



"Stella"

As pretty as an Arizona sunrise! As I walked out to the ramp at Casa Grande, Mike Still had just arrived from Chandler, not too far away, in one of the nicest Fairchild 24s flying. He was unbuckling his seatbelt as I approached and welcomed him to the Cactus Fly-In. My interest in his airplane is keen, as I too have a Fairchild 24....probably the slowest known Fairchild restoration project...ever. As I peppered Mike with questions, I surveyed every inch of the aircraft. The Warner 145 engine was still softly clinking as it cooled.

No stranger to the Cactus fly-in, nor to the Copperstate fly-in in the fall, this airplane is a multiple award winning example of a true Classic. You may have seen her in other parts of the country as well. She was first spotted by Mike and his son, Jon, at Oshkosh 2000.

How she, a 1940 Fairchild 24W, NC28648, was courted and caressed, and became known as a Lady named Stella is a story best told by Mike Still:



Fairchild 24W-40 NC28648

"My son, Jon, and I first saw "Stella" listed on the airplane bulletin board at Oshkosh in 2000. Stella was located in the San Diego area and owned by John McGee who had completed an 8 year restoration in September 1994. The airplane had not been flown for 23 years and was purchased by John McGee in a disassembled condition at Gillespie field. We both fell in love with "Stella", but timing was not right to purchase her as Jon was getting ready to leave on a 6 month tour of duty flying off the USS Carl Vinson CVN-70.

I again saw "Stella" listed for sale at Oshkosh in 2001 and she was now owned by Glen Chiappe in Austin Texas. Glen had flown her to Oshkosh to show her off and to offer her for sale. Jon was now stationed in Corpus Christy, TX and I told him that John McGee's airplane was now in Texas and not far from him. In January 2002 Jon was able to get to Austin and agreed to purchase the airplane. We agreed to jointly purchase "Stella" and Jon flew her to her new home at Bishop, TX on February 22. This is when Jon and his wife Jen officially named NC28648 "Stella".

Jon and I flew Stella to Sun-n-Fun in April 2002 from Bishop, TX in 12.2 hours. Our return to Bishop took 3 days, due to weather delays, but only 10.7 hours. Jon continued to fly Stella to Texas fly-ins until January 2003, when he and I flew her to Chandler, Arizona for my turn as caretaker. Due to Jon's military commitments, I have been her guardian and caretaker for the last 7 years. I have enjoyed continuing to upgrade and tinker with Stella and would hate to give her up.



We have only had a couple of learning incidents. Stella was fairly touchy on the ground and never knew which way she really intended to go on landing. After doing a ground loop, with minimal damage, I discovered that she had toe-in on both wheels. Repaired, she is now very proper and lands like a lady. The second incident was an off-airport landing. My son Jon and I went for a desert flight when the engine started to lose power and making loud banging noises. Jon was PIC and we settled for a landing in the Gila River Basin on the Gila Indian Reservation. Only slightly damaged the left wheel pant, but was bogged down in sand. We hired a tractor to pull Stella to high ground to consider what to do after the reservation police and fire department left. Considered pulling the wings off and hauling it back to civilization, when I determined that the culprit that bought us down was an exhaust valve tappet that had backed out and let the valve stay closed. After replacing and adjusting the tappet the engine ran fine, but it was now evening and dark. We sleep with the airplane that night and then taxied out to a paved road in the morning and flew back to Chandler. Stella had sand in her wheels and brakes but was glad to get home.

NC28648 has won several awards at COPPERSTATE Regional Fly-In and at Cactus Antique Fly-In in Casa Grande, AZ. There have been 10 owners since 1943. My son Commander Jon Still continues to fly with the Navy as a Chief Staff Officer of the Wing and T-45 instructor in Meridian, MS. His next tour will be Assistant Air Operations on the USS Truman.

NC28648 currently has 1,765 hours on the airframe and 303 hours on the rebuild engine.” Mike Still.

When you look at Stella’s many features two are readily apparent: The air-driven electric generator and the curvaceous, gracefully sweeping pitot tube fairing. Mike says the generator actually does it’s job well...and the pitot tube fairing is something very unique.

I also noticed there is a static port on the fuselage which I have not seen on other Fairchild aircraft. Internally, there are some items which have been added in the interest of safety, namely modern radios. The Walther DC amp meter compliments the wind-driven generator and maintains her proper “classic” theme.



When Fairchild cognoscentes inspect the “turtle back” of a Fairchild 24, there is close attention paid to the straightness of the longitudinal stringers. Usually, as a Fairchild 24 ages, those stringers and internal bulkheads have a tendency to weaken and deform as a result of the inexorable tightening of the old grade A linen and old finishing dopes used years ago. Like a small but determined weed growing through a concrete walkway, the linen will actually crush the wood bulkheads over time. This is less of a problem with modern fabrics and processes, but those who know will always give a critical eye to this area. Stella was very well restored and her stringers are absolutely perfect. Straight as arrows.





Photo: Jon Still

She's certainly a Lady. Mike and his son, Jon, are lucky to be her caretakers, and they are doing a very fine job in that regard.

The overhead compass is one item I have been searching for. A touch of class can be found in the polished rudder pedals and the FA Pegasus.

This year at Blakesburg the theme will feature Fairchild Aircraft, and I am looking forward to seeing Stella there if Mike and Jon are able to make the journey. It's only three 350 mile legs each way, so I am hopeful they will be able to share her with all who attend. See you there!

Keep the Antiques Flying!

Richard Hawley

