



Offbeat Oregon History: The Bonanza in flight

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

On the afternoon of Oct. 28, 1947, a brand-new airplane lined up and took off from McNary Field in Salem. It was a gleaming red-and-white beauty, one of the very first examples of a model that had just been introduced that year: The Beechcraft Model 35 Bonanza.

The Bonanza would go on to become possibly the most successful small airplane in history; a stretched six-seat variant is still in production today. It was a distinctive-looking aircraft, and its tail was configured in a distinctive V-shape. It was a fast, light-handling plane, an absolute delight to fly.

"When the Bonanza came out in 1947, it was unlike anything else," wrote Richard Collins, an online columnist for Air Facts magazine. "It was aerodynamically clean and the very first ones would cruise 175 mph with a 165-horsepower engine."

Within a couple years of its release, though, the V-tail Bonanza developed something of a sinister reputation. Overconfident and inexperienced pilots, lulled into carelessness by its seemingly docile handling, kept crashing them. Their fatal-accident rate from 1947 to 1952 was 4.9 per 100,000 hours — about two and a half times the average.

There was a particular issue when pilots who lacked the skills or equipment to fly by instruments found themselves in clouds — because the Bonanza was particularly unforgiving when it came to going into a bank, and an airplane in a banking turn does not "feel" like it's turning. "Left to its own devices, a V-tail would be in a spiral dive in a heartbeat," Collins writes. "A VFR (visual flying rules) pilot in clouds was almost autodead."

The other problem was, pilots would get excited and push the planes past their "never-exceed speed," which was rather easy to do in such a clean, streamlined airplane. When this happened, they would develop a sort of death wobble starting at the tips of the V-shaped tail, and once that started, a high-speed crash was virtually inevitable.

Within a few years, the Bonanza had a nickname: The "fork-tail doctor killer," a reference to

the fact that physicians were frequent buyers of the planes — which, at \$7,345, were expensive but not out of financial reach for a reasonably successful professional — and represented a disproportionate number of Bonanza crash victims.

Fans of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and "The Big Bopper" may remember that one particular Bonanza also became, on Feb. 3, 1959, a "fork-tail musician killer."

All that was in the future, though, and unknown to the four men in the little red-and-white airplane climbing into the sky over south Salem that day.

Veteran pilot Cliff Hogue was at the controls, and the airplane's co-owner, state Senate President Marshall Cornett, was with him. Also in the plane were Oregon Secretary of State Robert Farrell, Jr., and Governor Earl Snell.

The four of them were on their way to an 80,000-acre Lake County ranch near Adel, the home of the other co-owner of the airplane, Oscar Kittredge. The plan was, they'd land at Coleman Lake Landing Area, spend the night at the Kittredge ranch, spend the next morning hunting Canada geese, and fly back to Salem Wednesday night.

Everything went just fine at first. The little airplane touched down at the Klamath Falls airport; the men went to Cornett's home for dinner, then piled back into the airplane and took off at about 10 p.m. into an overcast sky.

Two hours later, Oscar Kittredge, waiting by the landing field and noticing the increasingly grim weather, concluded that his four visitors must have decided to stay over in Klamath Falls, so he drove home and went to bed. The next morning, he picked up the phone and rang Cornett's house. Cornett's wife answered the phone.

We can only imagine what that conversation must have been like.

A search was launched immediately, with local aviators flying grid patterns over the missing Bonanza's flight path. The Oregon Air National Guard got involved as well. Everyone hoped that the airplane had been forced to land or crash-land somewhere out of radio range.

A telephone tip came in from a cowpuncher camping in the Dog Lake area, southwest of Lakeview. The cowhand reported having heard a

small airplane engine, and he said it sounded like it might have been having some trouble.

So a group of searchers flew out of the Lakeview airport to check it out, and late on Wednesday afternoon they spotted the wreckage on a craggy pine-covered slope at an altitude of about 6,000 feet.

Drew's Valley District Ranger Jack Smith of the U.S. Forest Service quickly organized a search-and-recovery operation, which set out first thing the following morning. From the evidence at the scene, it appeared that pilot Hogue had simply misjudged his altitude while trying to stay under the cloud ceiling and over the terrain, and flew straight and level into the side of the ridge, shearing off several ponderosa pine trees and crashing into a small gap between other trees, crunching up like a wad of tinfoil. The plane was probably doing at least 150 when it hit.

Everyone was dead, of course.

This posed a unique situation. When the governor dies, his job is supposed to go to the secretary of state. If the secretary of state dies, the succession goes to the president of the Senate. All three of those officials were now dead, their bodies lying in and around that crashed airplane. The Oregon state government had been, essentially, decapitated.

The governorship fell to the speaker of the state House of Representatives, John H. Hall, who was sworn in later that day. His first act was to proclaim the following Monday, Nov. 3, a statewide day of mourning and a legal holiday.

And there was a lot of mourning being done. Earl Snell had been an amazing "people-person," and nearly everyone he had met over his two-decade-long political career thought of him as a personal friend. Snell had cultivated an uncanny ability to remember people's names and faces, even after years. He kept a card file on everyone he met with the names of their spouses and pets, along with other important information, so that upon meeting them he could, with a broad and delighted smile and a jovial pat upon the back, say something like, "Jay! You're looking great. Hardware business still treating you well? How are Marcia and the kids? Still got those two cute little miniature schnauzers?"

This style of gladhanding was so successful that Snell, by the time of his death, had built a virtual fan club among politicians and business leaders, which was sometimes called — only half in jest — the "Snell machine." And it wasn't just the elites that loved him; when elected to his first term as governor, in 1942, he scooped up a whopping 78 percent of the vote — still a record.

He was originally from the small farming community of Olex, and grew up in Arlington, where he later owned an automobile dealership. He got into politics via the Arlington City Council, and in 1926 made the jump to the state House of Representatives, where, after serving four terms and making friends with almost everyone, he was elected in 1932 as secretary of state. Ten years later, he challenged sitting Republican Governor Charles Sprague in the primary, and was elected governor.

It should be noted that Snell's record was not unblemished. He was a supporter of the internment of American citizens of Japanese ancestry during the WWII, and actually sponsored a 1944 bill that would have forbidden Japanese nationals from owning or renting land and prosecuted American citizens if they let non-citizen Japanese (even family members) live with them. It passed easily, but was ruled unconstitutional.

Bob Farrell was widely expected to succeed Snell when he finished his second term as governor, and surely would have moved on to the U.S. Senate after that. Cornett was also an up-and-coming player in Salem.

"Their loss means the way will be opened for new candidates," remarked the Portland Oregonian, in an editorial headlined "Politics Remade Over Night" in that Friday's paper.

Incidentally, another Southern Oregon politician, William Henry Fluhrer, was killed in another Beechcraft Bonanza crash just ten months later. Fluhrer, a veteran war pilot and founder of the bakery empire that first brought sliced bread to Medford, had just been elected to the state Senate and had flown three companions in to his home by Lake of the Woods to talk strategy. After takeoff, something happened; witnesses saw the plane start to waggle and then dive at high speed into the lake.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

An opinion on Superintendent Parent

Krista Parent has been an outstanding leader in the South Lane School District and our community. She was a driving force behind our new High School and our under construction Harrison Grade School replacement. She is so outstanding that she won two National Awards.

Her personal life took some unfortunate turns but what is upsetting is the cadre of vicious attackers who's only goal was to bring her down. The politics of personal destruction. The board did NOT fire Krista. Krista retired on her own terms.

In my opinion the "bad guys" won. It is unfortunate that this can happen but in this environment of detractors being judge and jury will willing assistance of a bias media. What can we expect?

Thank you Krista for your many years of service!!!

David Hemenway
Cottage Grove

A word on the chamber banquet

Over the many years, I have attended many Chamber of Commerce Awards Business Banquets. The one held Saturday evening at the Armory was one of the most enjoyable events I have attended in many years, and my hat is off to the planners and organizers for a job well done. All of the award winners were most deserving.

I would like to mention the Jr. Award went to Chelsea Armstrong, whereby she is awarded a scholarship. Chelsea is a senior at CGHS, and is involved in many projects in the community. I first saw her give a presentation at Rotary over a year ago. For a 17 year old, at that time, she was well poised and well spoken, well

deserving award candidate.

Secondly, the winner of the President's award, which went to a long-time CG resident, member of the PP&L staff, past Chamber executive director, and now manager of Banner Bank, former mayor Jim Gilroy. What is outstanding, in my mind, in dealings with Jim over the years—he has the ability to tell it the way it is, but never looking at the glass half-empty, but half-full. A very enjoyable positive attitude.

These two are so well deserving of their awards.

Don Williams
Cottage Grove

Have something to say?

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IN BRIEF JAN. 24-JAN.30

- The annual Crab Feed has been postponed until Feb. 17.
- Road construction continues on Gateway. Visit cottagegrove.org for daily updates on traffic restrictions.
- Bingo at American Legion will be held on Jan. 26 from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. 50 cents per card. All proceeds will support local veterans' programs.
- Latham Elementary will host a bingo night on Jan. 26 from 6 p.m. to 8:30. The event will feature pizza, 50 cent games and a silent auction.
- Odd Fellows Lodge will be hosting a flashback 1980s community dance party on Jan. 27 from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Residents are encouraged to attend in their best '80's outfits and enjoy the alcohol-free event that will feature a snack bar and raffle for a \$20 Jack Sprats gift certification.
- The library continues to host the Travelogue series, "A Moveable Feast." The three-month long series starts Jan. 29 and features guest speakers who have lived and traveled throughout the world.
- VFW will have its Friday dinner on Jan. 26. Adults can eat for \$9, children under 12 for \$3 and under five are free. Located at 3160 Hillside Dr.
- The Elks' community breakfast is Sunday, Jan. 28 from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. and features all you can eat eggs, ham, pancakes and hash browns. \$6 for adults, \$3 for kids under 12.
- All Star bowling fundraiser is set for Jan. 28 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Cottage Bowl. Proceeds from a raffle for the Strikes for Vets ball will go to VA hospitals. Tournament fee is \$40.

Letters to the Editor policy

In order to ensure that your letter will be printed, letters must be under 300 words and submitted by Friday at 5 p.m. Letters must be signed and must include an address, city and phone number or e-mail address for verification purposes. No anonymous letters will be printed. Letters must be of interest to local readers. Personal attacks and name calling in response to letters are uncalled for and unnecessary. To avoid transcription errors, the Sentinel would prefer editorial and news content be sent electronically via email or electronic media. Hand written submissions will be accepted, but we may need to call to verify spelling, which could delay the publishing of the submission. The Sentinel reserves the right not to print letters that may contain libelous content.

