio receiver, transmitter, headset, and radio loudspeakers, without a sensitive altimeter or a rate of climb indicator. A separate mailing to the FAA contained the Application for Registration (signed by F. A. Boettger, Secretary-Treasurer of the Cessna aircraft Company) and the actual Certificate of Registration, signed by Graves. There the “identification mark” of the aircraft with “manufacturer’s serial Nr. 8554” was set as NC89326.The path to the first private owner of NC89326 was short. Five days after the sign-off, Cessna’s Mr. Boettger personally appeared before Notary Public Lucille Bishop to execute a Bill of Sale for NC 89326 to the Mid-States Aviation Corporation, the same Mid-States from which, ten years later, Virl Vogan would purchase his used rear components for NC89326’s first rebuild. The sale price listed was the customary “One dollar and other valuable considerations.” Later that same day, W. R. Dotter of Mid-States executed another Bill of Sale for this brand-new Cessna to Mr. Gilbert Hansen. Notary Marcia Levitt witnessed the signatures.Gilbert Hansen’s Application for Regis­tration declares that he lived in Batavia, just a short hop southwest from Mid-States’ Sky Harbor Airport in North­brook. Hansen was 34 years old and had a private pilot’s certificate as well as an FCC radiotelephone license, which was required to operate a radio in an aircraft. He filed for registration the day he bought his airplane. By June 5 the CAA had issued Certificates of OwnershipCessna 140 and Registration (bureaucracy worked fast in those days). Two months after he bought NC89326, he transferred ownership to the company he worked for, the Furnas Electric Company. The documents transferring ownership are very detailed. They show Hansen was Vice President of the Furnas Electric Company, a family-owned operation established in Batavia. Here’s how family owned it was: Hansen was married to Helen Furnas Hansen. She was secretary of the company, of which her father Carl (W. Carlyle) was founder and president. Her mother, Leto, was the company’s treasurer. The four them were the company’s sole Directors.Gil Hansen reassigned the title to NC89326 to Furnas Electric two months after he purchased it, for the sum of $2400. Registration was granted to the company in October. It is unknown wheth­er the plane was used primarily as a corporate aircraft or for Hansen’s private flying. However, Hansen—though considered by his son to be an “ultra-conservative” businessman—had an adventurous streak. He died running the Colorado River in 1957; his body was never found.  NC89326 stayed with Furnas Electric for five years. Gil Hansen himself signed the transferring Bill of Sale on behalf of the company on June 14, 1951. Twenty owners separate Gil Hansen and Joe Sanchez in the life of NC89326. I know from the FAA’s records that the plane sold for $3077.40 two owners after Gil Hansen. I know this because the third owner took out a loan. The fifteenth owner took out a loan too, but was overcommitted. On June 13, 1963, Citizen’s National Bank of Maplewood, Mo., repossessed NC89326 for non-payment of a loan of $2365.06.The tenth and the fourteenth owners of the airplane were one and the same: Willis T. Howell. A “Willis T. Howell” ap­pears on a list published by the Chanute Air Museum near Chicago as a “Sig­nificant Contributor to Illinois Aviation History.” (Unfortunately, inquiries to the CAM about Mr. Howell turned up no further information.)According to the FAA’s records, a rear seat was added to NC89326 in 1970, and later removed. Avionics came and went from the plane, in one case bought and replaced in the same month. The wings of the airplane were repaired and recovered at least three times after Virl Vogan did his work in 1956. Joe Sanchez has seen the outcome of a number of these repairs. By 1991, NC 89326 had come to Richmond, Ky. In 2000, Joe bought his share. He flew the heck out of the plane. He flew to every fly-in at every county airport and grass strip in the area. He ate pancakes Cessna 140and barbecue and traded stories with pilots who had been flying the bluegrass their whole lives. He was invited to every private field and made it a point to drop down into them whenever he passed over. He joined three EAA chapters, organized and flew Young Eagles for all of them, over a hundred children, taking down every child’s name. He says he never knows when he will run into them again.The plane was tired, though. Joe convinced his co-owner that the Continental 0-85 engine needed a major overhaul. While the engine was being rebuilt, Joe started to look carefully at the 140’s airframe. Four years later, with 1800 hours of his time spent under the watchful eye of an A&P mechanic, Joe had gone thoroughly over the entire aircraft.The fall after he finished the restoration, Joe took the renewed aircraft 700 air miles to Faribault, Minn., for the Cessna 120/140 Fly-In, the sixtieth anniversary of that annual gathering. He talked to old Cessna pilots continuously for three days. The New Mexico child of a sheep rancher, now a cross-country pilot, fits right in to the world of classic light planes, their pilots and the county airports they inhabit.Out on the ramp at the county airport near Richmond, Cessna 140 NC89326 gleams white, with red and black pinstripes nose to tail. Virl Vogan’s welds are there on the left strut, as neat and solid as they were 40 years ago. On the sides of the louvered cowl decaled coats of arms announce ‘The Ghost of Cortez.’ That’s Cortez, as in the Spanish conquistador of Mexico. Joe is convinced he shares Cortez’s exploratory spirit and NC89326 has been his vehicle for expressing it. |