

Robie Hensley

Story # 3

I was downwind on approach to the McMinnville airport and was watching for other aircraft traffic. I didn't have a radio in the plane. OK – it looked clear, then on my final turn, the engine quit completely. I was getting pretty good at dead stick landings by ferrying some of Steve's planes lately. Steve was buying planes, fixing them up, and reselling them. Some we could ferry, others, we just disassembled them and loaded them on a trailer. Jack Eden, a friend and student pilot of Steve's called him to say that there was a Cessna 150 parked in a field near where he lived in Hillsboro, TN. Jack thought that Steve would be interested in the C150 since the owner didn't fly anymore. Steve picked me up at the house and also talked Robbie Shelton to go with us to look it over. On the way down, Steve said, "if it flies good then I'll fly it back. If it's just so-so then Robbie can fly it. If it's a real DOG – then dad can fly it back." So, guess who got to be the pilot – and yes, it was a real DOG! We found the plane in a field that had been used before as a grass airstrip. It hadn't been flown in quite a while and we suspected that the fuel tanks were contaminated with moisture and rust. Jack met us there, and had brought along a tank of fresh gas. We drained all the contaminated fuel out of the plane and tried to start the engine. We finally got the old bird fired up and running and after a few adjustments, Steve got it airborne then came back to land in the field. Steve then said, "dad, it's all yours, see you at McMinnville" – the first leg of the trip home.

After my dead stick landing at McMinnville, I rolled off the active runway where Steve and Robbie were waiting, fingers crossed. We drained the gas tanks a little, getting yet more water out of the lines. Planes don't fly too well on water for fuel. Satisfied that we had eliminated the fuel problem Steve said, "the next stop is Crossville, be on your best behavior because the FAA is there." (the FAA is kinda like the sky-police and can yank your pilot's license in a jiffy if you break any of their rules) I said, "OK – give me a prop and I'll be off." While climbing out, my heart skipped a beat as the engine quit again, then coughed and sputtered and caught up again. I did a quick "thank you Lord" prayer and all went well again till I was on final approach at the Crossville airport. The engine quit again, thus giving another chance to practice my dead stick landings right here in front of the FAA boys. Steve was talking to one of the officials at the time and he commented on the problem. Steve offered some reasonable explanation and came out to the plane to push me off the runway.

The next stop was Rockwood and I experienced the same thing again! By this time, I had learned to make my approach high, for safety reasons. What was Steve's advice? "next time, pump the primer" he trusted me to get this bird to Morristown next. The Morristown landing was uneventful since I followed Steve's expert advice. We visited with Evelyn Johnson. She still instructs flying and was the one who gave me my check ride for my commercial license. Even as I write this in the year 2000, she is still going strong and manages the Morristown airport.

After a brief rest, Steve said he would take the plane on to Greeneville. I thought, gee, thanks a lot! I was the one who had survived the most risky part of the journey so far. He joked by saying that I was the one with better insurance coverage than he had. I have no regrets, only good memories of having shared Steve's life and his passion for flying.