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*Not Sam Slade's actual Aeronca!
Photo courtesy of www.young eagles.org.

Sam Slade's Airknocker

by Jim Stark

I know, I should be drawn and quartered for making fun of such a fine airplane as an Aeronca 7AC. Fun as she was though, we had our moments and our last ride together was as hair-raising as any experience I've had in my two decades of catching crooks and cheaters. I'm a private dick. I chase crime for a living.

Business is good. Crime lurks everywhere. I was perfectly content doing my chasing in the Clipper Packard, a wonderful old steed with a Silver Streak Straight-8 engine. The good people at Blackstone Labs have kept us running smoothly for years now and that engine, even with oil changes extended to two months or 1,200 miles, is strong as a new one. We've chased down crooks at over 100 miles per and never once has my Packard let me down. The time came though that the Packard couldn't help because we needed wings.

In 1949 there wasn't a lot of crime to fight up in the air. The nasty, scheming low-lives had yet to figure out how to use aerial flight to extort, corrupt, and otherwise disrupt honest society. But to be prepared I learned to pilot a flivver?? a few years earlier. Now I was called upon to once again take to the air, this time to round up a bunch of cattle-thieving varmints. More than a score of beef cows had disappeared from the farms and ranches around town and the cops couldn't figure it out. Not that that was a big surprise. Brothers Melvin and Abbott made up two thirds of the local force and the other was the jailer, Smelly Sorg, Melvin's brother-in-law, who idled at the office answering the phone on the rare occasion it should ring. Most of the teeth of the penalty of being locked up was having to smell the jailer who was always in need of a bath. The occasional bum who spent the night would often insist on a plate full of nothing but beans for dinner just so he could improve the air.

The cows seemed to be disappearing without a clue. I was following the tale of woe the cops were spinning in the local rag, "Mornin' Gazette" for months and it gave me more laughs than Mutt and Jeff in the funnies. Fifteen farms had been hit in the last year. Thirty-eight cows in all disappeared and not one shred of evidence was to be had. The cops were hinting it was an unearthly thing that was happening and that made folks everywhere start watching the skies. Some folks saw something too, bright lights moving every which way at baffling speeds. Me and Becky Sue had been watching the stars together many of those nights and we didn't see anything but stars, if you know what I mean. Yeah, you got it, Becky Sue and I are a pair.

When the thieving cow rustlers hit Becky Sue's uncle's farm and took his prize Holstein, I was immediately involved. Her big tears tore at my heart. "Sam," she pleaded, "you have to do something. If Uncle Roscoe loses any more cows, my inheritance could be severely affected." My training doesn't allow sentimentality usually, but in this case I couldn't say no.

I drove the Packard out to Roscoe's farm. It was well fenced in and except for the main road in, there was no other access to the property. Roscoe showed me the area in which he had last seen the prize cow. It was near a muddy pond where several others of the breed now grazed. "Don't see any way, that the cow could have just up and gone anywhere," offered Roscoe. "Saw him just before dark last night and he was hanging out with his sweetie, Daisy May. They was chewing their cud's and admiring each other."

"Did you see anything unusual or hear anything out of the ordinary?" I queried.

Roscoe responded, "Well, now that I think of it, I did hear a motor sounded a lot like a big engine. It didn't last very long and made me think about the Stearman those flyboys like to putter around in on nice evenings." He left me there with my thoughts. I searched the area thoroughly and didn't find much of interest. I was near the bank of the pond and the dirt was festooned with deep tracks of cow hooves. Then I saw what appeared to be the oddest thing. There was one set of hoof prints that led nowhere. There were two cows side by side walking but only one set of prints continued. That's impossible, I mused, unless Roscoe's cow suddenly grew wings and learned to fly.

Now onto a real clue, I spent the next day searching pastures where the other cows had turned up missing. I found traces of blood the cops had missed and in some areas, other tracks that came to an end just like on Roscoe's farm. I quizzed all the farmers and the one thing that kept coming back was the motor sound, just past dusk on the night of the strange disappearances. Back at my office I plotted all the crimes looking for clues as to the timing and location of the events. No one knew for certain the times of the disappearances but no one could discount the possibility that it happened right around dusk or later. Some farms had been hit more than once so I drew a time line and decided the dirty scoundrels were going to hit again on Tuesday the following week and the most likely spot was another trip to Roscoe's farm. That didn't give me much time to get back into the air. I called Barney's Fly in and Gas-Up Airport and arranged to renew my license the next morning.

It was a cold fall morning with low-hanging clouds but not much wind. As I pulled the Clipper up to the barn, there stood Barney Blowhard Blanca his-own self, in his crisp, starched military jumpsuit and highly polished brown boots. He had pulled out the Aeronca and was leaning jauntily on the strut. He gave me a military salute and a big grin. My mind flashed back to the early days of training. Listening to him rave about his heroic flying stories day after day made me half sick. He just couldn't leave the controls alone. I'd be floating down on late final and he'd have his feet pasted to the pedals and a death grip on the stick. I put up with his nonsense too many times but made the sacrifice in the name of fighting crime. I finally got my ticket after a long 16 hours. I swore I'd never fly with Barney again.

But then I thought of Becky Sue and her tears. If I was going to catch the thieving rustlers and win Becky Sue's heart forever, I was going to have to endure Barney's malarkey one more time.

"Mornin' Sam," Barney grinned. I didn't smile back. I was here for one reason and one reason only: to solve a crime. Me and Barney were going to go flying and when we landed, I'd have his signature on my ticket.

"We talking or flying this morning?" I asked as I pushed by the bag of wind. "Let's get it straight, Barney. We are going to get me checked out so I can solve another crime. I'm not here to socialize. I'll do the flying, you do the checking. When we land I fully expect to be able to rent this airplane any time I please with no questions asked on your part!"

"Tough as always, aren't you Sam?" he offered. I ignored him and fired the engine. As I taxied to the turf strip Barney punched me in the shoulder. "What about the preflight?" he asked.

"Barney," I shot back, "if you were fool enough to let me fly this thing with you as a passenger without taking a good look at her beforehand, you ain't much of an instructor." With that I fire-walled the throttle at the end of the taxiway, jammed the right rudder home and as we spun right, corrected with left rudder and headed straight down the strip. We cleared the ground with a roar and headed for the practice area.

I had just started in with my usual maneuvering when the engine gave a cough and started running rougher. "What the hell, Barney?" I said, glaring over at his pale face. "You have been getting the oil analyzed in this thing, right?"

"Yeah, yeah," answered Barney. "I think that's all a crock, but the owner insists." Barney tried to maintain his cool façade, but he clearly was worried. "Do you actually read the reports?" I snarled, and when Barney didn't say anything, I had my answer.

The engine still felt rough, so I applied carb heat and jammed the mixture full rich. That helped and the engine seemed to even out. Sick of his smarmy attitude, I decided to give Barney the ride of a lifetime. I let one stall develop fully and after three turns of a spiral got her back to level at about a hundred feet. I glanced over and Barney had turned white as a sheet, his eyes bugged half out of his head. He didn't even look over at me, just kept a death grip on the panel with both hands like he was froze there. He got to coughing on the way back to the airport and that sort of loosened him up. I took her straight in and I suddenly felt stiffness on the controls. It was Barney up to his old tricks. I yanked and cranked the Aeronca through all sorts of aerial contortions as we neared the grass but I couldn't get the fool off. I'd had enough. I drew my trusty 8-mm Mouser and whip-locked him a good one on the chin, knocking him cold. I landed the airplane firmly with only a couple of bounces, narrowly missing a spectacular ground loop.

I waved smelling salts under Barney's hairy nose and he roused with a start. "What happened?" he choked out before his manic coughing resumed. On the next inhale I passed the salts under his nose one last time and he jerked back so violently he nearly came straight up out of his seat. "What the hell you doing to me Sam?" His bulging eyes were rotating madly in the sockets and I looked like he might just start crying.

"You passed out Barney," I explained. "You been feeling okay recently?" He rubbed his jaw and worked it back and forth. "You must have hit your jaw on the stick when you suddenly slumped over," I added. "Now, how about the sign-off?"

"No way Sam," he said, "I never got to see you land. How do I know you aren't going to take our baby out and smash her up because you haven't mastered landing?"

"Are you alive," I queried, "and is the airplane in one piece?"

"Well, yes," he responded.

"Then you know I can land the plane without any help. You sure weren't any help on that landing, slumped over on the stick like that." I got the signature.

By Hook or by Crook

The Aeronca was rented for Tuesday. If my theory was correct, I should be able to spot the crooks somewhere in the general area of Roscoe's farm at about dusk. I invited Becky Sue along so she could watch her hero fly off into the sky of waning light.

Night was taking hold of the day when I launched into the cool, smooth air that marked the closing of Tuesday's light. 65-winged horses pulled us into the growing gloom. I knew the rules about flying at night but there are times the rules don't count as much as others. Where crime lurks, there are no rules, at least none that count.

I cruised the night sky for an hour watching the night lights of towns slip by. The lazy eight I was flying would give me a good line of vision to one-eight-zero, the general direction of Roscoe's farm. Suddenly, a fire ball appeared in the south sky at eleven o'clock. I heard no report but got aimed that way in a couple seconds while firewalling the throttle.

There was nothing to see, at least for the moment. Then my eagle eyes picked up a blue light, rising like the devil himself with his tail on fire. I was headed right at it and then it was above me, still rising fast. I flipped on the landing light and like a vision, there was Daisy May the cow, flying.

Only thing was, she was impaled with a harpoon. I nearly slammed into her but she kept rising and I somehow slipped past while being rocked with a terrible turbulence. Me and that airplane nearly rolled inverted. I wrestled the thing under control and pulled out of a steep dive while kicking over into a chandelle and started climbing fast. Up ahead I caught sight of the blue light again so I headed rearing for it. The chase was on.

Squarely at 12:00 high the blue light sped off in the darkness. The C-65 Aeronca engine was screaming in protest as we climbed and gained. I worked the rudders back and forth to keep perspective on the target. Then the landing light swept past a tail rotor and I realized the blue light was an exhaust plume. A better look produced the silhouette of a Sikorski H-19 helicopter. Suddenly she swung right and the open door revealed a figure on a gondo bolted to the door and the one and only Rupert Figpen, a man I had busted twice for grand larceny. He didn't figure on going back a third time since he had a high-powered rifle trained on me. Tracers suddenly filled the air. I ducked and dodged and then remembered flying long enough to roll away to the right and push that stick forward until it bent in the middle. We screamed away in a spiral and it took some time before I could decide if I was upright or upside down. Remembering my excellent training, I let go of everything and pulled the throttle back to idle. We rolled and bounced while the altimeter unwound and soon enough, she steadied and I took command once again. I looked around and the few lights of the night were right where they should be, below. I reached for my crime-fighting bag and pulled out a capsule of smelling salts. One good sniff and I was good as new. After my eyes stopped watering, I eased the throttle forward again and started thinking about how to get on the ground to rat out Rupert to the local authorities.

I need wonder no more as the engine started banging and clanging and generally making the worst noises I had ever heard in two decades of hard nuts crime fighting. The Aeronca started shaking violently and I thought the engine was going to depart the airframe, leaving us stranded up there doing back flips all the way to the ground. I pulled the throttle and killed the mags. I trained the dim red light on the airspeed and set her for best glide. We were going down and there was nothing but inky blackness below us.

There was nothing to do but wait. The wind-milling prop kept the landing light lit and soon enough trees and barns were flying past but I couldn't see anything ahead. Then we splashed and skipped and splashed again, and on the third time, she rolled over head first.

Due to my excellent physical conditioning I slowly started to extract myself. The left door hung open. I crawled out, grabbed the strut and dropped to the ground. I sunk in to my waist in cold, mushy liquid. It didn't take long to realize I had hit the town's human waste dump. I sure wished I could hold my breath for half an hour because that was how long it took to slog out of the mire. Once on shore it didn't get any better. As I walked toward a farm security light, sewage kept shooting up my leg, being squished by my foot in each alligator boot in turn. Becky Sue gave me those boots and she sure was going to be disappointed I ruined them.

I had to walk home. I knocked on a few doors and if anyone opened them at all, once they got a good whiff of me, faster than I could say, "Excuse me," Wham!

I took a dip in a hog trough and slowly made my way back to civilization. The next day I fingered Rupert and the law tracked him down. He was a whimpering mess and he sang so fast and loud the cops had to slap him to shut him up. His accomplices were soon in stir along with him. We won't have to deal with any of those arch villains again for a long time.

Engine Trouble

I called the good folks at Blackstone to ask if they had any records on NC 420, the Aeronca's registration number. Sure enough they have been tracking that engine for years reporting time and again that a valve guide problem existed. For the last few reports they'd called Cletus to alert him. He was the only contact on the account. I got the reports in the name of a few reports they'd called Cletus. I confronted Barney and he turns out he never told the owner about the problem. Ignoring the truth from Blackstone Laboratories, this slop bin of an A&P mechanic nearly got me killed. What's worse, I'd ruined the new alligator boots from Becky Sue and she wasn't speaking to me. My anger welled up and I threw the Blackstone reports in Barney's face and stalked off.

The bad thing was the cows were gone and putting the thieves in the hoosegow couldn't bring them back. Even Daisy May didn't survive her encounter with the harpoon. Turns out when the bad guys saw my landing light come after them, they hit the emergency winch release in an effort to outrun me.

At the same exact moment Bobby Ray Smitt, eased on this fifth beer of the evening, was swaying in front of his barbecue grill. The fire was just right so he turned and yelled, "Martha...where's the beef?" As he turned back to the grill Daisy May dropped in at 2,345 pounds and 310 mph. She hit that grill dead center and exploded.

Bobby Ray was blown halfway to the house. He pulled himself up on his knees, folded his hands and screamed, "OH SWEET JESUS! WHATEVER I DONE I'M SORRY!"

As reported in the "Mornin' Gazette" November 21, 1949.

Report of the Month

This 6-cylinder IO-520-L received 7 new cylinders in six months.
Can you figure out what happened during the summer of 2008?

(To learn where the various elements might be coming from, [click here](#).)

ELEMENTS IN PARTS PER MILLION	MI/HR on Oil	39	UNIT/ LOCATION AVERAGES	53	37	52	27	UNIVERSAL AVERAGES
	MI/HR on Unit	250		508	297	225	99	
	Sample Date	03/15/09		1/04/09	7/6/08	5/10/08	1/5/08	
ALUMINUM	6	9	10	12	11	6	9	
CHROME	6	9	12	38	13	7	10	
IRON	26	45	44	71	51	26	46	
COPPER	3	5	8	5	6	5	4	
LEAD	4927	5940	6376	7725	6349	3096	4393	
TIN	2	2	4	7	1	1	1	
MOLYBDENUM	2	4	4	16	7	3	4	
NICKEL	6	11	4	60	20	5	7	
POTASSIUM	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	
BORON	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	
SILICON	10	12	13	11	11	14	7	
SODIUM	8	6	5	3	6	1	4	
CALCIUM	81	25	59	25	13	107	6	
MAGNESIUM	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
PHOSPHORUS	71	102	17	121	1608	101	478	
ZINC	2	2	3	2	2	4	4	
BARIIUM	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Values Should Be*

PROPERTIES	SUS Viscosity @210°F	90.9	86-105	91.3	98.3	94.3	92.1
	cSt Viscosity @ 100°C	18.19	17.0-21.8	18.30	19.95	19.02	18.49
	Flashpoint in °F	460	>430	415	455	440	420
	Fuel %	<0.5	<1.0	0.8	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
	Antifreeze %	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Water %	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Insolubles %	0.4	<0.6	0.4	0.6	0.5	0.3
	TBN						
	TAN						
	ISO Code						

*THIS COLUMN APPLIES ONLY TO THE CURRENT SAMPLE

This engine was torn down and inspected for a prop strike in early 2008. The ECI cylinders were overhauled and reinstalled. All new bearings were installed on the bottom. About 200 hours later, as a result of high CHT on take-off that would not come back down, they determined there was a hole in cylinder head #3 (the May 2008 report). None of the other cylinders were within the range ECI had put out a notice on, and since none of them had any apparent issues, the owner replaced only the one cylinder. About two months later, cracks were found on the other five original cylinder heads. They topped the engine with six new Superior cylinders after the July 2008 sample. After break-in, all is well.