

*Contributions
from our
Members*

Early Soaring in Nevada

by Stanley E. McGrew (This article was provided by Jim Madson)

Jim Madson and I somehow managed to meet during the Air Venture event in Oshkosh this year (2010), and after talking a bit, learned that we both had Nevada soaring experience in our backgrounds. I promised Jim that I would go through my old logs and pictures, and “write something up” regarding soaring activity in the Las Vegas vicinity in the early 1960s, with a view to possibly publishing in your newsletter. Here (finally) is the product of that promise to Jim.

If there was any earlier soaring activity in the Las Vegas area than that I helped get started in the earlier 1960s, I was never aware of it. (Anybody know?) In any event, and like most things that happen in this world, it was a combination of circumstances and a bit of luck that got this glider activity “jump started.”

In 1962, I was assigned by the Air Force to the Nevada Test Site. My wife soon found employment at the adjacent Nuclear Rocket Development Station, where she was the Personal Secretary to the Director of Personnel for Westinghouse Astronuclear. One day in late 1963, she came home and announced “Hey, I saw the interesting résumé today of a technician from southern California that Westinghouse will probably hire. He jumps out of airplanes and flies gliders – both things that you have talked about doing someday.” That really got my attention. I had given much thought to both these things, without doing much about either. Not too long thereafter, a lunch-hour meeting was arranged, where a rapport was quickly established that continues to this day. The individual’s name was Jack Beadle, and he went on to a later career as an Air tanker Pilot (another story for another day). He also threw me out of the airplane for my first three parachute jumps, and I went on to log a total of 1,249 jumps before I hung up jumping (yet another story for yet another day).

But this story is about gliders, so let’s get back to that. Jack owned a TG-4A (a.k.a. LK-10A) that he was planning on bringing up to Nevada. This got me pretty excited, as I was totally taken with the thought of getting very involved in the sport, and this seemed to present that opportunity. Taking Jack’s advice as to the “best way to get started,” I soon cranked up my Fairchild-24 and headed for Gus Briegleb’s El Mirage soaring facility for a couple of days, where I was welcomed with open arms (my extended arm with the fist full of money probably didn’t hurt)! My logbook shows that on 11 January 1964, I made five flights (two of which were solo) in N67532, a TG-3. On



the 12th, I logged two flights in a 1-26, and one flight in a BG-12 (things seemed to move right along in those days)! Then on 1 February I drove back down to El Mirage with the objective of staying until I had obtained my Commercial add-on glider rating, and to adsorb all of the towplane driving experience I could while there. I left El Mirage on the 9th with the rating in hand. Ross Briegleb had been my instructor (while barely out of his teens), and Gus gave me my check ride.

Now, back to Nevada. Jack did bring his TG-4A up, and decided to base it at the Jackass Flats Airstrip in Lathrop



Wells. Several reasons for this. One reason was “proximity.” I had managed to get into government housing (since closed) at Indian Springs Air Force Base, which was a whole lot closer than Las Vegas. Jack had found a “place in the country” for his house trailer in the vicinity of Beatty, Nevada, where he later conned a road grader operating

County employee (as I remember, for a single bottle of whiskey) into carving out a landing strip near his trailer. Jack had just acquired a Luscombe 8A, which he successfully operated in and out of that rather primitive single-roadgrader-pass runway!

The strip at Lathrop Wells might have been custom tailored specifically for our subsequent glider operations. Almost no traffic (the only airplane we generally ever saw was the once a week arrival of the “Doc” to check over the girls at the adjoining so-called “ranch.” We called this weekly visit the “Jolly-Dolly Run.”) The pretty good condition of the strip at that time was due to the improvements made by some promoters who were scheming to start something like a “Lake Havasu City” in the Amargosa River Basin (the river is totally underground, as I remember). These folks had put down a chip coat on the runway, and constructed an 8-bay shade hanger and then “went bust!” So we basically just moved in rent free, and operated out of that strip through October of 1965. The last time I saw that strip, it had been totally taken over by “squatters.” I believe I understand that the County has since closed it as an airport (and run the squatters off, maybe)?



But one “squatter” had already taken up residence on the airport at the time Jack and I moved in. His name was “Slim.” (I am sure he had another name, but I never knew it.) He was an authentic character. He had been a real cowboy in his early years; went into truck driving when he got too old to be comfortable on a horse; and was now scratching out a living as a free lance diesel mechanic. Slim had boarded up one bay of the shade hanger as a shop, and had installed a tiny travel trailer therein as living quarters. He had never had any previous experience around aircraft of any type, but he quickly “took” to Jack and me; and us to him. Talk about a stroke of luck on our part. Only think about it. Would you be comfortable leaving your flying machine alone and unguarded in the middle of a Nevada desert? Slim easily slipped into the role of “unpaid night watchman.” Early on, he had reason on several occasions to put on his boots and hat, strap on his six-shooter, and amble out in his long johns to intercept the vehicle that had just driven onto the airport in the middle of the night. I was never privileged to personally witness this, but I can well imagine my probable reaction to the sudden appearance of this apparition at my car door! The word soon got around, and we were never bothered with a single incident of vandalism on our growing fleet of aircraft (my Fairchild-24 and PT-23, and Jack’s TG-4A and Luscombe).

My logbook shows my first glider flight at Lathrop Wells in Jack’s TG-4A as having occurred on 26 April 1964. All our early launches were via auto tow behind my Ford station wagon. This worked surprisingly well, despite the rather limiting length of the runway. While we were only able to get about 700-800 feet of altitude on a given launch, the generally booming conditions usually enabled one to “hook a thermal” and successfully “get away”



about one out of every two attempts. And although auto tow was working pretty well for us, I early on decided that we needed a tow plane. I was pretty well “tuned in” to the PT-23 since they were both affordable (back then) and capable. (Gus had four of these in service at El Mirage at the time). I found four PT-23s for sale in the greater Los Angeles area, flew down and looked them all over, and bought the best one on the spot. While otherwise very sound, it badly wanted recovering, so I immediately took it up to Fallon, Nevada, and turned it over to the operator up there (an old timer with a lot of dope and fabric experience). It went “on the line” and

made its first glider tow out of Lathrop Wells on 1 June of 1964, and continued to perform in that roll through 9 October of 1965, when I experienced an in-flight fire, and it “burned out from under me!” (The only aircraft I have ever so much as “put a scratch on” in 58+ years of flying, and I totally destroyed that one!) The loss of the tow plane was not a “fun thing,” but the timing at least was not bad, as the Air Force “shipped me out” (to Hawaii) shortly thereafter, while Jack left at about the same time to start getting his toehold in the Air Tanker industry.

But we had a lot of fun and made many good flights while Jack’s TG-4A and my tow plane were both “up and running.” We would sometimes go “on the road” for a weekend. One such expedition was to the Furnace Creek airport in Death Valley. Another was to “Big Smokey Valley” north of Tonopah. I flew the glider up to Tonopah on a Friday evening (my first ever venture much away from home plate), and Jack flew the PT-23 up on Saturday and we then aero-towed on up to Big Smokey Valley. Sunday evening, we put the glider back in the box (my wife had towed the trailer up), and all went home.

Most of our flying was on weekends, but we also did some flying after work during the week. We would meet at the strip, where one of us would tow the other up, park the towplane, and go home. The lucky guy in the glider would then commonly stay up until near dark. One of my most memorable such experiences is a long, final glide home (from over the Funeral Mountains at about 17,000) in (by that time) dead still air with the setting sun at my back.

Although I do not believe there was another single glider in the Las Vegas area at that time, there were a few glider pilots thereabouts who, somehow, “found out what was going on” at Lathrop Wells, and elected to get in on a bit of it. My written record of what then transpired is woefully incomplete, and my memory is not all that great either. But what I clearly remember is that some sort of rather loose association was formed, and A TG-3 purchased and put into operation at Lathrop Wells. (This represented quite a trip for these folks from Los Vegas, but hey! That’s where the towplane was.) My logbook shows my first flight in that TG-3 as having been on 12 June 1965. But neither this log entry, or the log entries for a couple of later flights lists the Registration Number of this machine (which is a great pity, as I believe there is still a TG-3 in your part of the country, which may very well be the same one). Neither do I have a record of any names of these few individuals. Nor do I know whether they were able to “keep anything going” after they lost the services of a towplane. And neither have I ever since flown a glider over Nevada. (I keep promising myself a trip to Jean, but have so far not kept that promise to myself.)

I have surprisingly few pictures from those days, but such as I have, I have sent along with this text (guess I was much more into “doing it” than in “documenting it” back then).



These days, and although (finally) fully retired (I last drove airplanes professionally for the U.S. Forest Service); I am doing most of the aero towing out of the Morgan County Utah “International Airport” in a Callair A-9. The Utah Soaring Association keeps one of their three GROB 103s here, and a fair number of privately owned ships are also based on the field. Come look us up, if you ever get into this area.

