

A Bonanza Tradition:



THE FORTIERS' BEE

IT'S a well-known fact that certain airplanes have a near narcotic effect on given groups of people, and this is what has given rise to so many type clubs. Some of the airplanes, however, Beechcraft Bonanzas being one of them, seem to work their way into a person's DNA and take up permanent residence in that person's soul. And it must be a DNA-level attraction for the Fortier family of Chico, California, whose Bonanza history started in 1947, the first year the breed was produced, and family members have continued to be involved until today. They represent three generations of Bonanza ownership, with two generations owning the

same airplane, a B35, for more than 38 years. In keeping with the tradition, N5256C is slowly working its way to Rick Fortier and his wife, Leslie, as the family heirloom.

If we were to present the torrid tale of a raggedy old 1950 airplane being stripped down to its underwear and brought back to life one bolt at a time, it wouldn't be the first time we've done so on these pages. Within the vintage airplane community the stories of heroic airplane restorations are becoming clichés. This is why the Fortier Bonanza is unique among vintage airplanes: It has never been restored! Nor has it ever stopped flying. For an amazing 58 years it has been doing what it was designed to do: provide transportation.

The Fortier family business is producing almonds and walnuts. The family immigrated west late in the 1800s and took up residence on what is still the family ranch in Northern California. With a century on the same land behind them, Rick, Leslie, and Rick's brother, Russell, are the fourth generation to work their family ranch and the third to raise almonds and walnuts. And for well more than a half-century, there has been a Bonanza (or two) sitting on the runway.

Rick's grandfather, Herman Fortier, owned a number of brand new Bonanzas. Starting in 1947, Rick's father, Stanley, grew up with his father's Bonanzas and purchased his own, N5256C, in 1970, when the airplane was already 20 years old.



by Budd Davisson

BEECHCRAFT DYNASTY

BONNIE KRATZ

“The airplane had been well cared for,” Rick says. “I was a toddler at the time; I only remember being buckled in and going somewhere.”

You could say Rick and his younger brother grew up in this 1950 B35 Bonanza.

1950 Bonanzas originally came out of the factory with a 185-hp E-185-8 Continental and an electric controllable-pitch propeller. Considering that those original Bonanzas weren’t that much smaller than the last V-tail Beech birds, it’s almost comical to think of them with only 185 hp. Apparently one of N5256C’s owners previous to the Fortiers didn’t think it was so funny.

“Sometime during the late 1950s,” Rick says, “the airplane was

upgraded to a 225-hp E-225-8 Continental engine, which is common in the straight 35 through the F35. It still retained the Beechcraft 215 electric propeller. I have never had the opportunity to fly an older Bonanza with the 185-hp engine, but I am sure more horsepower made a difference. The 225-hp engine and the 215 propeller are still powering this airplane, and with routine maintenance, both should last for quite a while.”

Although his parents bought another Bonanza, an A36TC in 1980, they kept the B model knowing it would eventually be handed down to Rick, who, at the time, was 12 years old.

Rick says, “The B35 has always been Dad’s baby, and since I showed

interest in flying, he not only supported that interest, but made me an increasing part of his aviation life as I got older.”

“Sometime during the 1980s Dad and a friend decided the airplane needed painting. It was getting a little shabby, so they did some research and decided to change it from its G model paint scheme back to its original scheme. So, they used the B35 handbook cover as a guide and repainted it just like it came out of the factory. With this scheme it offers the opportunity to polish most of the fuselage and wings. I now enjoy polishing Five-Six Charlie because of all the compliments we receive. There is nothing like a polished Bonanza.”

After Rick’s father purchased



BRETT BROCK

With its bank of original “piano key” switches across the lower portion of the instrument panel and the metal trim around the central axis of the throw-over control yoke, the interior of the Fortiers’ Bonanza is nearly original. The addition of a set of modern radios and a Garmin GPS 396 increases the utility of this family airplane.



BONNIE KRATZ



BRETT BROCK

5256C, he joined the then newly formed American Bonanza Society (www.Bonanza.org). Rick followed suit, after obtaining his pilot certificate. This was a natural thing to do, considering the birds-of-a-feather aspect of airplane ownership.

When Rick started flying, it

didn't take him long before he was Bonanza-qualified.

“I received my PPL in 1990 in a Cessna 172. I was 22 years old. After that I immediately got my complex airplane endorsement to fly both of our Bonanzas. My father could see the aviation bug had grabbed me pretty hard, and he of-

Rick Fortier isn't deterred by all the aluminum surfaces that need to be kept bright and shiny. “...I now enjoy polishing Five-Six Charlie because of all the compliments we receive. There is nothing like a polished Bonanza,” he says.



BONNIE KRATZ

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The four Fortiers, Leslie and Rick with their two daughters, Hannah and Holly. Their Bonanza has been part of the family since Rick's father bought it in 1970.

ferred me half ownership in the B35. Who could turn something like that down! I knew how much the airplane meant to him. Aviation, in so many ways, has drawn us close together, and this was just the icing on the cake."

Any airplane of that age at some point needs to be upgraded for utility and ease of maintenance, if nothing else.

"The panel is still the original style with the original 'piano key'

switches, which all work. The avionics are Narco, which my father had installed in the mid-'70s. A few years ago, I removed the old Narco automatic direction finder system and the Lear autopilot, which was installed in the late 1950s. Removing them took a tremendous amount of weight out of the airplane."

All retractable-gear airplanes at some time need the landing gear repainted and checked over, and

so it was with Rick's old bird. "We pulled all three gear legs out and had them powder coated, checked the bolts and bushings, and installed new seals," he recalls.

Like we said, this is most definitely not your average tale of restoration derring-do. We're so used to hearing about re-skinning and having to replace half the ribs and track down illusive interior parts, but the nearly 60-year-old Fortier Bonanza's history reads more like the maintenance history of a much younger airplane. But the Fortiers aren't done.

"We have a list of things we're going to do in time," says Rick. "Someday we will have to tend to things like replacing the windows, when needed, reupholstering the interior, and updating the avionics. Recently, the control surfaces were removed, stripped, checked for corrosion, and repainted. They are all-magnesium, so [they] have to be watched carefully. But restore 56C? We don't see any reason to. Besides, if we changed it too much, it wouldn't be perfect."

We like their attitude. The patina on this airplane comes not from age, but from being touched and loved by a family that truly cares for it. This airplane is a member of the Fortier family. Rick and Leslie are both young, and their daughters love to take turns sitting in the front seat with Dad, so there's yet another generation coming along that will layer their own brand of patina on top of that generated by their ancestors.



Rick's grandfather, Herman Fortier, is leaning on the leading edge of an early Bonanza. The fellow on the left in the photo is an associate of the Schmizer Farm Equipment manufacturing company. The photograph was taken in Stockton, California around 1948 or 1949.



Rick Fortier and his brother Russell stand alongside their father, Stanley, after the elder Fortier had purchased what would become a family heirloom, Bonanza N5256C.



The 1950 B35 Bonanza now sports an original color scheme and was upgraded to a 225-hp E-225-8 Continental engine, a later model used on many subsequent Bonanzas. It retained the Beechcraft 215 electric propeller.