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BAX SEAT

WHO FLIES BONANZAS?

The Inside Scoop on this Flying Cuisinart – Gordon Baxter

LIKE ALL ordinary pilots, I always wondered what went on inside the mind of a Bonanza pilot, and what went on inside a Bonanza. I've got hours at the controls of most common airplanes, but I was never close enough to anybody rich enough to get the chance to go out and fool around in a Bonanza. It was the same in high school; the only girls I took to the picture show where the ones I was pretty sure would go with me – I never tried to date a cheerleader.

Oh, I flew an old Bonanza once. "You got it" was the extent of my formal instruction. We were flying out of a grass strip set among the trees. What surprised me, knowing nothing of the airplane, was how easily it flew. It did what I wanted and sort of told me what it needed, and came down and rolled along smoothly in the grass. No surprises, although I half expected those little rubber casters that Beech calls tires to poke into the ground like crutch tips.

Bonanzas were born for smooth pavement. Did you ever notice how a taxiing Bonanza sort of looks like nineteenth-century ladies of Japanese royalty with their little pigeon-toed feet bound? And after its dainty turnings, showing a surprising bullet nose, it stops with three great samurai swords naked in the sun.

Bonanzas come rumbling up, full of horsepower. I like the way their cowlings open, like the hood of an old Packard, exposing great rows of cylinders. I always expect to find eight or 12 of them in there, with a two-inch copper pipe to the gas tank, but an A36 will slip along at 65 percent, 158 knots, with a fuel flow of only 14.5 gph. The 285-hp Continental six is not really a hog, not that Bonanza owners and other yachtsmen are obsessed with such numbers except for clubhouse conversation.

Beech owners belong to clubs. Excellent clubs. Their Mecca is the American Bonanza Society, in Wichita. All anyone had to know about the airplanes in my past was how to hook up two bare wires. The Beech owners possess a key.

The Bonanza Society is so exclusive that the V-tail people slight the straight-tail people with the whispered curse "Debonair", a designation Beechcraft dropped long ago. At the factory today they are all Bonanzas, but within the cult, a true Bonanza must have a rudder that shares the same bed as your elevators, toe to toe in an elegant vee. There is no such thing as an "old" Bonanza.

The one in which I finally got a chance to make a trip, to fly enough, was a six-place 1975 straight-tail A36. It had a buff-cream basic finish with deep maroon and red contrast trim. To my eye, this eight-year-old airplane looked no different from the brand-new A36s I've seen beside the Beech tent at air shows.

The N number is 66JT, as in Jack Taylor, who is president of Jim Bath & Associates, a Houston-based international aircraft brokerage firm. Dealing in turbine-powered aircraft, JB&A represents the difference between used-airplane dealers and brokers. Even the telex in their office speaks in low, subdued tones. Bath and Taylor are both ex-fighter pilots who met at Atlantic Aviation some years back while introducing the Hawker Siddeley here, and they are type-rated to deliver their various jets overseas. Bath unleashes the eagle in him with his French Rallye. Taylor, who looks like the distinguished retired colonel that he is, chose the Bonanza. "I have about 75 in it," he said in his banker's voice, and a bluer chip one could hardly find.

The Bonanza really does carry six, and the cabin seems so light and airy with windows curved up to the sky. I never did sort out the panel. It's Cuisinart, I think, with rows of buttons for whip, puree, stir, blend, crumb, chop, mix, grate, grind or beat. Also pulverize, frappé, liquefy, high or low. I let Taylor run the panel.

He had to make a quickie to Joplin, Missouri, which is only about three hours due north of where he picked me up – Beaumont, on the Texas coast. It's a lot longer than that any other way you could go.

I watched him settle into the left seat with the familiar certainty of a bird on last year's nest. He got out the charts and showed me the route and distance, which is always such a considerate thing for any pilot to do for any passenger. "And don't pay any attention to that right fuel gauge. It's intermittent." How nice. Even Bonanzas can be human. The right mag had a rattle in it, too, making me feel more at home.

"I always start 'em like they are flooded, that way you know where you are," said Taylor, nimbly bringing life to the fuel-injected pipes.

I leaned over and watched all his numbers, with the as yet unsaid promise of flying it back. "We are down at six; it flies best at eight." He got cleared to eight. With casual magic he moved all the VORs into our flight path, got out the thick manual and peered at familiar graphs for optimum settings, punched in the Century III autopilot, and reached over into the rear seat for a rather elegant coffee service. Thus the Bonanza pilot crosses Texas and Arkansas and enter Missouri. His shirt was always dry, just as I always suspected.

"Why did you choose 66 in your N66JT tail number?" I asked conversationally.

"For Phillips."

I intruded no further into that. He offered that N66JT had been to Europe and back. "Had 60-gallon ferry tanks in the fuselage."

We were rushing up on Joplin, and there were miles of sunshine all around us. Kansas City reported Joplin at 200 feet, sky obscured, visibility one and a half, and

handed us off to Joplin Tower. This was unreal. Kansas lay clear and sunny all around, except for one flattened cloud hugging our destination airport. "What are your intentions?" asked Joplin. "We are landing," said Taylor.

He looked up from his intent study of the Joplin plate as we descended into the clag. "You watch for land. I'll watch the instruments."

I gradually unclenched my toes as I felt nary a swerve nor power change. We came down on rails. "I got the lights," I said in what I hoped was my best airline voice. Those lights sure were close to the ground, too. The Bonanza flared obediently and rolled smartly along the centerline. Taylor even made a midfield intersection turnoff toward fog-dimmed hangars. Somewhere a Cessna was bleating for a Joplin report. "Well, a Bonanza just landed," said the tower.

"I don't care about that. What's it look like to you?" asked the wise 172 driver.

I got left seat going home. Taylor has the optional dual yokes, mounted on a massive bar that obscures everything below the equator. He continued to operate the switchboard, and I just flew the airplane in a state of high grins.

Over Texas, the sky clabbered up and Taylor asked if I wanted the autopilot or a clearance on top. I told him I needed the experience – leave it like it is.

Whuff! Thud! The Bonanza punched the rolling reefs like a loaded truck. No zooming bounces, just quick teeth-clickers. On gauges for the first time in many moons I was trying to herd my little doggies through the chute. The instrument layout was perfect, although I still tend to fly modern flight directors backward.

"Bonanza 66 Juliet Tango, you are 15 miles west of course," said Fort Worth Center. I always wondered what would be a good answer to that. Taylor had one.

"Roger, Fort Worth; new pilot."

That seemed to satisfy everyone. But in past airplanes, not so swift, I only got five miles off course.

The Bonanza showed its shark teeth to me once. As the last decaying cloud flipped our tail and Beaumont Approach cleared us down to 1,500, I was careful, but the speed slipped up into the yellow arc like a wet watermelon seed through my fingers.

With minimum words from Taylor we got slowed down, gear down, and didn't super-cool anything. I landed the Bonanza as if I'd been doing it all my life. A gentle airplane.

What kind of man flies the Bonanza? A few days later Taylor mailed me a copy of his trip log. Taylor-Baxter, date, total landings carried forward, engine cycles, airframe

total, manifold pressure and rpm, fuel flow, OAT, and cylinder-head and oil temperatures, weight, destination, time, costs and, under "remarks," a tidy notation about the right fuel gauge and the right mag. All I ever do is sweep out the cracker crumbs. But then, I'm not a Bonanza pilot.