



## REMINISCING WITH BIG NICK

# MY 35-YEAR LOVE AFFAIR (PART 1)

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Nick Rezich

All Photos Courtesy the Nick Rezich Collection

Before I get carried away with my love affair, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for the treasures of mail that have reached me since the publication of the "Howard" story.

The following letter is most precious, and I felt it should be shared with everyone:

Los Angeles, California  
August 22, 1974

Dear Nick,

Thank you for sending me a copy of the story—article—about us and our aeroplanes. You told it like it was—and made it very interesting.

I will not argue with you about the Howards being one of the greatest! Do you know that there are several of them out here still flying? As a matter of fact, at one time there was a Howard Club—all members owned and flew the Howard.

Again, thank you very much for everything you wrote and feel.

Best personal regards,  
(Signed) Mike Howard  
(Mrs. Ben O. Howard)

As soon as the "boss" allows me a stamp fund, I'll try to answer everybody. Many letters contain corrections of names, photos, etc.

Let me explain some of these mistakes. First, Jack Cox should receive a medal of the highest order for his ability and patience in transforming my hieroglyphics into readable material. (*Nick is too modest . . . his material is a pleasure for me to work with.*—JBC) His lovely wife, Golda, has come up with the Rezich alphabet, which helps somewhat, but it still takes her two weeks to unscramble the "i's," "e's," "s's," etc.

I love writing to doctors—it's my only chance to get even with them.

Maybe by now you all will understand why some misspelled names sneak in!

This past June I made a five-day whirlwind tour of California visiting some old Howard Aircraft buddies and family friends. My first stop was the most significant and the highlight of my trip. Sunday morning, June 9, dawned sunny and warm in San Francisco, where I picked up a rental car for my tour to Los Angeles. An hour and a half out of Frisco I pulled into the Palo Alto Airport, where I met Larry Low, a gung-ho EAAer and antiquer, whom I had never met before, but knew well from our letter exchanges.

Standing in front of his hangar, we exchanged family introductions—all but one, the one behind the hangar doors. I was really getting antsy, and it showed as I kept pushing on the locked doors. Larry finally got the message, and we opened the doors.



**Big Nick's Culver Cadet at Howell Airport (on the south side of Chicago) when the racy little two-seater was brand spanking new. Notice the ground-adjustable Freedman-Burnham prop.**

There she stood, my love—a majestic lady in all her pomp and glory. The last time I touched her was almost 30 years ago to the day. With moist eyes, I walked up and laid a gentle hand on the door latch and introduced my wife of 23 years and mother of three to my first love affair, a Culver Cadet that I bought new 34 years ago, NC20926, serial number 106.

Larry Low had her dressed up in the latest fashion: urethane paint, tinted one-piece windshield, carpeting, starter, generator, nav/comm, ELT, chrome gear, landing, nav and strobe lights, plus one hell of a lot of tender-loving care. After 34 years I could not find a wrinkle in her skin anywhere. I thought I had a showstopper when I owned it, but you should see it now! This fellow, Larry, has put much effort, time, and money into this priceless jewel. Oh, sure, I made him an offer—but he quickly informed me of others that are available...but not my love—at any price!

This whole affair started back in 1939 when the aviation industry was still reeling from the blow of the Depression. The surviving companies and some new ones were all pushing new models. The route to recovery was paved with many new designs. The OX-5 powered machines had all been turned out to pasture for a graceful and well-earned retirement.

The machines of '39 all sported round engines or the new flat, opposed 4s, all air-cooled. Prices ranged from \$990 for the Cub to \$52,000 for the executive Lockheed 12. The most advanced airplane was on the draw-

ing boards in a small plant located in Columbus, Ohio.

The genius behind the slide rule was Al Mooney, who was known to many in the industry as a bright, ingenious engineer.

## THERE SHE SAT IN FRONT OF THE HANGAR LIKE A THOMPSON RACER WAITING FOR THE STARTER'S FLAG TO DROP!

When Al Mooney announced he was building a two-place airplane with retractable gear that would cruise at 120 mph with a top of 140 mph, have a service ceiling of 17,000 feet, and have a cruising range of 1,050 miles with a 15-gallon auxiliary tank...and all this while powered by only 75 hp and selling for less than \$3,000, he lifted many eyebrows—including mine!

I anxiously waited to see what this new design of Mooney's would look like. I went to the Columbus, Ohio, plant on the pretense of buying a Dart, hoping to get a glimpse of the new Culver. It didn't work. After two days all I got was a lot of rumors and

no peekaboo. Before I left, I made a deal with a friend of mine to send me a snapshot of the prototype as soon as it was rolled out of assembly.

With the coming of fall and winter came my photo...wow! When I saw what that little jewel looked like, I made up my mind right then and there—I had to have one! I ordered one without even having a ride in one. The price was \$2,475. I received the sixth one built, serial number 106, NC20926. A blue and silver paint job was stock.

The late Art Carnahan of Mono-coach fame was the area dealer, and he delivered my new Culver as far as Joliet, Illinois, where the snow stopped him. I drove in a snowstorm to Joliet to pick up Art and view my new jewel. There she sat in front of the hangar like a Thompson racer waiting for the starter's flag to drop!

I don't think I knew what the word *thrilled* meant until that cold evening in Joliet when I opened the cabin door and tried that Culver on for size. Art gave me a fast cockpit check, and then we hopped in the car and headed for my home back in Chicago. During the drive Art explained the gear details and the flight characteristics. By the time we reached home I was ready for the races!

To knock off the chill of the drive, my mother poured us some of our best homemade wine, which was followed by a fiesta supper. After supper and a gallon of wine later, I stuffed Art's pockets with \$2,000 in fives, tens, and twenties and put him on a train for the trip back to Bloom-



**Nick and a friend indulging in a little clowning for the photographer. The insignia is that of the Illinois State Militia. Nick once flew missions for the Militia into flood-ravaged downstate Illinois, landing on roads to deliver blood to hospitals.**

ton, Illinois, his hometown.

My first flight in the new Cadet was two weeks later, when the weather cleared. Up to that time, I had been flying Travel Airs, Pitcairns, a Laird, Bellancas, Stinsons, Porterfields, Rearwins, Cubs, and Howards, and from what Art told me none of the above flew like the Cadet. My brother helped me roll it out of the hangar, preflight it, and cranked me.

As I taxied out, I tried to remember everything Art had told me about the Cadet's handling. It felt good and solid while taxiing, and when I got to the runway, I was ready. I set the tab at zero and poured the coal on. The takeoff was smooth and straight.

I left the pattern and started to climb to altitude for some turns and stalls. In the next 20 seconds I learned all about the Culver's sensitive flippers. I reached up to trim it for climb so I could concentrate on the gear retraction. Well! When I gave the trim handle the usual husky crank, all hell broke loose. The nose shot up...I pushed forward on the stick and went up against the roof...I pulled back, and I was pushed a foot down into the cushion! Another push forward...back on the roof! I finally got the message and stabilized and started *flying* it.

I left the gear down and climbed to 3,000 feet where I practiced medium and steep turns, slow flight, and some stalls. The more I flew it, the better I liked it. Now, I trimmed it for hands off and cycled the gear a few times. All went well, so I headed for Willie

Howell's airport on the south side of Chicago, where I was to keep it. As the airport came into sight, I dropped the nose and let it boil. I went over the office, indicating 170 mph, and this brought everyone out, so I did it again, followed by a steep, climbing turn. I was really getting my jollies!

I dropped the gear, checked the lock, and started in to land on the 1,800 feet of solid runway the Cubs were using. With that gang out there watching, I couldn't afford to goof the first landing. I dragged it in and put it on three points, using about 1,200 feet. The roll-out was like a Cub. I taxied in, shut down, and stepped out... the hero of the airport! I had the fastest, newest, cleanest, most advanced airplane on the airport.

I flew that little airplane all over the country until I went into the service in June 1944. My biggest maintenance bill was for wax. I would wax it every weekend before flying it.

I had no intention of selling the Cadet when I went into service. I checked Willie Howell out in it and told him to give rides in it until I returned. I was home on furlough after completing my basic training when I received a phone call from a fellow from Wellington, Kansas. He informed me he was in town to buy my Cadet. I laughed and told him "no way"—not for sale, and that ended that... I thought.

The following Sunday, I was out at the airport flying the bird when this same fellow from Kansas arrived in

a cab and announced he's come to pick up the Cadet. We went through the whole scene again, only this time he added the green. He started peeling off the big ones, and when he had \$3,500 lying there, I changed my mind and said, "Okay, it's yours!" He still had a fist full left and was willing to part with it.

I asked him if he wanted to go through the logbooks and look the plane over. He answered, "Hell, I know this airplane as well as you do!" I had raced this airplane and never lost to anyone, thanks to the help of "Sludge" Doyle and his "Offy" factory. I had a real hot rod—I was putting out 90 hp with a super-thin Freedman-Burnham prop. That is why this fellow knew all about my Cadet—he had kept track of it and wanted it for the speed.

He turned to Willie and said, "Fill it up." He paid the gas bill, threw his bag in the back, and said, "Give me a crank." I cranked him up and went to the cockpit to shake his hand and say goodbye. As I reached in he handed me a twenty and told me to go have a drink. He took off to the west, and that was the last I saw of NC20926 until June 1974.

After I returned from the California visit I bragged so much about my old Cadet that my son, Jim, sold his beautiful J-3 Cub that he soloed in and bought a Culver Cadet. Now it will be a battle around our house trying to keep the ol' man out of the kid's airplane... oh, well, that's love! 