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 Northwest 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 Gls 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...
hours in the airplane’s first year flying. “Then when GI flight training was
stopped by the government it left me with all the equipment, and the bottom
fell out of the airplane market,” says Resch. “I had all the airplanes paid for
but couldn’t sell them for much.”

Resch sold the 120 to Bud’s Flying Ser-
vice 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

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.

Kirk, on the eastern plains, and then the
airplane went to a pilot and A&P named
Fred Elliott who brought 77140 home to
a new airport in Aurora, Colorado.

East Colfax Airpark, now Aurora Air-
park, was developed as general aviation
pilots grew tired of fighting the traffic at
ever-growing Stapleton to the west, ac-
cording 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 sig-
nificantly. Elliott died in 1995, but the
logbooks show these details.

He installed an electrical system,
which allowed for the subsequent addi-
tion of a Narco Super Homer radio and
transmitter, starter, generator, and bat-
tery, 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.
Helen’s 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
DID get some money as well,” says Herrick.
“Shook’s [strip] was quite short but I had
no trouble clearing the trees. I prac-
ticed some slow flight and stalls before

no matter how much he polished the airplane, it
would no longer shine. “Something had hap-
pened 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 re-
placed the original brakes with Cleve-
dland brakes, rebled the interior, and re-
built the starter, generator, and carbure-
tor. He had the 120 back in the air by July
the next year, and happily flew the air-
plane 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 ac-
quired 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 air-
plane. Dan Prudek, who based the air-

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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 overgrossed 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 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

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

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 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...