

# AIR WAYS

MEMORABILIA RELATED TO REGIONAL AVIATION

Contributed by Horace Hamilton III

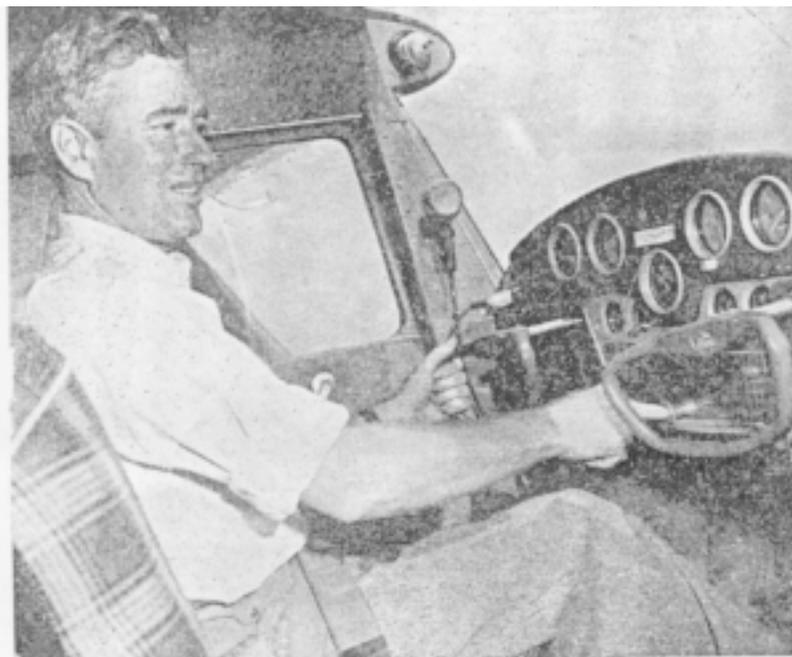
## BIG SPRING AVIATION AND CECIL HAMILTON

Contributed by Horace Hamilton III

Cecil Hamilton was perhaps most representative of Big Spring aviation from the late 1940s through the early 1960s.

At age 33, March of 1947, he purchased a small airport from John Underwood and Garland Sanders. The airport, located just north of Big Spring on the Snyder highway, was to be known as Hamilton Field for the next two decades.

Cecil was already a native of the area, the son of Horace and Nobye Hamilton of Stanton, Texas; his wife, Allene, the daughter of G. M. and JoAnn



*Cecil Hamilton. Picture from a 1951 story in the Big Spring Herald.*

Long, was born on the family farm in Howard County and spent most of her early life in Stanton.

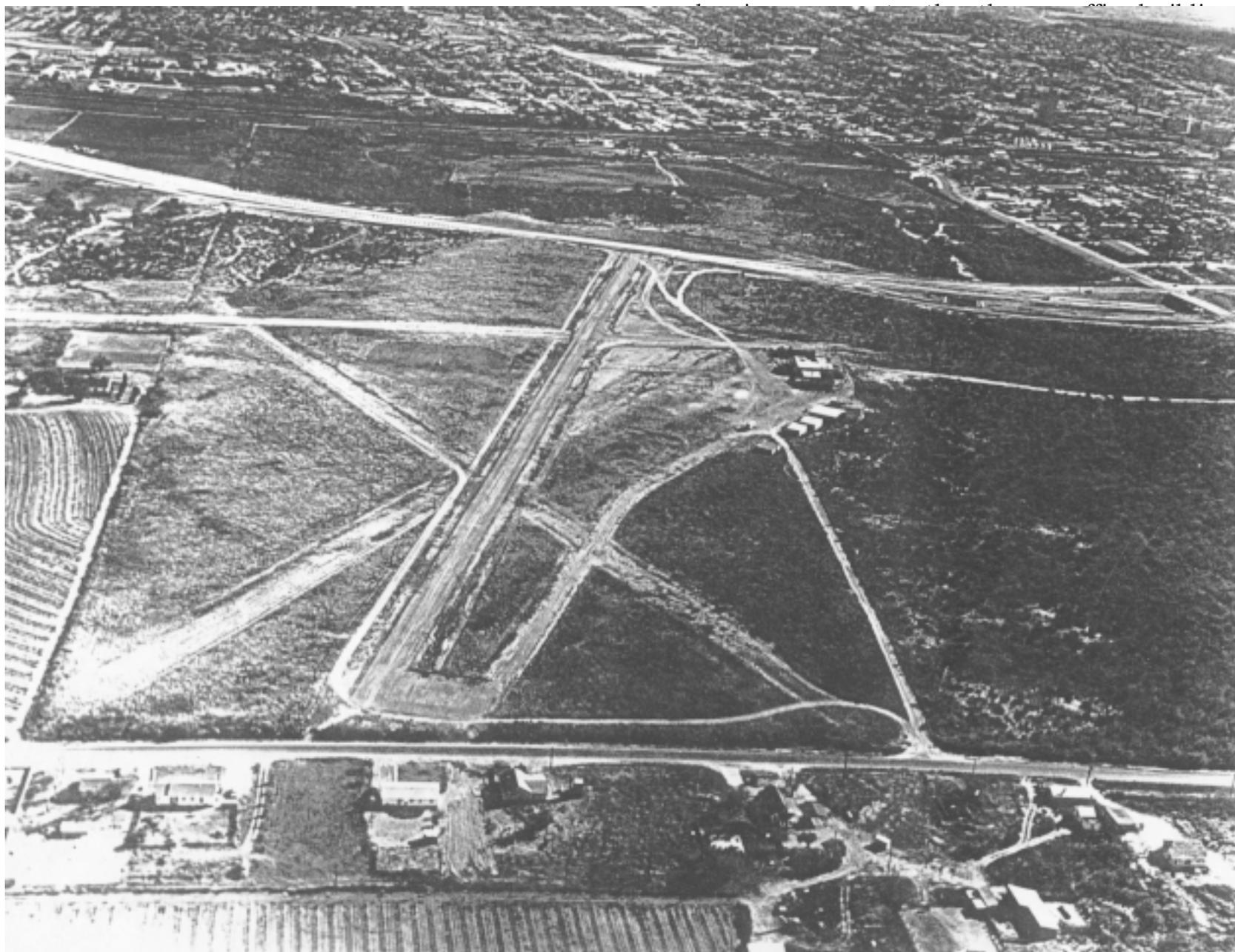
Cecil arrived in Big Spring with experience and credentials in flying. He had had an avid interest in flying since childhood, when he had occasionally played hooky to go to the Big Spring or Midland airports when famous pioneer pilots were in the area, and he had owned his own plane in Odessa prior to WW II.

Cecil's commercial flying experience upon his arrival at Big Spring included approximately three years as a basic and primary flight instructor with the US Army Air Corps (Curtis Field, Brady, Texas), and approximately two and a half years in the airlines...first as a copilot with TWA and later as a captain with Lone Star Air. TWA, headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri, was then known as Trans Western and Continental Airlines, later to be Trans World Airlines. Most of Cecil's flying with TWA consisted of trans-continental flights in the DC 3, but included the Boeing StratoCruiser, which was at that time the largest plane in the world.

Cecil's flying credentials included Private and Commercial Pilot licenses, and Instructor, Instrument, Instrument Instructor, Multi-Engine and Air Transport Ratings.

Cecil looked for other opportunities in flying when Lone Star Air declared bankruptcy, and learned that the airport at Big Spring was for sale.

As owner and operator of Hamilton Field, Cecil was in aviation jargon an FBO (fixed base operator). At the time he purchased the airport, the Underwood-Sanders Field consisted of dirt runways



**Air Ways** *Horace Hamilton*

tiedowns, a few metal hangars and gas pumps. The city airport was at this time located at the former Big Spring Army Air Corps Bombardier Base, which later during the Korean War became Webb AFB. Borrowing money against his farm lands in the Lomax area, Cecil made a number of improvements: asphalt pavement on the “long” runway (3200 ft) and on some of the taxi-strips, runway lights, an Unicom radio system, and relocation of a large wooden war-surplus hangar (the type with large multi-panel sliding doors, which included panels with passage doors) unto a concrete slab and foundation. He also acquired a war-surplus Link Trainer for his flight school (more on that, later).

Hamilton Field became the city airport for almost a decade, the interval between the government’s redesignation of the former municipal airport to Webb AFB, and the building of the Howard County Airport further out on the Snyder Highway. Cecil was sole operator of the airport initially, but later leased an office building and some hangars to the City; the City’s Airport Manager during this time was Barney Edens.

Hamilton Field was for that period of time, in which most private planes consisted of 90 hp to 150 hp light aircraft, a very adequate airfield. The main runway, 3200 ft x 150 ft N-S, was fairly flat and level with a drop-off just beyond the south end; aircraft taking off to the south typically made their first left turn almost over the center of downtown Big Spring. The airport also had a 1850 ft x 100 ft E-W runway for use when a strong west, or occasional strong east, wind made cross-wind takeoffs and

landings difficult or dangerous on the main runway. This runway was intimidating to inexperienced pilots, in part due to the shorter length and in part to the strong roll of the land...a pilot could not see from one end of the runway to the other due to a significant intervening hill!

Even with the physical limitations of the airfield, Hamilton Field hosted many local flight events, only a few of which are mentioned here.

Various regional and occasional state “Air Meets” were hosted at Hamilton Field; these included a number of weekend “Hangar Breakfasts” in which pilots would fly in from neighboring and sometimes distant locations to enjoy camaraderie, a morning breakfast and usually some competitive flying with prizes donated by flying clubs or merchants. The competition usually consisted of events such as seeing how close to a line marked on the runway one could first touch their wheels down, or how close they could drop a bag of mixed sand and crushed lime to an “X” marked on the airport (after the initial air meets, Cecil was voluntarily ineligible for prizes, to allow other pilots an opportunity).

I remember in particular an EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association) meet in which many homebuilt and some very strange looking craft flew to Big Spring; the number of visiting craft far exceeded the routine tiedowns, with aircraft parked all up and down the aprons and taxi-strips.

The annual March of Dimes “Penny A Pound” plane rides event that was held on a Sunday each year for a number of year’s during that period was the first, and sometimes only, flying experience for

many Big Springers: a 165-pound person would pay \$1.65 for a short trip around Big Spring, so that usually with two fellow passengers he/she could view their home and neighborhood from the air. The Big Spring Chamber of Commerce would provide advertisement and reimbursement cost for aircraft fuel, and Cecil and some other local aircraft owners donating use of their planes, time and flying skills; Cecil's donations were invariably the larger since he typically had several of his aircraft in use, flown not only by himself but by some of his flight instructors.

Hamilton Field was on several occasions the host to the Good Year blimp, to glider pilots competing in glider competitions at Midland Air Terminal and who were unable to make it back to Midland having "lost their thermals", and to pilots coming through the area in their efforts or attempts to set time and distance records. One such record achiever was Constance Wolf, who in the early sixties used Hamilton Field as a base of operation in her hot air balloon.

It was not unusual for US Army or US Navy planes to refuel at Hamilton Field in the fifties, rather than going to

Webb AFB only a few miles away. They could refuel at a civilian field and pay with a fuel voucher with less delay and "red tape" than fueling at a USAF base with the consequent hassle of inter-branch transfers.

Hamilton Field was also the home base for Cosden Petroleum's corporate plane, a twin engine Beechcraft, back when Big Spring was the corporate headquarters of Cosden.

An unhappy event in the history of Hamilton Field was a fire which in 1949 consumed the main hanger, along with four of Cecil's planes. The towering flames were very visible in Big Spring, and the fire department responded, but they could not ar-



**Air Ways** *Horace Hamilton*

rive in time to control the inferno.

In addition to the very limited income derived from hangar rent and fuel sales associated with being the FBO, Cecil was a flight instructor, charter pilot, power line patrol pilot and a Piper Aircraft dealer.

Returning WW II veterans qualified for the “GI Bill of Rights” to pay tuition for various types of training and education, including flight training. Cecil and his wife Allene for several years operating a certified a veteran’s flight school. Cecil was the main instructor and Allene was the certified ground school instructor, providing evening instruction in meteorology, theory of flight, etc. after a full day as an elementary school teacher. These “GI flight schools” typically consisted of around ten students who had two classes per week for six weeks. Class graduations were often celebrated with a cookout and dance held at the rock pavilion up on Scenic Mountain. Polly Settles, niece of the Settles for which the Settles Hotel was named, was their secretary for the first few years.

Many Big Springers, including several women and teenagers, also learned to fly at Hamilton Field, independent of the GI flight schools. At times, Cecil had a full-time and one or more part-time flight instructors working under him. These included Wayne Yeager, Elby Henderson, and Howard Lloyd, and perhaps others. A large part of one wall of the lobby of the airport office building was covered with shirt tails (and blouse tails) commemorating first solo flights...it was a standing tradition that upon a student pilot’s first solo, a portion of the shirt they were

wearing on that flight was cut off and, after having the pilot’s name and solo date written in ink and signed by both student and instructor, was tacked onto the wall for display.

Cecil was a real stickler for safety and would not solo anyone until they convinced him they were really ready, including at least once having had Cecil unexpectedly cut the engine to idle to have the student successfully demonstrate they could indeed make a forced landing with no power. There were a few that Cecil never would authorize to solo because he was not convinced of their safety, and unfortunately a few bore a grudge as a result.

Under the CAA (Civil Aeronautics Agency), which in 1959 was replaced by the FAA (Federal Aviation Agency), Cecil was a certified flight inspector authorized to conduct the flying exam to determine if a student pilot could be granted their Private Pilot’s license.

Cecil was tough but fair, but his reputation for demanding, demonstrated competence led more than one student pilot (though not one of Cecil’s students, I think) to travel to Midland Terminal or to other cities to take their test.

Cecil provided air charter service out of Hamilton Field for almost twenty years. Charter trips were for one or several individuals, and included business trips, hunting and fishing trips, and at least one instance I recall in which a local man was trying to get to his dying father’s bed in a panhandle town with no airport...Cecil landed on a road at the edge of town, and the police took the son to the hospital, getting him there in time to be with his father when

he died.

Occasionally a client requested a charter trip when Cecil was occupied by a prior commitment. On several such occasions, if Cecil did not have an available commercial pilot available, Cecil would tell them that he couldn't provide the charter service but would supply the plane at the reduced plane rental fee if they could get a suitable pilot. In response to exclamations on where they were to get a pilot, Cecil would tell them that his son, Horace, was a licensed pilot and would fly them at no charge. Horace, a teenager and not a commercial pilot, was glad for the experience, and the customers liked the savings.

A special type of charter trip were the numerous air ambulance trips in which Cecil would transport critical patients and a nurse to a distant medical center which provided services not available in Big Spring. Cecil had a Piper Tri-Pacer in which, after removing the right front and right rear seat, carried the pilot, a stretcher and a passenger to attend to the patient. The air ambulance trips included locations as distant as the Mayo Clinic at Rochester, MN. The ambulance configuration was used on at least one occasion for Cecil to return the body of a local citizen who had died on a trip out of state.

Of interest, Cecil had the distinction of making the first landing at Webb AFB when Webb was re-dedicated as a military base, and it was under emergency conditions during the opening ceremonies. Cecil had been to Austin to purchase a used plane, a Howard, a high wing monoplane with a large radial engine; the Howard was nicknamed "the pilot's

plane" because of the skill required to control it. The plane was barely off the ground when it suddenly lurched to the side, aimed toward the control tower. Cecil was able to gain sufficient control to miss the tower, but came close enough that he and his passengers clearly saw the shocked facial expressions of the aircraft controllers. Cecil determined that the rudder was locked in a full left position, but that he could compensate with the ailerons; he felt safe enough in the air, but felt that they had a good chance of cracking up when he attempted a landing. Figuring they preferred to crash at home rather than away, Cecil "crabbed" back to Big Spring with one wing low. Approaching Big Spring, Cecil radioed to Webb for permission to land there, since Webb had wider and longer runways and emergency equipment. The commander was familiar with the Howard's reputation and had fire trucks and ambulances dispatched along the runway prior to the landing attempt. Cecil "crabbed" in to align the plane's descent with the runway, and then immediately prior to touchdown altered aileron control to allow the plane's wheels to align with the runway....and made a perfect landing ! The base commander was skeptical that anyone could make a good landing in a Howard under the described conditions, and gave orders that Cecil and his passengers were to be kept under observation until the plane was checked out, feeling they were publicity seekers intent upon disrupting the opening ceremonies. It was quickly determined that a pressed fiber pulley which had inappropriately been substituted into the rudder cable system had been sawed into

by the cable action, and the rudder cable was securely locked.

Hamilton Field for most purposes came to an end in 1959, when the County constructed a larger airport with better facilities just two miles northeast of Hamilton Field on the Snyder Highway (the concrete taxi strips of Howard County were bigger and better than the main runway at Hamilton Field). Cecil was a member of the Big Spring Chamber of Commerce Aviation Committee which oversaw the dedication of the Howard County Airport. Cecil continued to use Hamilton Field for the base of his charter and power line patrol activities for about seven years after most others migrated to Howard County, and he had his home on Hill Top Road, immediately to the east of the north end of the main runway; on occasion, he or his son would taxi across Hill Top and park a Tri-Pacer or Cessna by the house while eating lunch.

The second death-knell for Hamilton Field came in 1963 when the IS-20 north bypass (FM 700) was constructed on a path which cut 550 ft off of the south end of the remaining runway, leaving only 2700 ft of runway. The few remaining aircraft owners who had continued to rent hanger space transferred to Howard County Airport at this time.

An informal poll, inquiring as to the flying experience of the responding pilot and of the known experience of their acquaintances, made at an air meet held at Midland Air Termi-



**Texas Air Tourists To Be Here On Oct. 6**

This group worked out plans for the Texas Air Tour in haste to Big Spring on Oct. 4 to take part in dedicating the new Howard County Airport. They met Tuesday morning at Settles Hotel. Left to right, standing, Bill Quimby, manager of the Big Spring Chamber of Commerce, Cecil Hamilton, airport operator, Clyde McMahon, president of the Big Spring Chamber of Commerce; seated, Clyde

Thomas Sr., attorney and amateur pilot, Jack Cook, chairman of the Chamber of Commerce Aviation Committee; Cliff Green, Austin, director of Texas Aeronautics Commission, Ann Burroughs, Austin, director of the 1959 Texas Air Tour and Lieut. Col. D. W. Pendergrast, Webb Air Force Base.

*July 14, 1959  
Big Spring Herald*

**50 PLANES—125 PEOPLE**

**Texas Air Tour To Be Here For Oct. 6 Port Dedication**

Big Spring Chamber of Commerce was assured today that the Texas Air Tour will raise its October travels to being the flying Texans here on Oct. 6. They will join with Howard County in celebrating dedication of the new county airport on that date.

Cliff Green, director of Texas Aeronautics Commission, and Ann Burroughs, managing director of the 1959 Texas Air Tour, both of Austin, were here today to confer with officials on the part the tour can have in the dedication. They met with the aviation

committee of the Big Spring Chamber of Commerce at breakfast in Settles Hotel.

An agreement was made with the two Austin men that the tour would schedule its itinerary to bring the 50 or 60 privately operated airplanes and their 125 passengers to Big Spring at 3 p.m. on Oct. 6.

Their schedule calls for the tour to open on Oct. 3 starting from Terrell. It ends in Galveston on Oct. 10. On Oct. 6, the tourists are to eat a barbecue luncheon in Brownfield. They will take off for

Big Spring immediately afterward and will land at the new airport from 3 to 3:30 p.m. that afternoon. They will participate in the dedication and later will be entertained with some sort of social function. After spending the night in Big Spring, they will take off Oct. 7 at 8:30 a.m. for Marfa.

At the conference this morning were Jack Cook, chairman of the Chamber of Commerce Aviation Committee, Clyde Thomas Sr., Clyde McMahon, Lieut. Col. D. W. Pendergrast, Cecil Hamilton, and Bill Quimby.

nal in the early 1960's designated Cecil Hamilton as the probable *most experienced pilot in the state*: he had at that time logged over twenty two thousand hours of flying time, but moreover, had since obtaining his commercial licence never recorded any flying time that was not business related.

Cecil discontinued flying in 1966 due to health reasons and sold the remainder of his flying business to Howard Lloyd, a former employee. Howard, owner of Big Spring Aircraft, and his family were killed several years later in a crash of their light plane while vacationing in Mexico. Cecil continued his farming and other interests until his death in March, 1993.

#### REMEMBRANCES (NOT NECESSARILY HISTORY)

I worked part time at the airport for several years as a teenager...fueling, washing and waxing aircraft, mechanic's assistant, office help, cleanup and occasionally flying to Midland Terminal for parts or to leave an aircraft for maintenance that couldn't be done at Hamilton Field at that time, flagging for crop dusters...it was a great place to build memories ! Below are some isolated memories that may be of interest.

The F-104 was in the mid-to-late fifties the hottest and most exotic aircraft we knew of. I remember one Sunday afternoon when a F-104 swept down low over Hamilton Field, then lowered his landing gear and flaps and slow-flighted a landing pattern,

coming down to about 300 ft over the main runway. Everyone at the airport was out watching him, astonished and wondering what in the world was going on... it was exciting to see, but we knew no one would attempt to bring the world's fastest plane down on this little airport, especially when an Air Force base was only 4 miles distant.

I was told that it was the brother of Garland Sanders (one of the two previous owners of the airport), apparently saluting fond memories. It certainly stirred up our afternoon.

There usually were more spectators than flyers; many pilots would spend hours sitting on the benches in front of the office, visiting with other pilots and watching students "shoot landings". I learned that you couldn't judge a person by their appearance or dress; some of the wealthiest men gave the impression of having the least.

One such man that I remember fondly is Martie Clayton; although he "was the money" behind the Truman Jones Lincoln and Mercury dealership and was a member of the Clayton-Anderson industries, he was very non-prestigious, typically wearing old worn jeans and older boots. Mr. Clayton had a 12-year-old 2-seater Luscomb that he frequently flew at Hamilton Field, and when not flying, he enjoyed visiting for hours on the benches watching others flying. Martie asked me one spring if I would assist him in roundup; upon asking him what was involved, he wanted me to fly one of his planes and help guide the cowboys on their horseback endeavors. I was surprised but readily agreed, and gained quite an interesting insight! I found that Mr Clayton's

ranch was measured in sections, not in acres, and that he generally had two aircraft actively involved in roundup activities. I thoroughly enjoyed that roundup, to the extent I would have volunteered to have done it without pay. I flew a Piper PA-18 Super Cub equipped with tandem “pivoting” landing gear for soft field operations, and with an electric megaphone speaker mounted between the struts. My duties included alerting the riders to cattle overlooked in draws or behind hills or brush, and to diverting the cattle by buzzing them if some struck out in a direction void of riders.

Occasionally a local pilot would be sufficiently overdue, whether on an official flight plan or based upon family’s anticipations, that search and rescue missions would be initiated, usually in cooperation with the Civil Air Patrol. I can remember Dad funding aviation fuel for search-and-rescue missions out of his own pocket...he would post information on the missing pilot’s flight plans, last-known location and aircraft description, with an offer of fuel at no charge to pilots who would fly a portion of the area of interest to look for the downed plane....I could have been wrong, but I felt some of them took this as a free flying handout, whereas others took the searches seriously.

Once the young son of a prominent electrical contractor was lost, presumably going out toward South Mountain on his own. Dad flew out South of town looking for him and upon finding him, circled low, pointing his wing to the location where the boy’s father successfully led a search party to the missing lad.

Dick Mitchell was an aircraft and engine mechanic at Webb AFB by day, and the chief mechanic at Hamilton Field evenings, weekends and on many of his vacation and holidays. I remember that Dick was very impressive with his strength, and very likable to work with...I can remember his biceps “bulging and rolling” as he worked the wrenches in an engine overhaul.