



Commentary

Flying Carpet

Cowboy Pilot

T-craft up on old Route 66

"Howdy Greg, My name is Baldy and I am a working 'wagon trash' cowboy in northern Arizona. Have a '41 T-craft I use on the ranches — I'm based at P23 [Seligman Airport] and just built a Starduster Too. I enjoy reading your columns as it's always apparent how much you *love* our passion, which is flying. Having said this I hope you'll visit my free Web site www.pilotsharetheride.com as I am trying to help people share our love of flight and maybe expenses as well. If a \$25-a-day working cowboy can afford to fly, anyone can. Well sir I thank you for your time and look forward to your articles as it's great to see someone who totally tries to help the little guy get started. If you are ever around Seligman it would be a pleasure to meet you. I day-work only now on ranches and shoe 30 horses in PHX every 5-6 weeks. Well sir take care and fly safe, *adios* for now from Baldy in No. Az."



Enticed by that e-mail, I'm northbound to meet Baldy this crystalline morning. Seligman lies in ranch country up on old Route 66, between Flagstaff and Kingman. To get there I fly from Phoenix over Prescott and up the Big Chino Wash. With visibility exceeding 100 miles, Mount Humphreys is my snow-capped signpost for the entire flight. Long before Seligman appears, I divine its location from glinting tractor-trailers and a mile-long freight train — Interstate 40 and a transcontinental rail line run through the tiny town. I land and join a solitary Piper Tri-Pacer on the ramp.

A battered Nissan Sentra drives up, and out pops a bearded man with a broad grin and a big hat. How this larger-than-life guy fits into such a tiny car wearing his cowboy hat I don't know, but sure enough, it's Baldy. You can see farther on the ground here than from the air in most places; with a sweep of the arm Baldy identifies ranches that he works as a hired hand from here all the way to the Grand Canyon.

"Now for the tour," he says, driving me to a residential street bordering the airport. Between houses rests Baldy's 75-hp Taylorcraft in an open shed; a mud track leads to the runway. "Any problems parking your plane in town like this?" I ask.

"No, Greg," he chuckles, "though I had to repaint one side after it got graffitied last month — probably shouldn't have left the spray paint on the shelf."

The Taylorcraft gets Baldy to "cowboying" jobs all over Arizona and up into Nevada, "plus it's handy for scouting strays." He's also restoring a Cessna 120 for resale. Muddy tires on both airplanes attest to off-airport adventure. Baldy routinely lands at backcountry cattle camps. "Come to think of it, Greg, you should fly in for the home-grown horse auction held by Babbitt Ranches. You can land where I do on the road at Redlands camp; it's straight for miles, if you don't mind landing on gravel."

Baldy became a private pilot last May, but thanks to years of flying with his mentor, J.R., he has more hard-knocks piloting experience than most of us. Baldy tells of flying backcountry Idaho, and of a precautionary off-airport landing near Española, New Mexico. Then he takes me to an old hangar — this one at least has doors, though three feet of sky separate them from the roof. Inside, another Taylorcraft keeps company with a dusty '37 Chevy pickup and a '49 Ford coupe. "This stuff was J.R.'s," explains Baldy, "until he was shot at age 78 in his trailer four years ago by his fiancée's jealous ex-husband. Now I take care of it for his sons." J.R. had sold Baldy his plane on installments for \$6,500. "J.R.'s sons honored the deal after J.R. died, but of course they wouldn't let me fly the T-craft until it was paid off — that took me three years."

Baldy's a heck of a storyteller, so I ask if he's a cowboy poet. He says "no, but I did study music at UNLV," so maybe that's where he gets his rhythm. "After college in 1980," he explains, "I found the music business too full of unhealthy temptations, so I learned cowboying up in northern Nevada where they only go into town three or four times a year. It's easy to stay out of trouble that way. I'm proud to say I've been dry for 14 years." He rubs his shoulder. "Only thing wrong with me is I'm getting rotator cuff surgery next month. I was bucked by horses twice this year, and both landed on me."

Over the years Baldy has suffered two aircraft incidents — one when another pilot ran the Starduster out of fuel, and the other when the T-craft nosed over on landing. "I much prefer aircraft accidents to getting bucked by a horse," he quips.

Baldy lives in a doublewide, its yard littered with broken glass and old construction materials. "Just got this place," he apologizes, "I'm still cleaning it up." The door dangles open when we arrive, and I sense it's always that way. After all, this is a man who lives more outside than in; home is little more than a bad-weather bedroll. Inside, a partly assembled "Boredom Fighter" biplane fuselage consumes the living room; on top teeters the dusty laptop computer where Baldy monitors his Web site. We admire the assembled wings hanging in the bedroom, then tour Baldy's workshop out back. It's cleverly constructed of truck-size metal shipping containers, torch-cut and foam-sealed together. A woodstove chimney pierces the roof.

We lunch with Baldy's cowboy buddy Shawn at Lilo's Westside Cafe. Both men wear the grime of hard work, but if Baldy's the good-natured old timer, Shawn is the Marlboro Man. ("Some of those commercials were shot at my Colorado ranch," he tells us later.) Shawn's weather-bronzed face and chiseled features must make the girls swoon, especially those steely blue eyes gleaming from the shadow of a black Stetson. Hats here are a permanent feature of every man's head. Having left mine in the car, I feel naked without one.

"I was flying last month when thunderstorms developed," says Baldy in the course of introductions. "With weather closing in behind me and the airport blocked, I landed at Shawn's ranch and dined with his family." He boasts of Shawn's pretty little girls, Dally and Rieta, ages 5 and 6.

"Didn't tell you what happened when it rained again the other day," replies Shawn to Baldy. "My daughters kept saying 'Baldy's coming to dinner! Baldy's coming to dinner!' I couldn't figure it out. 'What makes you think Baldy's coming to dinner?' I finally asked. 'Because it's raining outside, and Baldy always comes to dinner when it rains.'" Shawn laughs, "As little rain as we've had around here lately, I suppose their logic wasn't entirely crazy."

Shawn's family works ranches all over the West. "We're moving our cattle to northern Nevada," he explains between bites. "They rope cattle differently up there, using longer, softer ropes. And they don't wrap rubber around the saddle horn like in Arizona." While he and Baldy compare the finer points of calf roping, I savor a slice of Lilo's homemade "fruit of the forest" pie — berries, rhubarb, and apple.

"You should come up for a branding, Greg," offers Baldy. "Only thing about brandings is they'll expect you to help out and do some work." He lowers his voice. "Oh, and you can't bring Jean — women aren't allowed at the branding wagon. I know it's not right, but that's just how it is. The only exceptions are a few ladies who cowboy right alongside the men."

"Better yet," says Shawn as we rise to leave, "join us for the Arizona Cowpunchers Reunion in Williams the last weekend of July, just south of the airport [Clark Field, P32]. It's a special rodeo limited to working cowboys." He describes wild-cow milking by a three-cowboy team. "One ropes, one 'mugs,' and one milks. Each team must fill a [soda] bottle and race to the finish line to empty it. Then there's wild horse racing — you have to rope 'em, saddle 'em, and race 'em using only a halter and a lead rope. Pretty crazy!"

I promise to attend and, comforted by the knowledge that real cowboys still exist, soon bank the *Flying Carpet* homeward over volcanic craters east of town. "Have a safe flight, Greg!" Baldy radios cheerfully on his handheld. "If you need a place to stay for the Cowpunchers Reunion, well, *mi casa es su casa*. And when you come up, tell Jean to get ready to have about a hundred hats tipped her way, 'cause that's how cowboys are."

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include *Flying Carpet*, *The Savvy Flight Instructor*, *The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual*, *Job Hunting for Pilots*, and *You Can Fly!* Visit his [Web site](http://www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com), www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com.

By Greg Brown

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Baldy Ivy and his '41 T-craft.