LOOKING BACK AT
HELICOPTER PIONEERS
AND THE BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY
BY JAMES S. RICKLEFS
In 1933, while still in his teens, James Ricklefs completed pilot training in a Waco 9 and a Fleet 2, and then received his pilot's license. He has continued as an enthusiastic, innovative, and highly productive leader of the aviation community for almost seven decades. He has been an aircraft owner since 1936 and has owned and flown a number of unusual aircraft including a 1916 Spad VII and a 1916 Sopwith "Pup," which he flew to various antique aircraft fly-ins. In recent years he has enjoyed restoring and flying antique aircraft and helicopters. His most recent restoration is a 1935 Fairchild, which is called the "Honeymoon Airplane." He and his wife flew in this airplane on their honeymoon in 1936. This airplane was a wedding present from the bride's father! It was discovered wrecked in a barn a few years ago and was restored by Ricklefs.

Ricklefs' successful business experience is also eclectic and noteworthy, having started in 1937 and including increasingly responsible and demanding positions in finance, plastics and a variety of aviation organizations.

Ricklefs' formal education includes an A.B. degree in Social Science from Stanford University and a B.S. degree in Aeronautical Engineering from West Coast University. He is an accomplished musician, having played saxophone and clarinet in high school and college, including three trips to the Rose Bowl and Rose Parade. He has played with a professional dance band and plays a Hammond organ for home enjoyment.

His helicopter experience began in 1947 when he soloed a Bell 47B and was employed by the Landgraf Helicopter Company. In 1948, Ricklefs purchased two used Bell 47B's and incorporated Rick Helicopters, Inc. as a commercial helicopter charter operator. By 1953, Rick Helicopters, Inc. was the largest in the world in both gross revenue and number of helicopters (35).

In 1948, Ricklefs was a founder and first president of the California Helicopter Association, which became the Helicopter Association of America and, in 1981, was re-named the Helicopter Association International (HAI). He has continued as a leader and active supporter of HAI ever since. He is also a member of many other aeronautical organizations including Helicopter Club of America, American Helicopter Society, National Aeronautic Association, Aero Club of Northern California, Quiet Birdmen, The Early Birds, Air Force Association, Aircraft Owners & Pilots Association, Experimental Aircraft Association, OX5 Aviation Pioneers, Twirly Birds, Whirly Girls Men's Auxiliary, Western Aerospace Museum, Hiller Aviation Museum and Institute, and the American Aviation Historical Society.

Ricklefs is also an active member of a number of community service, yachting, and antique aircraft organizations and social clubs. He has written a number of technical articles and a 967-page book: SFO Quiet Birdmen Photo History.

He has received many well-deserved awards, including HAI's Lawrence D. Bell Award, the Aero Club of Northern California's "Crystal Eagle" award, the Twirly Birds' Les Morris award, the Helicopter Foundation International's Heritage Award, and has been inducted into the OX5 Aviation Pioneers Hall of Fame.
Looking Back at
HELIICOPTER PIONEERS
and the Birth of an Industry
by James S. Ricklefs

A fascinating story about the men and women who took a marvelous invention to the marketplace to see if it could earn its keep in the modern world. By golly it did!

Although the autogiro was an exciting invention, it failed in its quest to earn a living. But it was soon followed by its offspring, the helicopter. The question of the day was: could it succeed where its parents failed? Not only did it succeed, but it excelled and prospered and its many unique uses are evident in dozens of service roles that today's operators and their flying machines perform.

Allow me to introduce to you some of the many interesting and talented people who, since the helicopter's early beginnings, have helped the helicopter earn its keep.

This treatise will be largely anecdotal in nature. The opinions expressed are largely my own and they are gained from my observations after having been in the business over forty years, the many associations and friendships I have made, what I have read, and what others have told me. The main time period that I will cover is roughly 1945 to 1960, with an occasional update where appropriate. With these caveats, let's get on with a trip down memory lane and see how the helicopter shaped history while history was shaping the helicopter. Sounds interesting enough, doesn't it?

EARNING MY WINGS

First I should give you a little background concerning my connection with the helicopter industry. I learned to fly fixed wing aircraft, soloing from the Stanford campus in 1933. Many people are surprised to learn that there was an airport on the campus in 1933, but there were no hangars there and the field was sod. I tied the airplane to the fence. After leaving Northrop I took a job as chief engineer for Aero Industries Technical Institute and West Coast University. John Northrop, Jr. was one of my students. (John really wasn't Jr. as he and his dad had different middle initials, but we thought of him as Jr.) In 1944 armed with a Social Science degree from Stanford University and a degree in Aeronautical Engineering from West Coast University, I left Northrop Aircraft and went to work for Fred Landgraf at the Landgraf Helicopter Company, which utilized an interesting design format based on using rigid laterally disposed rotors with ailerons on the blades. During the war, Landgraf had a couple of military developmental contracts on the H-2 helicopter blade rotor system and we even sold manufacturing rights to an English company. After the war we tried to get it in production but without success. We spent an hour and a half with Robert Gros of Lockheed, much to the chagrin of the people in his outer office. He was intrigued with the design, but decided that Lockheed could not afford to finance the production of the machine.

In 1940 I worked at Northrop Aircraft in the engineering department. While working there, Jack Northrop let me keep my Fairchild airplane at Hawthorne Field adjacent to the factory. There those were different times and aviation was still in its infancy. My solo airplane was a Fleet Model 2 biplane with a tailskid and no brakes. Imagine that-no brakes!

Jim Ricklefs solos the Landgraf model H2 (with an 85 HP Pobjoy radial engine) at Vultee Field in Downey, California, in 1946. The Landgraf machine had contracts with the military, but never got into production.
Landgraf Model H-2 in May, 1946 at Vultee Field in Downey, California, just six months too late to become a charter member of Twirly Birds. In 1947 I learned how to fly the Bell helicopter, taking lessons from the Armstrong Flint organization in the Los Angeles area. I soon realized how fortunate I was that I didn't just step into a Bell or Sikorsky machine and try to fly them solo without proper instruction. The Landgraf machine required far less training: its blade ailerons gave instant control like an airplane, while it took several hours of instruction to get used to the control lag in the Bell and Sikorsky machines.

My instructor at AF Helicopters was Fred Bowen. Also learning to fly the helicopter at this time were Roy Falconer and Joe Seward (sometimes referred to as the "Navy Boys"), Bob Facer, Bob Boughton, Arni Sumarildason and others who would go on to make their mark in commercial helicopter history. Floyd Carson came out and demonstrated autorotations. Later, Joe Marshman was sent out on the same mission. I have flown with a lot of helicopter pilots, but none were smoother and more skillful than Floyd and Joe. When you flew with them it was like sitting in a rocking chair!

Fred Bowen was both my flight instructor and FAA flight examiner. On my solo flight, Fred got out of the machine and for proper balance had Bob Boughton - who had soloed just a few days before - ride with me. Fred told Bob to sit on his hands. I'm sure this took a lot of willpower on Bob's part. Afterward, Fred administered my flight exam. I didn't fly that well. Fred told me if he hadn't ridden with me before, he would have flunked me!

**CELEBRITY ENCOUNTERS**

Seems like most everyone in aviation had a Howard Hughes story to tell. In 1940, my friend Edmund "Woody" Wodrich went to work for Hughes when Hughes had his engineering department at the Grand Central Air Terminal in Burbank, CA. Woody had a fresh aeronautical engineering degree from MIT and Howard had Woody re-designing his shotgun! Shortly after WWII Hughes was flight testing his coaxial propeller fighter plane when the propellers went into reverse. Hughes was seriously injured when he crashed in a residential sec-

tion in the Los Angeles area. Dr. Vernon Mason, the doctor that pulled Hughes through, was a friend of mine. Hughes was so grateful to Dr. Mason for saving him that he set up the non-profit Hughes Medical Foundation in Florida and put Dr. Mason in charge. As Hughes' ventures became profitable he would put them into the medical foundation as a tax shelter. I understand that when he died the medical foundation was his biggest asset.

In 1945 we landed a movie job, in which Yvonne DeCarlo played a modern woman flying a helicopter. The pilot in this film was Mike Meger. Mike didn't like it one little bit when he was forced to dress in drag for the scene. Mike went on to a career with Enstrom Helicopters and won the World Championship in the helicopter free style competition. Mike died of a stroke in 2002.

In 1946 we did some publicity shoots with the Landgraf helicopter and a talented actress, singer, and dancer named Vera-Ellen. Vera had performed a number of musicals and starred with such greats as; Fred Astaire, Danny Kaye, Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, Ann Miller, Judy Garland, and Bing Crosby.
DAYS WITH THE HELICOPTER GREATS

One fond memory was the full day I spent with Igor I. Sikorsky in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I shared a 16mm film showing the Landgraf machine in flight and some construction details. Mr. Sikorsky got his engineering department together and I showed the film. Afterward he took me on a tour of his plant, tipping his fedora hat and greeting each worker by name as we progressed through the factory. His old-world manners were so charming and captivating. He also let me ride in one of his machines. I believe the pilot was Jimmy Viner, who very much impressed me with an autorotation landing.

When I was working out of Los Angeles, Larry Bell visited me several times while visiting his brother, Vaughn Bell, who lived in the area. Vaughn had an old dog whose back legs were failing. Larry had his engineering department design a wheel device so the dog could get about. Helicopters were Larry's babies. I think he was more interested in fixing them than he was in fixed-wing aircraft.

I have known Stanley Hiller since 1944, when I was with the Landgraf Helicopter Company. Stan was considered to be a boy genius. Not surprisingly, he grew up to be a man genius and was one of the "big four" helicopter manufacturers of the early era along with Sikorsky, Bell, and Piasecki. Stan came out with the Hiller 12E, powered with the 540 Lycoming engine, which made it a winner.

Frank Piasecki and I have been longtime friends. Since 1958, we have exchanged many coast-to-coast visits. I visited with him on the east coast and Frank visited me on the west coast. I owned and operated a number of his machines. I had four of his HRP-1s, one HRP-2 and one Vertol V-42A. I sold the HRP-2 back to him and one of my pilots, Bob Delker, flew it from the west coast to the east coast. I am not sure what he did with it or if he still has it. Frank has suffered a stroke and that has slowed his pace, but I understand he still goes to his office daily.

ENTERING BUSINESS: RICK HELICOPTERS TAKES FLIGHT

In early 1948 after observing the excitement and success of Armstrong Flint, I went back to Buffalo, New York and talked to the head of the Bell helicopter division, Dave Forman, and bought two used Bell 47Bs. These had been repossessed from Helicopter Air Transport (HAT) of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which had gone out of business. The new price on helicopters was $25,000. Dave Forman apologized profusely for the perceived high price and told me that in a year or two after they got more production the price would certainly go down. It never happened! I had a chance to meet Larry Bell briefly during this time and got to know him better later.

On Dave Forman's desk there was an ominous warning that should have cautioned me to stay out of the helicopter business. It was a carafe of buttermilk—the classic remedy for ulcers.

I got my start in the helicopter operating business in the Los Angeles area in 1948 with my partner Arni Sumadiason. We rented space in the Landgraf Helicopter Company building near Compton, California. I had financing, engineering, and management skills, and Arni, coming from AF Helicopters, had operating, management and piloting skills. Arni and
I split up after a couple of years because Arni wanted to operate the business locally, so he could be home at night. I felt that to be successful, we should be prepared to take contracts in remote areas. Arni went to AF Helicopters and AF set him up in business with other skilled pilots, ending up under the umbrella of AF's World Wide Helicopters. Ironically, Arni spent practically all of his years after leaving me in out-of-town or foreign locations. Arni was a very successful businessman. He retired to the Grand Cayman Islands where he owns commercial real estate. I visited him there in 1997.

I started in business with an invested capital of $40,000. By the end of the first year I had lost $20,000. The second year I lost another $10,000. I started making money in the third year and just in the nick of time. By the early 1950's my companies had become the largest operators of helicopters in the world, a position I held for only a few years as Petroleum Helicopters and Okanagan Helicopters passed me in a flash. The offshore oil business was the answer for Petroleum, and Okanagan became very large by putting a lot of helicopter companies under one umbrella. I think Glenn McPherson had a lot to do with this.

My major business was in surveying. At that time Alaska was considered a perimeter defense zone. A lot of the territory was unmapped. The military wanted it mapped in a hurry and the surveyors using donkeys were not going to do it. We fulfilled the transportation needs for the Army Map Service, Coast and Geodetic Survey, and the U.S. Geological organizations. The surveyors took high altitude photographs, and then placed control points on them. After determining the location and altitude of these control points the surveyors could use a stereoscopic planograph machine to make a map. It was a faster method of map-making, and it wouldn't have worked without helicopters.

Success allowed me to build a 44,000 sq. ft. hangar and office on four and one-half acres of land at the San Francisco International Airport and a smaller installation at the Anchorage International Airport. Helicopters excel where transportation is either poor or nonexistent and at that time Alaska met this criteria.

In 1951 I bought out the helicopter division of Alaska Airlines, Inc.. This purchase added three more Bell 47's to our fleet. The Chairman of the Board of Alaska was R. W. Marshall. Marshall had a hearing problem and used a hearing aid. As we dickered on a price he kept telling me he wasn't hearing me. When my bid got high enough to suit him, he said, "now I can hear you." Jack Peck handled the details of the sale. Lou Leavitt ran Alaska Airlines Helicopter Division. I believe Lou was an autogiro pilot before becoming a helicopter pilot. Lou was the only autogiro pilot that I am aware of to have transitioned to the helicopter. Lou performed test flights on the Platt LePage XR-1A, a helicopter with laterally disposed rotors, and worked for Helicopter Air Transport (HAT) of Philadelphia. He later worked in the Gulf of Mexico, but ended up in Alaska where I used to see him at QB meetings.

Through the years we had several support aircraft starting with a Taylorcraft, then a Navion, then a couple of Cessna 180's on floats, and finally a Grumman Super Widgeon. We also contracted out for support aircraft in

The Korean War greatly impacted the development of the helicopter industry. Photographs of helicopters transporting the wounded and delivering supplies to soldiers on the ground were just the shot in the arm that the fledgling industry needed.

During the 1951 fire season we lost a helicopter. Lou Hartwig and my chief mechanic, Art Miner, flew a Bell 47 to the lookout station on top of Grass Mountain in the Angeles National Forest. Our service truck with several of barrels of gasoline was there as well. The fire started up the side of the mountain at high speed and even though the helicopter was warmed up they could not take off in time. The forest service people plus Lou and Art fled down the lee side of the mountain and were missing for nine hours. They finally showed up at a camp with most of the clothing burned off their backs, but all alive and well. The lookout station and the helicopter burned up, and the truck with the fuel drums on it blew sky high! Wow!

In 1952 I purchased Elmer "Pete" Schlesinger's U. S. Helicopters, Inc., adding five more Bell 47s to our fleet. Pete became the second president of the California Helicopter Association, which later became the Helicopter Association of America (HAA), and eventually, HAI. One story Pete told me concerned a job he had flying Art Linkletter to a San Francisco celebration. Art was dressed as a Spanish Conquistador, complete with sword, helmet, and breastplate. As Art exited the helicopter he drew his sword and thrust it into the air. The rotor blade got dinged, the sword flew for about a mile and Art had a very sore wrist!

In the late 1950s our year-round Alaska point man, Jack Shields, met a tragic end while in the employment of the Bonneville Power Administration. He flew into a power line across the Columbia River and was decapitated.

In the summer of 1953 we had a large military survey contract in Alaska. We had a hangar and base in Anchorage and we set up another base out on the Alaska chain at King Salmon. We were flying a large number of hours. In mid-season Jackson Hughes brought his ship into King Salmon for a major overhaul. We had power trains built up so we could switch these units with the ones needing overhaul. Jackson was flying a fair amount of hours and was getting bonus pay for those hours, so he really put the heat on the mechanics to get him going again. The mechanics would often work through the night on his aircraft. One morning after a major nighttime overhaul, Jackson took off in a hurry and flew into some wires in front of the Quonset hut. Jackson wasn't real happy about it and neither were the tired mechanics.

In 1954 I moved my operation from Los Angeles to San Francisco to try my hand at providing helicopter airmail and passenger service for the area, similar to what was being done in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. I knew the job could not be done without government subsidy, as operations in those cities had all been subsidized. After working for Los Angeles Airways, M. F. "Mike" Bagan came to San Francisco and announced that he believed the business could operate successfully without a subsidy. He formed a company called
SFO Helicopter Airlines, Inc., sold stock, and started in business. Thinking Mike's operation was a success, the government withdrew their subsidies from New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. They all went under, as did Mike Bagan and his operation.

In 1954 I recruited my cousin, Rex Bishopp to join my company, Alaska Helicopters, Inc. (AHI). In 1967 I sold AHI to him and Tom Craig on a pay-as-you-go basis. In 1977 they sold AHI to Columbia Helicopters, Inc., and eventually in 1995, Columbia would sell AHI to Era Helicopters, Inc.

HAI in Its Infancy

On December 13, 1948 in the offices of AF Helicopters, Inc., at the Burbank, California airport, we formed the California Helicopter Association, and I became its first president. It would later become HAA, and eventually, HAI.

The following people were the original founders of HAI: Knute Flint, Harry Armstrong, Fred Bowen, and James Newcomb of AF Helicopters, Inc.; Joe Seward and Roy Falconer of Rotor-Aids; James S. Ricklefs and Arni L. Sumaratidason of Rick Helicopters, Inc.; Elynor Rudnick and Bob Facer of Kern Copters, Inc.; Fred Blymyer and Bob Boughton of Helicopter Service, Inc.; James I. "Tommy" Thomas, Ed Eskridge, and Phil Johnson of Sky Farming, Inc.; and Art Fornoff of Bell Helicopters. These people certainly deserve the title, "Helicopter Pioneers."

One of my greatest joys in my life is knowing that I played a small part in the history of the fabulous Helicopter Association International—a helicopter success story if ever there was one!

Stories and Characters from the Helicopter World

Over the years, I have met many interesting people who played a key role in the development of the helicopter, and along the way, I was privileged to share in some exciting, historical, sometimes sad, and sometimes amusing moments.

Art Fornoff was instrumental in the founding of the group that later became HAI. I think Art was about the sixth employee hired by Bell. He came to the west coast, working out of the back of his car. Art built the service organization up to a seven million dollar gross before he retired. Sadly I remember World Champion stunt pilot Art Scholl, who died in 1985 while performing a movie stunt flight. Art was some pilot, and worked for me as a mechanic in 1950.

Bob Suggs of Petroleum Helicopters, Inc., left his mark on the helicopter industry. In my files, I have a letter from him written to me in 1949 stating he was thinking of getting into the helicopter business, and asking if I could give him any pointers. The way it worked out, I should have been asking him for advice! He had a few eccentricities such as his refusal to hire California pilots. He claimed that they were used to the swinging west coast and could not adapt to the bayou way of life. Bob and I had been friends since 1955. He was a gracious host. On one of my visits to New Orleans with my wife, we wanted to see the nightlife and try out some good restaurants. Bob was unable to accompany us, but everywhere we went he had left word that we were his guests, and we could not pay for anything. That's a pretty nice way to treat a competitor. His wife Carroll Suggs was every bit as gracious, and turned out to be quite a businesswoman herself following Bob's death in 1989.

In the late 1940's Art Young visited us on the west coast. Fred Bowen showed him around the area by helicopter. Fred was very disappointed that Art didn't seem to be very much interested in helicopters. But Art at this time was in his sketching and painting period and had Fred land every so often so he could sketch something that caught his eye.

Also in the late 1940's Douglas "Wrong Way" Corrigan walked into my office and said he wanted a job flying helicopters. I asked him how much helicopter time he had. He replied that he had none and that I would have to give him a couple hours of dual!

Knute Flint contributed significantly to the helicopter industry. Knute, with financing from Harry Armstrong,
started in business in the Los Angeles area in 1947 and pioneered many first uses for the helicopter. He was a terrific salesman and a very skilled pilot. He was quite a guy, acquiring his sales experience from his days as a Fuller Brush salesman. Later, instead of staying with World Wide Helicopters, Knute took his money and put it into a ski resort venture in the Sierras called "China Peak." And as for Harry Armstrong, I helped Harry celebrate his 100th birthday at the MGM in Las Vegas in May, 1997. Arni Sumarldason was there as well, along with Harold and Pearl Gribble. Harry died four months later.

In 1960 one of the best storytellers in the helicopter business was E. E. "Tug" Gustafson. Dr. Carrol Voss (AGROTORS) recorded and transcribed many of his stories. Tug pioneered helicopter spraying for Sikorsky and then went to Bell and set up seismic and offshore operations. Tug left us in 1994 with Parkinson's.

In 1950 Lou Hartwig, who used to work for me, was one of Bell's top test pilots. Jerry Garbell was an experienced fixed wing pilot-mechanic when he joined us in 1950. We taught Jerry how to fly a helicopter. Jerry later went with Aero Copters in Seattle, which was owned by Bill Boeing, Jr. Later, Jerry ended up owning the company and did very well. He died of a heart condition in 2001.

Elynor Rudnick-Falk was the fifth president of HAI. Around 1950, she ran a helicopter operation out of Bakersfield, California. At our early helicopter meetings she acted like "one of the boys" and would smoke cigars alongside other operators. Elynor and I had a running "tongue in cheek" argument. Elynor sold Knute Flint a Navion airplane. Knute was supposed to have returned the magnesium flare set out of the aircraft but never did. Knute sold the Navion to me. So every time Elynor and I would meet she would say, "Rick, when are you going to give me my flares?" Elynor left us in 1996. We miss her.

In 1950 my Washington attorney was L. Welch Pogue. He was very helpful to our industry and attended and frequently addressed our HAI group as well as giving us free legal advice. On October 21, 2001 he turned 102. He is one of the most accomplished and intelligent men I have known. He was former Chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board. He was instrumental in setting up the rules by which international airlines are regulated. Many years ago Welch was made an honorary lifetime member of HAI.

I had known Hal C. Conners since 1958. He was a good and enthusiastic salesman. In 1961 he served as HAI's 10th president. He was active in the Los Angeles area but died young in 1970. He pioneered the use of electric signs on helicopters among other things.

As a member of the Quiet Birdman society, I had occasion to have lunch with Jimmy Doolittle a few times. No airman has to be told what an outstanding individual Jimmy was. We had something in common as we belonged to a small group that had flown the WWI Spad 7 scout airplane and were still living. In 1970, at one of these luncheons, I presented Jimmy with a photo/history book on the Quiet Birdman, which I wrote. His acceptance speech left something to be desired. He later cleared things up when he told me, "I left my teeth on top of my dresser!"

Ruth Hurst-Jefford, a beautiful and talented lady, was one of our contacts for support aircraft in Alaska. She has done some interesting things in her life. She grew up in the Midwest and learned to fly in Lincoln, Nebraska in an Arrow Sport monoplane powered with a Ford engine. Her first husband was well-known Alaska flyer Jim Hurst. Her second husband was famous Alaska pilot Jack Jefford who worked for the FAA and pioneered much of the Alaska network of routes, airports, communication, and navigation facilities.

Ruth, as well as being an accomplished flyer, was a concert violinist. She played first chair with the Anchorage Symphony and made a number of foreign tours with the Robert Shaw Chorale as concert mistress of his orchestra. Ruth for many years flew the weekly mail run from Anchorage to Skwentna and the return run. I went on this run with Ruth a couple of times and saw how
eager the people were to get their mail and supplies. If I had been a hunter or a fisherman, I'd be in seventh heaven, given all the places we traveled to that had never been hunted in or fished before. Seems I was always too busy with my business to throw in a hook or to shoot anything.

I remember many humorous moments as well. In the late 1940's Ed Montgomery started a helicopter service in Arizona using Bell machines. He visited the factory in Buffalo, New York, where he was taught how to do vertical autorotations. Ed hired Chuck Marthens as a pilot and on their return to Tucson, Ed offered to teach Chuck how to do vertical autorotations. Not realizing that the air is thinner in Tucson than in Buffalo, they sure were surprised when the helicopter compacted horizontally about three feet in a cloud of dust. After that, Bell took vertical autorotations out of the curriculum! Ed later set a record of some kind by trailing a Bell 47B helicopter on its own wheels from Tucson to Seattle. He confused Bell by ordering an unusual amount of wheels, tires and wheel bearings. They were about to re-design the undercarriage before they found out what he was doing.

An amazing incident occurred in 1945, when Bell was testing one of their open ships on a tether. The pilot in a heavy winter flying suit felt things going badly and shoved the collective down hard. He apparently was not wearing a seat belt and this action threw him up into the main rotor blades where he was flung out into a snow bank with very little injury. Not many people could go through spinning rotor blades and live to tell about it!

In the late 1940's Clarence M. Belinn of Los Angeles Airways invited me to come along on one of his mail runs in a Sikorsky S-51. After the ride, I spoke with Clarence in his office. He began lecturing me, saying that Knute Flint and I were giving the helicopter industry a bad name by doing jobs that were too dangerous and that we should be more selective in what we did. The next day one of Clarence's S-51's fell off the post office roof killing the pilot. This taught me a lesson. Just when you feel you know it all and brag about it, something comes along and humbles you.

On one occasion in 1952 Larry Bell was escorting Madame Jacqueline Auriol, who was the daughter-in-law of the president of France. We had advance notice of her visit and arranged to give Madame Auriol some helicopter dual. Wanting things to go
A 1966 issue of Bell Helicopters’ Rotor Breeze shows then-President H.C. “Pete” Brown checking in at the Inn of the Six Flags to attend the HAA 18th Annual Convention. More than 500 visitors, operators, and manufacturers registered for the convention that year.

A 1966 Helicopter Association of America brochure.

smoothly, my staff prepared drinks to be served in my office after we had completed our flight. I asked my first wife, Nadine (now deceased), who spoke French to come down and join us so that Madame Auriol would have someone to converse with. After the flight and some subsequent picture-taking, I ushered my guests into my office. I sat down in my executive chair and fell over backwards! Picking myself up from this embarrassing performance, I explained to Madame Auriol that I did not perform this act for just anyone – only my important guests. As you can imagine, Larry and Madame Auriol thought I was a very funny fellow. Larry also introduced Madame Auriol to Dutch Kindleberger of North American Aviation, Robert Gros of Lockheed, and Denald Douglas of Douglas Aircraft Co. Madame Auriol got to fly in their latest designs.

In 1955 one of my pilots, Bruce Walters, landed his helicopter on the tundra in Alaska. After shutdown, he was startled when a moose charged the helicopter. There was no time to start the machine, and no trees around, so Bruce climbed up and laid flat along the main rotor. He had a whistle in his pocket, which he blew. When the moose heard it he lifted his head and looked around, but when Bruce stopped blowing the whistle, he would lower his head, paw the ground and charge. Bruce kept blowing the whistle and finally the moose wandered off.

I recall one of our pilots, Les Wunsch, telling me about the built-in oven in the Bell 47. In 1955, whenever Les was flying a morning flight in Alaska, he would put a can of corned beef hash in a space between the exhaust and the heater muffler, so that when he stopped at noon, he would have a hot lunch ready for him. Ingenious I’d say!

One hot day in 1955, pilot Buddy Kohls was working in our San Francisco hangar, stripped to the waist. Tattooed across his chest were the words, “I Love Mary.” I told him I hoped he had married Mary. He said that he had married another girl instead, and now he had to keep his undershirt on all the time.

In 1958 we held our annual Helicopter Association meeting at the Inn of Six Flags in Fort Worth, Texas. It was a rowdy affair and I recall that H.C. "Pete" Brown and Richard D. "Dick" Eccles were the ringleaders. They came in to the Bell Helicopter hospitality suite, grabbed all the furniture and threw it into the swimming pool. Then someone told them they were neglecting other manufacturers, so
they went to the Hiller Helicopters hospitality suite and threw that furniture into the pool as they did in other rooms. If that was not enough, the pair then ran naked through the lobby, shocking all the guests. The next day we voted for president of the Helicopter Association and the group was so impressed with what happened the night before that they elected Dick Eccles president! Pete, Dick, and the Helicopter Association have matured much since those days. Pete was elected president in 1965 and ran a good sober convention. But we were never invited back to the Inn of Six Flags.

Tony Page was a journalist and published a small aviation publication based in Texas. She was a good friend of aviation publisher George Haddaway, and had a legendary sense of humor. In 1960, at one of our HAA meetings in Texas, Tony decided to give a gift of a mascot to the Bell Helicopter Company. This gift was a live full-grown donkey. Tony presented the animal to Bell on stage at our annual award dinner. It was the highlight of the evening. After dinner, Tony took the donkey into all the hospitality rooms where a shovel, broom, and trash can were needed for cleanup!

For many years, beginning in Christmas of 1960, I would place a helicopter on my lawn in San Carlos, California, with a Santa Claus mannequin in the cockpit and Christmas lights around it. It was a standing prank in the San Carlos Police Department to send rookie policemen out to my home, telling them they had
a report of a forced landing or crash. I was standing near the helicopter one day when a rookie pulled up to the house with his lights blazing. He got out of the car, took out his notebook and asked me who the pilot of the helicopter was. I said, "Santa Claus." He looked at me, assessed the situation and said, "Those blanket-covered guys back at the station!"

RESTORATION: TLC FOR OLDER AIRCRAFT

In later years I have gotten to know Stanley Hiller even better than I did in the early days, as I have been helping him with his Hiller Aviation Museum on the San Carlos, California airport, which opened in 1998. Stan has put $2.5 million into the museum, making it really first class and well worth seeing. I was involved during the planning stages for the museum for about four years before it opened. Since that opening, I have put my 1935 Fairchild 24C8C airplane in the Hiller museum as well as a number of my antique airplane engines. The airplane is called the "Honeymoon Airplane" and I'll tell you why.

The Fairchild was a wedding present to my wife, Nadine Davis, and myself from her father. We flew in it on our honeymoon in 1936. We later sold it. About twenty years ago, I found it in a barn near San Jose, California, in wrecked condition. I bought it and restored it in memory of Nadine, who died of breast cancer in 1953. I flew it around to air shows for a few years and it won the Grand Champion trophy at Watsonville,


In retirement, I took up restoring old airplanes and helicopters as a hobby. I restored or partially restored a WW1 Sopwith "Pup," a WW1 Spad 7, a Sikorsky R-4B and two R-6As, two Hiller Rotorcycles, one Hiller Ramjet, a 1933 Fairchild 24C8A plus a number of antique engines. I am a lousy mechanic, and I would never fly in anything I've worked on. I mainly supplied the money, hangar space, and the inspiration. Three of those airplanes have won Grand Championship awards.

IN CONCLUSION

The failure rate for helicopter operation businesses in the early days was very high. I would estimate that about one out of ten or twenty made the grade. The reasons why I think I was successful were: (1) Luck (2) I had a large fleet and good engineering and repair facilities, which enabled me to operate almost entirely without hull insurance (3) I had good financial connections, so instead of renting I invested in my facilities and they appreciated through the years (4) I was blessed with a good and loyal personnel team and customer base. Of course another factor was-as they say in the real estate business-location, location, location.

My career as a helicopter operator and businessman gave me the opportunity...
to travel to many places around the world, and meet so many people who went on to become pioneers of the helicopter world. It has been an exciting ride, and I am proud to have played a small role in the history of today's developing civil helicopter industry. That industry spawned an outstanding group of achievers who proved, without a doubt, that the helicopter could earn its keep.

Chuck Marthens (far left), Clay Farnsworth and Bruce Walters spot-check a Rick Helicopters Bell 47-D during a wire-laying contract in 1955. Clay Farnsworth's career ended in a tragic airplane crash in 1964, while he was working for the Forest Service in Idaho.

Art Miner updates the maintenance schedule in his office at Rick Helicopters in San Francisco. Today all of this record keeping is done on computers. October 1956.

Sikorsky Aircraft demonstrates an S-58 to Standard Oil Company and Rick Helicopters, Inc. Pictured are (L to R): Cas Pinkowski, mechanic; Sergei Sikorsky, Demo Manager; Don Gordon, pilot; and Jim Ricklefs, President of Rick Helicopters. October 1957.

Jim Ricklefs at the San Francisco hangar with one of his workhorses, a Hiller 12-E. April 1960.
Jim Ricklefs built his 44,000 sq. ft. hangar and office at the San Francisco Airport. Rick's initial hangars as well as the old administration building in the background were all torn down to make room for a terminal expansion. February 1956.

Our Mission

To provide our membership with services that directly benefit their operations and to advance the civil helicopter industry by providing programs to enhance safety, encourage professionalism, and promote the unique societal contributions made to the rotary flight industry.

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