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Summer 2009

Betty's Biplane An American Aviation Classic

By Wayne Gorst

Without realizing the significance of what he had just bought, Dan Henry surveyed the mountain of pieces and parts that he hoped was indeed what the seller had presumptuously proclaimed to be a 1929 Great Lakes Biplane.

"I was that proverbial kid at the airport fence always dreaming of being a pilot," Dan told me. But in spite of having accomplished that a number of years earlier, as well as already owning a modern airplane, the lure and mystique of the old time biplanes still ran hot in his pilot veins. "When I saw there was a 1929 Great Lakes in Bill Kennedy's estate sale over by Athol, I figured that might be one I could fix up and fly," Dan said, recalling his happy naiveté.

After getting all the pieces and parts moved into his Colville hangar, Dan started investigating the history of the plane, never imagining he had just purchased a significant piece of American aviation history – one that would consume over 10 years and 11,000 man hours of meticulous restoration and rebuilding.

While sifting through all the historical information on the Great Lakes airplanes he could get his hands on, he kept seeing the names of famous aerobatic pilots who owned and flew them. "I got to the bottom of the list and there was Betty Skelton's 'Little Stinker'. I saw the N number (FAA registration number all airplanes are

required to have) on the tail in the picture and my legs started to vibrate.I'm thinking, my god it's this airplane!"

"This airplane" turned out to be N202K – the very same 1929 Great Lakes biplane, serial #28, that launched the aerobatic career of the young woman who would go on to hold more combined aviation and automotive records than anyone in history. At just 21 years old, a vivacious Betty Skelton flew N202K to win the 1947 Ladies' National Aerobatic Championship, repeating the feat again in 1948 in the same airplane. If that was all she had done, it would have been plenty, but Betty Skelton went on to become "The First Lady of Firsts." The first female pilot to perform an inverted ribbon cutting at airshows; first woman to be included in the NASA testing regimen for future astronauts; first to set a new world lightplane altitude record of 29,050 feet in a Piper Cub; first woman in the world to drive a jet-powered car over 300 miles an hour; the first woman test driver in the automotive industry; and the first to become enshrined in both the International Aerobatics Hall of Fame and the International NASCAR Motor Sports Hall of Fame – just to name a few!



Betty Skelton posing with N202K after winning the 1947 World Aerobatic Championship
Photographer Unknown

After searching for and just missing the very highly regarded Betty Skelton at the 1992 Oshkosh Fly-In, Dan telephoned her at her home in Winterhaven, Florida. After introducing himself, he politely explained that he was now the owner of N202K, her original Little Stinker. She laughed and said "Dan, there is no way you have my airplane." Persisting, Dan said with even more conviction, "Betty, I have your airplane." His detailed explanation of what he had learned of the history of the plane convinced her enough to call Jaime Serra, the mechanic and family friend who had taken care of her airplanes when she was flying the aerobatic circuit so many years earlier.

Although N202K was her first aerobatic airplane, it was her second one, a 1946 Pitts Special, serial #2, that many people associate with her rise to national prominence. That airplane, dubbed "Little Stinker, Too" (N202K was the original Little Stinker), now hangs in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

Betty purchased the Pitts Special in 1948 after winning the second national aerobatic championship in Cleveland, Ohio, flying the Great Lakes. To get both airplanes back to

Florida, Jaime Serra, the mechanic, flew the Great Lakes and Betty flew the Pitts. After getting all the way home and approaching the runway on short final, the Kinner radial engine in the Great Lakes began belching smoke and threatening to quit (Betty said later "you never knew when that Kinner was going to quit on you..."). In all the excitement, Jaime managed to get the plane on the ground but not without serious damage. They pushed the little champion into a corner of Betty's dad's hangar, where it would sit untouched for nearly 10 years.

Betty was much too busy between 1948 and 1951 flying the aerobatic circuit in the Pitts to have paid much attention to the fate of the Great Lakes. She just assumed her father had it dismantled and scrapped. But her conversation with Jaime in October of 1992 convinced her that Dan Henry did indeed now own her original Great Lakes. Jaime explained to her that in the late 1950's the reigning Men's US National Aerobatic Champion, Frank Price, had driven over from Waco, Texas, and purchased the Great Lakes – sorry state notwithstanding – from Betty's dad.

Frank rebuilt the airplane – in a utilitarian sort of way –



Betty Skelton and friend with N202K at the 1947 World Aerobatic Championship
Photographer Unknown

replacing the Kinner with a 165 hp Warner radial engine. The Great Lakes was back in competition. The logbooks indicate that it was flown for brief periods somewhat infrequently until the mid 1960's. Frank had several aerobatic planes stationed regionally around the country to fly in competitions; the Great Lakes remained a part of his winning fleet until William Kennedy, a retired aerospace engineer from Hughes Aircraft talked him out of it in 1965. Mr. Kennedy disassembled the plane in Texas, crated up the parts and hauled it to his new home in North Idaho, near the Henley Aerodrome between Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint.

For the next 25 years Bill Kennedy accumulated many spare parts and necessary components for the plane's ultimate restoration, slowly filling his hangar. In the 1970's an FAA-Certified Great Lakes repair station put all the tooling together to produce the Great Lakes aircraft again. This fortunate event allowed Mr. Kennedy to purchase many necessary parts right from the factory including a complete set of blueprints for the airplane.

When the sale was over and the parts all inventoried, N202K's new owner, Dan Henry, discovered that in addition

to the basic airplane he had six main wheel tires; factory new cylinders and everything else for the top end of the engine; the complete blueprints; premium grade aircraft spruce for new wing spars and ribs; and a host of lesser, yet still important items. All of these items and more would be required in bringing N202K back to its former glory.

When Dan learned what he had bought, he knew he had a bigger obligation to do it absolutely right. "What I thought would be about a twenty grand project turned out to be 11,000 hours worth of combined effort," Dan related as we stood admiring the fully restored biplane. You can do your own math on that investment. Lucky for the Little Stinker, its new owner is the Vice President of Hearth and Home Technologies in Colville, a company he co-founded and helped grow to very successful proportions.

As is generally true in aviation circles, there is a deep love of all things airplane and most of those enthusiasts are always eager to pitch in on a worthwhile project. The Colville aviation community is no different, and Dan had no lack of well-qualified assistance throughout the Great Lake's restoration. Harley Howell II did all the necessary



June 13, 2009, first flight of the restored N202K with test pilot Kelly Mahon at the controls

stripping, repainting and sheet metal work on the fuselage; his son, Harley III, rebuilt one of the wings; Monte Zema rebuilt the wing center section and the other three wings; and Russ Arrell rebuilt the engine (under Monte's supervision), installed all the new fabric covering, painted the airplane, and rigged the flying wires and control surfaces. Dan Henry Sr. did all the woodwork required, including building new spars from the spruce William Kennedy had purchased, all the formers between the spars, inspection cover frames, and blocking. Herb Munro, another biplane enthusiast and former Pitts owner, was the project historian, providing all the research required to "get it right."

"So what's next," I asked Dan. "The plan is to get some hours in it and fly it back to Oshkosh (the premier U.S. Fly-In) in July. We've made arrangements for Patty Wagstaff, the current Women's National Aerobatic Champion and six-time recipient of the Betty Skelton 'First Lady of Aerobatics' award to take Betty (now 83 years old) up for a flight." And who knows, Betty just might decide to do another inverted ribbon cutting while she's back at the controls of her Little Stinker! 

With a little luck, you might get to see the "Little Stinker" at one of these regional fly-ins. And even if it's not there, you can still enjoy a whole lot of aviation related fun and plenty of other noteworthy airplanes.

July 17-19
Northwest International Biplane Fly-In
Spokane Felts Field

July 18
4th Annual Sandpoint Fly-In
Sandpoint, Idaho

August 8
Colville Airport Fly-In and Pancake Breakfast
Colville, Washington

August 21-23
Wings Over Republic Fly-In
Republic, Washington



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