

"The Lord works in mysterious ways!"

A few years ago, after attending my 50th High School reunion, I decided to go on a quest to try to reacquaint myself with some "old friends". No, not previous girlfriends (that would be scary), but instead, my old airplanes. The FAA has a registration "look up" section on their web site, and by using it I was able to easily find my first two airplanes. The 1946 Ercoupe was now located in Hershey, PA, and I communicated with its new owner. The airplane had not been flown since the early 90's and was in storage in a hanger, along with several other of his airplanes. A few photos were sent onto me and it was sad to see that she was now taking up residence in a "nursing home". Next came my 1964 Cessna Skyhawk and it was good to learn that it was still flying... in Asheville, NC. This spring, while I was returning from a road trip to my Seymour, TN airport (Knoxville area), I arranged to stop by and talk to its new owner. After breakfast, with he and his wife, we went over to the airport where I was able to make a photo of myself and the old bird, which still looked substantially the same as when I sold her in the late '60's.

However, it was more difficult to locate my single and twin engined Piper Comanches since their registration "N" numbers had apparently been changed. Then, a few weeks ago, as I lay in bed and just before I fell off to sleep, I had an epiphany. My single engine Comanche's serial number suddenly and magically just popped into my head. Now recalling that serial number is akin to remembering one's driver licence number, and out of all of my planes that is the only serial number that I seem to be able to remember. Armed with that new data, I was able to go back to the FAA registration site and once I fed it into their database, the new owner and plane's location popped up. And lo and behold, it was now based in Belle Foursch, SD!! That town of about 8,000 people is only 100 miles to the north of my summer base of Custer and I made a quick call to talk to their airport manager, my old plane's new owner. I had intended to make the hour flight with the Highlander to visit the old bird, but, unfortunately, the airport was temporarily closed due to a runway lighting construction project. I had to make a two hour drive instead. When I arrived I found that the "old girl" had a new coat of paint, a 3 bladed prop but much of the same panel mounted electronics that I had left behind. She was also sorely in need of some major maintenance having not been annualized (an FAA mandated inspection) for some two years. The new owner informed me that \$26,000 would buy her back, but to expect to spend about half of that again in getting the ship into an airworthy condition. I told him that all I really wanted was the opportunity for a quick look over of the plane and a photo with it.

On my return drive, I stopped by the town of Lead, SD to see from ground level the "big dig" that I had photographed from the air a few weeks earlier, while I was en-route to the Spearfish EAA fly-in. I learned that this was originally a deep shaft mine started by the Homestake Mining Company back in the 1880's. It finally closed its doors in 2001 when gold was selling for about \$400 per ounce and after extracting some 41 million ounces from shafts that went as deep as 8,000 feet below the surface. Before closing down, the mine reverted to an open pit configuration that



Me and my single engine Piper Comanche in 1980



Me and the same re-found Comanche in 2010



Lead's Homestake open pit gold mine from above



The 1200 foot deep mine seen from ground level

created a bowl just outside of the city limits some 1,200 feet deep. Today with gold selling for over 3 times that 2001 pricing it would probably be profitable to re-open the mine, but they are legally prevented from doing so. Back in the mid 60's the whole shebang was transferred to the ownership of the Sanford Laboratory to be used for underground neutrino particle investigation. It was discovered that the site, due to the density of the rock here, slows down these sub-atomic particles (which are generated from the fusion of stars and which can penetrate the entire earth's core in fractions of a mili-second) enabling their "capture". While physics is well beyond my limited understanding of science, suffice to say that these positive results have allowed the old mine to remain viable and today there are about 100 employees reclaiming it to its current level one mile beneath the earths surface, but with plans to increase its depth to over 3 times that in the future. This educational tour took us over to the mine and into the old vertical shaft elevator house which gave us a chance to see the 8,000 feet of coiled cable that even today is used to lower workers down into the mine's shaft.

My drive back to Custer took me through the beautiful Spearfish Canyon where fall's colors were beginning to make their presence known in the Aspen and Birch trees which abound here. All in all, it was a pleasant day in which I re-acquainted myself with an old friend, got to learn about gold mining and its current day scientific alternative, and had a chance to experience my first taste of autumn in the beautiful Black Hills of South Dakota along with a late lunch of buffalo stew taken at the Spearfish Canyon's Lodge's Latchstring Restaurant.



The mine's 5,000 foot vertical shaft elevator house



There is over 8,000 feet of wire on this coil spool



Spearfish Canyon Lodge and its Latchstring restaurant



Typical Spearfish Canyon rock walls



In the Canyon winding streams and waterfalls abound



The Aspen Trees were beginning to color-up