# CLIFFORD E. "Cliff" DAVIS (1898-1987)

Prescott, Parker and Phoenix

Clifford E. "Cliff" Davis was born in Hammon, Okla., on January 8, 1898, one of nine children of Alexander and Matilda Davis. At some point prior to 1915, the family moved to New Mexico.

In 1920, at around 22 years old, Cliff moved to Arizona, where he worked as an auto mechanic and electrician. He married Opal Milner in Prescott five years later. Opal was born and raised in Prescott. By 1932, Cliff, in partnership with his brother, E. J., and Clay Vermillion, had taken over the Weaver Garage, described as two large auto storerooms at 110 S. Granite St.

In May 1929, Cliff enrolled as a student at Copper State Airways, one of the two small flying schools that operated at Prescott's Ernest A. Love Field during the summer of 1929. As was common during that period, Cliff's actual flying experience extended back to the days when neither planes nor pilots were licensed. He related later in life that his first attempts to fly took place in 1915 in a "home-made Wright model with a Model T Ford engine."

> " 'Our first airplane in Magdalena, N.M., wouldn't fly more than 10 feet off the ground,' Cliff declared. 'Finally I acquired a Jenny and my instructor immediately crashed it demonstrating a forward slip.' "
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> *Arizona Republic,* October 19, 1947: 14

Cliff started flying again in the Verde Valley in 1923. In 1929, with the Air Commerce Act firmly in place, he decided to earn his license. He started with Copper State Airways at Prescott, but when that company dissolved, he finished his training with Jack Thornburg in Phoenix. Thornburg was an early Arizona aviator who operated Arizona Air Service, first at the old Phoenix Municipal Airport on Christy Road, and then at Sky Harbor. Cliff passed his private pilot examination at Phoenix Municipal in June 1931. Shortly thereafter, he purchased a three-place Curtiss Robin C or C1, a cabin monoplane powered by a 185-hp Curtiss Challenger engine. By April 1932, Cliff and his brother had built a hangar for the Robin at Prescott.

Cliff's silver Robin joined George Voller's American Eagle A-129 biplane as the first two planes to be owned by Prescott residents and based at Ernest A. Love Field. As detailed in the airport's centennial history, Cliff Davis was one of the dedicated, resourceful people who kept the airport operating during the Great Depression.

While working on his commercial pilot license, Cliff continued to operate the Weaver Garage with his brother and Clay Vermillion. Besides car storage, the business offered auto service and repair. In April 1933, Cliff and his brother took over the auto repair shop at

E. G. Weaver's Dodge agency on S. Montezuma St., while Vermillion continued to operate the service station on S. Granite St. The new business would be known as the Davis Brothers Garage.

Having earned his commercial pilot license, by 1934 Cliff was flying extensively around the West and made at least one trip to the East Coast. He was also instructing at Ernest A. Love Field. In June 1935, it was reported that he was going to Pennsylvania to take delivery of a new Taylor Cub to be used for flight instruction at Prescott. That same month he earned his transport pilot license, reportedly impressing the notoriously hard-to-please Dept. of Commerce inspector, E. V. Pettis.

Cliff and his family moved to Parker, Ariz., where he began flying for the companies that were building Parker Dam, the Colorado River Aqueduct and the All-American Canal. His contracts involved general flying, but in particular, he was always on standby to transport injured or sick workers to Los Angeles for treatment. He was among the first pilots in Arizona to operate an air ambulance service. He flew from airstrips at Parker and Crossroads, Calif., the latter being slightly father north and closer to the dam.

Not surprisingly, upon arrival in Parker, Cliff immediately lent his full support and know-how to the development of Parker's airport (today's Avi Suquilla Airport), which at that time was little more than a crude dirt runway.

The Davis family still made regular trips to Prescott. It was only about an hour from Parker in the Robin, and both Cliff and Opal had family and friends to visit. Their two daughters, Barbara (1928) and Beverly (1933), became seasoned passengers in dad's planes. Cliff participated in the air shows at Ernest A. Love Field, and during lulls in the Colorado River reclamation projects he gave flight instruction at Prescott. At one point in 1936, Cliff announced his intentions to open a flying service and school at Prescott, however it appears that he was called back to Parker. In April 1937, he was reported to be "employment manager" on the Parker Dam project, although that has yet to be corroborated.

At Parker, Cliff established what was claimed to be the largest flying school in Arizona. Students came from Yuma and even the West Coast. He became friends with Nellie and Joe Bush, well-known throughout the state as the operators of the Colorado River ferry at Parker. Nellie Bush was one of the most interesting women in Arizona history: teacher, ferry-boat pilot, street car conductor, Arizona's first woman judge, state legislator and airplane pilot. She purchased her own plane and Cliff often accompanied her on her flights to Phoenix.

Cliff was still flying at Parker in 1940, when Southwest Airways, Inc., hired him as one of its original seven pilots. The company was founded by a group of investors that included several Hollywood luminaries. The intent was to secure federal contracts to train pilots.

Southwest Airways started by buying a school at Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport that was already operating a Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program for the Civil Aeronautics

Administration. Next, the company began securing contracts to operate flight training schools for the U.S. Army and Royal Air Force. Three large "contract flying schools" were built and operated in the desert areas on the periphery of Phoenix. These were Thunderbird Field I (northwest of Glendale), Thunderbird Field II (now Scottsdale Municipal Airport) and Falcon Field (now Mesa's municipal airport). By the end of WWII, Southwest Airways had trained thousands of pilots for the U.S. military, as well as for Britain, France, China and at least a dozen Latin-American countries. Some sources credit Southwest with training more than 25,000 pilots.

In 1941, Cliff Davis became Director of Training at Sky Harbor, a position he held for the duration. That program became the largest CPT / War Training Service school in the United States. He was also among the first Arizona members of the newly-formed Civil Air Patrol.



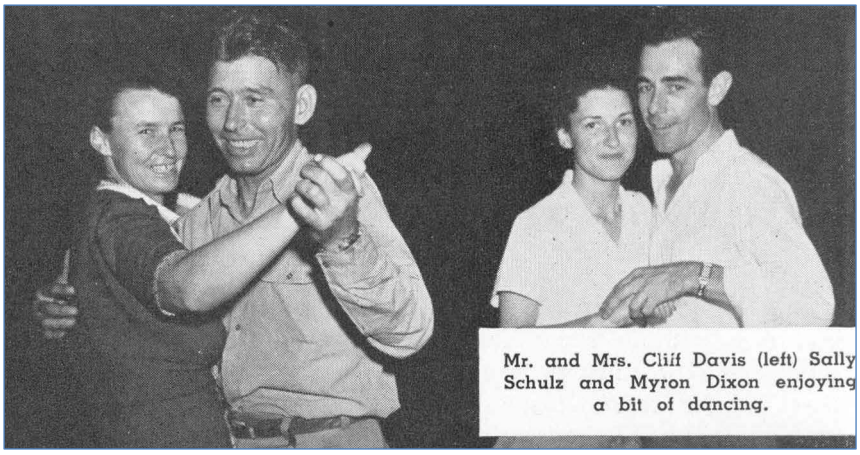
SYNCHRONIZING WATCHES to split-second accuracy prior to flying the millionth pilot training hour for Southwest Airways are, left to right, Ralph Jordan, Cliff Davis and Al Storrs, directors of training at Thunderbird, Sky Harbor and Falcon respectively.

*The Thunderbird,* Vol. 2, No. 4, June 1944

After the war, Cliff joined with Arthur "Art" Bethancourt, another Southwest Airways flight instructor, to open the Davis Flying School at Sky Harbor. Art later went on to serve for 25 years as operations superintendent at Sky Harbor, finally retiring in 1976.

Cliff remained at Sky Harbor for at least another two decades. Over the years, his students included many prominent Arizona pilots. Aviation historian and early Arizona pilot, Ruth Reinhold, wrote that as of 1981, Cliff was "still flying 100 hours a month, solidifying his reputation as one of the state's foremost instructor/pilots."

Around 1945, Cliff and Opal purchased a home in the El Molino Place neighborhood of Phoenix, within walking distance of Sky Harbor. They spent more than 40 years there. Cliff Davis, a true Arizona aviation pioneer, passed away on September 6, 1987 at the age of 89.




Opal and Cliff (L) show the youngsters how it's done at a Southwest Airways picnic. (*The Thunderbird,* Vol. 1, No. 6, August 1943)




Contrary to the caption, Cliff is on the left, Art is on the right. (*The Thunderbird,* Vol. 2, No. 1, March 1944)