

The morning was perfect. County Road 97-D seemed damp from the night as my sister and I walked to the school bus. The still morning air seemed to be waiting expectantly for that familiar, wavering drone drifting across the fields heard on a few of these clear February mornings in 1961. Squinting into the winter sun, my eyes skipped across the plowed fields until they picked out that distant, lanky figure moving slowly along a dirt road next to a plowed field. Tucked under one arm could be seen a wide and splendid wing that unmistakably identified Mr. Keith Irwin and one of his planes. The morning sun passing through the wing seemed to make it glow with light as he worked his way between the fields.



I lost sight of him behind the trees and my thoughts turned back to the school bus.

It was actually not the school bus, but the green house we had to pass, along Road 97-D that my sister and I were both thinking about. Before we got to the end where Keith's house was and where the where the bus stopped, we had to sneak past that green Pfanner house. Hidden behind the fence lurked the never-seen, fiercest-growling dog we could imagine. We often held on to each other as we approached tangency with his house, waiting for the inevitable onslaught of terror. But we always did make it past the Pfanner house to wait for the bus by the Irwin house. It was the house that Mr. Irwin built himself and lived in, with its oddly-shaped triangular walls and unusual colors. Keith also had a dog; a long, brown dachshund, but it wasn't as fierce as the unseen Pfanner dog.

A few scenes like these show up on the pages of my early memories as a young boy in rural west Davis, California. Mr. Irwin was a small-dairy farmer and could be seen with cows in the barn or driving his '51 Ford 8N tractor with a manure scoop on the front, cleaning up the yard. (I would never have guessed that 60 years later I would own that very tractor, but that is another story!)

With his little spare time on the dairy, Keith had a passion for building Old Timer model airplanes. Old Timers planes are designs from the 1930's and 40's that are "free-flight" meaning that they have no active controls; you just start the motor and launch it, watch it fly up until it runs out of fuel and then gliding down in large circles. Some later models had a single pulse-type rudder remote control to keep the plane from landing far from where it was launched.

This next photo is of Kathy as a toddler, maybe in 1959, next to a very large Old Timer that Keith built, perhaps one of his first.



Kathy also went to Fairfield School, a little two-room, four-grade country schoolhouse, but the year after we left Davis. She was a single child, a sweet, shy, tow-headed and willowy girl.

Keith's wife Martha Jane passed away in the early 60's leaving him to care for Kathy, alone. It was a good fifteen years after the Morejohn's left Davis in 1961 before I met the two Irwins again. Keith had sold his last of his dairy operation in 1974 and retired on his land. It was then he began building his collection in earnest.

After my teen years on a cattle and sheep ranch in California's San Joaquin Valley, I had returned to Davis for my university education. In 1975, through a remarkable series of events, my newlywed wife Kate and I moved into the very same 900 square foot house that I was raised in, the last house going north on Road 97-D. To our delight, Keith and his daughter Kathy still lived in the

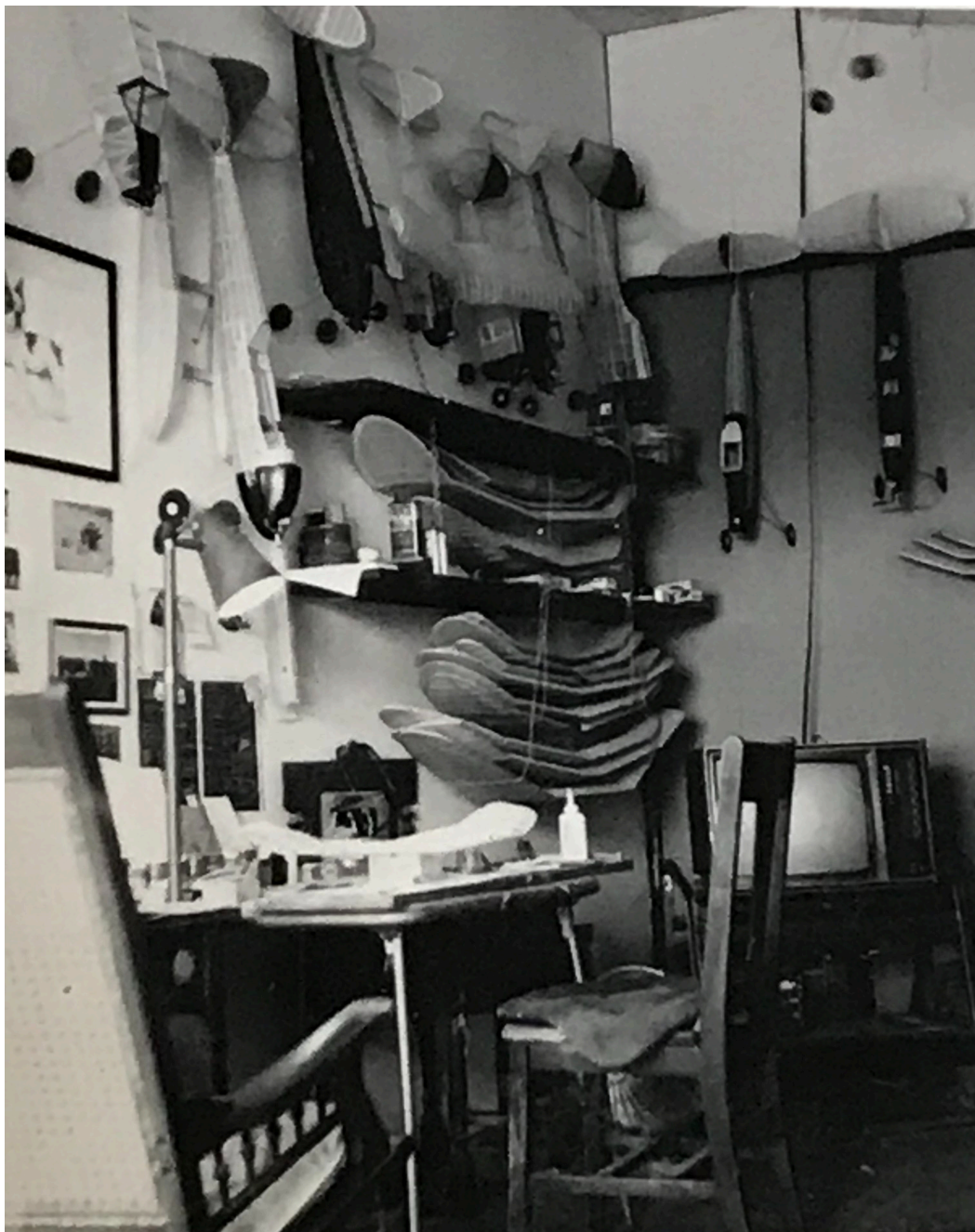
same house at the south end of that mile-long road, with the big old barn and some goats to milk. Keith now had a little Boston Terrier named Benjie that guarded the house from the inside, always bustling about as seen in this photo in Keith's living room where he modeled the planes.



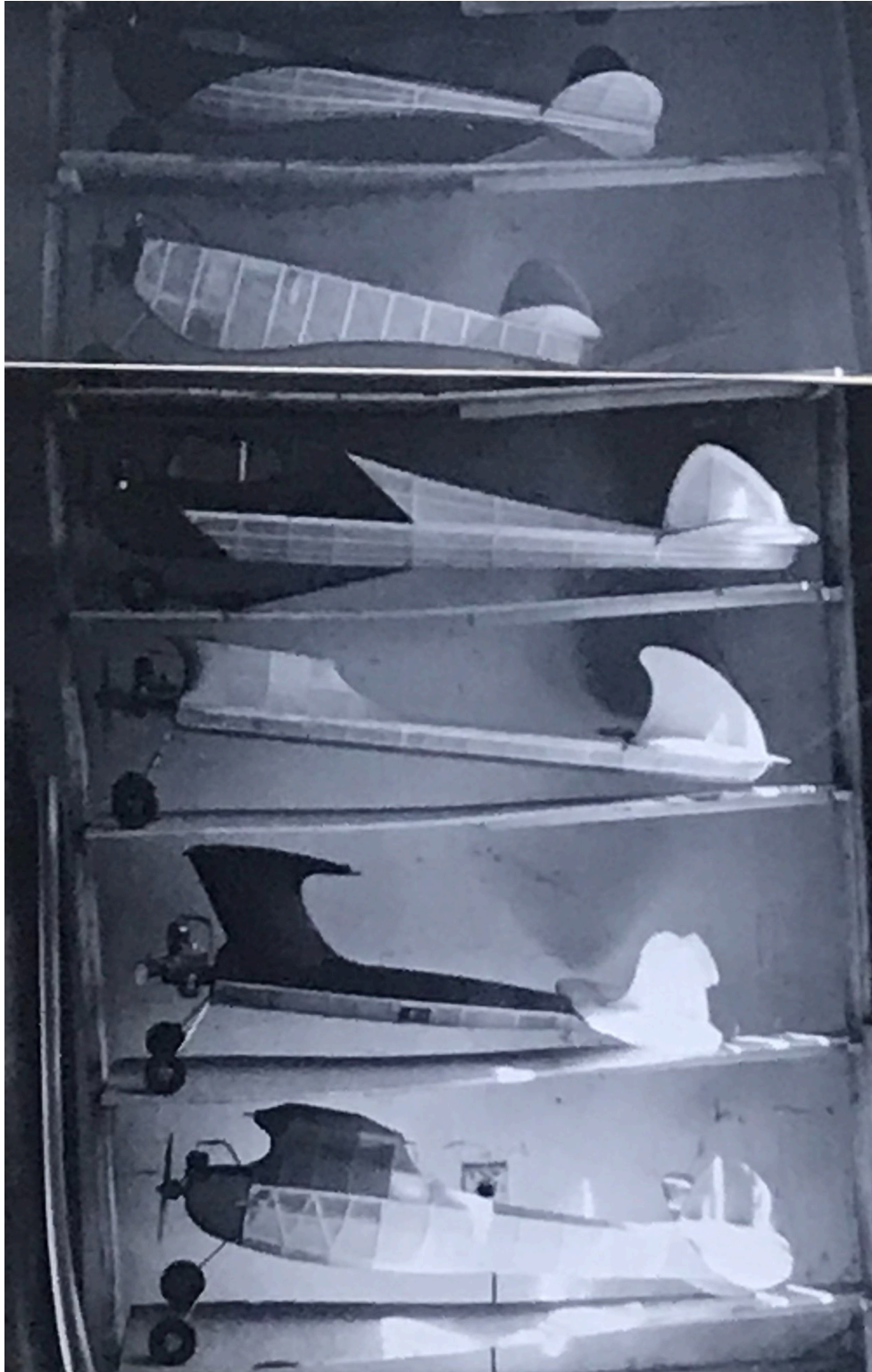
After all these years, Keith had not changed, except for becoming perhaps a bit more cynical about world affairs, truly living the life of a hermit in his own little world, more and more absorbed in his wonderful airplanes and simple habits. Keith was a quiet, opinionated, and sometimes ornery old gent who mostly kept to himself. He could often be seen riding his old balloon-tired bike out into a field to fly a newly built or an old favorite airplane of his making.



We struck up our 20-old acquaintance again and I was fascinated with his way of life and his planes. I took the color photos in this story when I joined him out in the fields to fly a plane. But he would sit for days, even weeks, in his sparse study, slowly crafting a carefully chosen Old Timer model from plans taped to a drawing board on his card table workbench, pinning and then cutting the balsa with the sharpest razor he could find in his cardboard box of single sided razor blades.



His study was an unpretentious museum of sorts, the walls lined with the graceful bodies and perfect wings of his fifty or so rice-paper covered beauties on simple, saggingly-thin plywood shelves, strung together from floor to ten-foot ceiling.

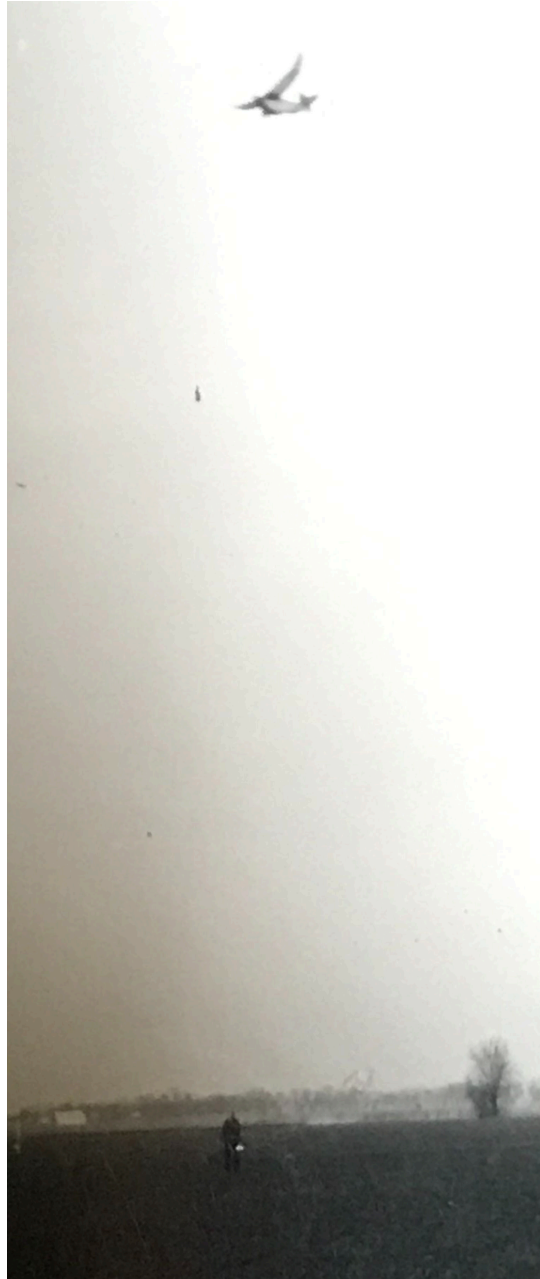


Once a plane was finished, he would wait for the right weather (not hard in Davis) and then take his plane out into the fields for test flying and trimming.





Most of his planes sport his own trim tabs, fashioned conservatively from the wall of an empty soda can. He would fly it for hours, sometimes days, taking it back home for some adjustments not suitably made in the field.



He paid careful attention to engine mount angles, weight distribution, wheel shape and position, flight surfaces, air-piston timers for de-thermalizer tails and of course, the engines themselves.



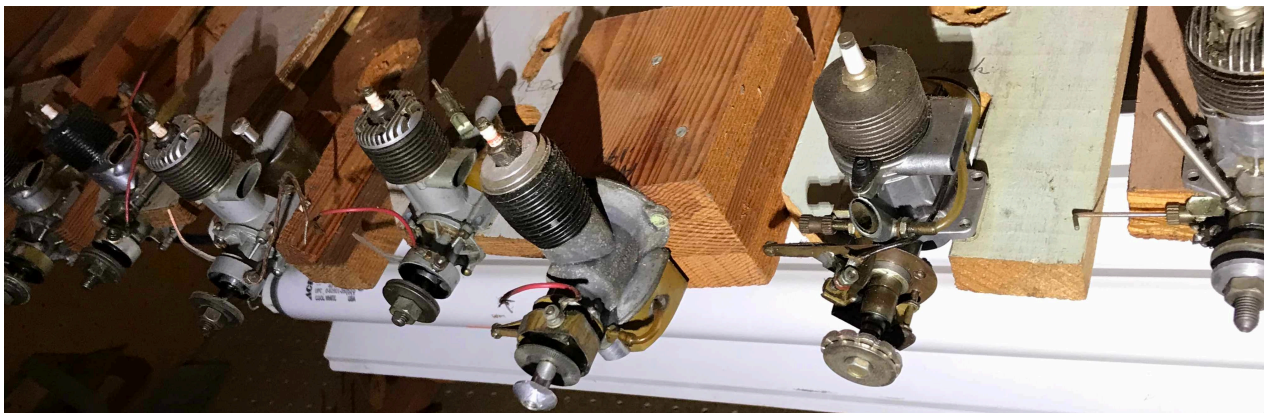
His engines were invariably one of two types, either an antique spark-plug gas engine or a smaller, non-glow plug, non-spark plug compression-ignition diesel engine as seen below. The “head” at the top of the combustion chamber has a thumbscrew to adjust the head plate to increase the compression until the fuel mixture self-ignites.



As for the gas/spark plug engines, he would typically purchase a particular vintage one that he had nourished an interest in through an ad in an Old Timer publication, and he had collected a couple of dozen of these engines. About half of them were mounted in planes, the other half forming a small collection by themselves.



He made his own ingenious magneto ignition systems for the engines with spark plugs as can be seen in these photos.

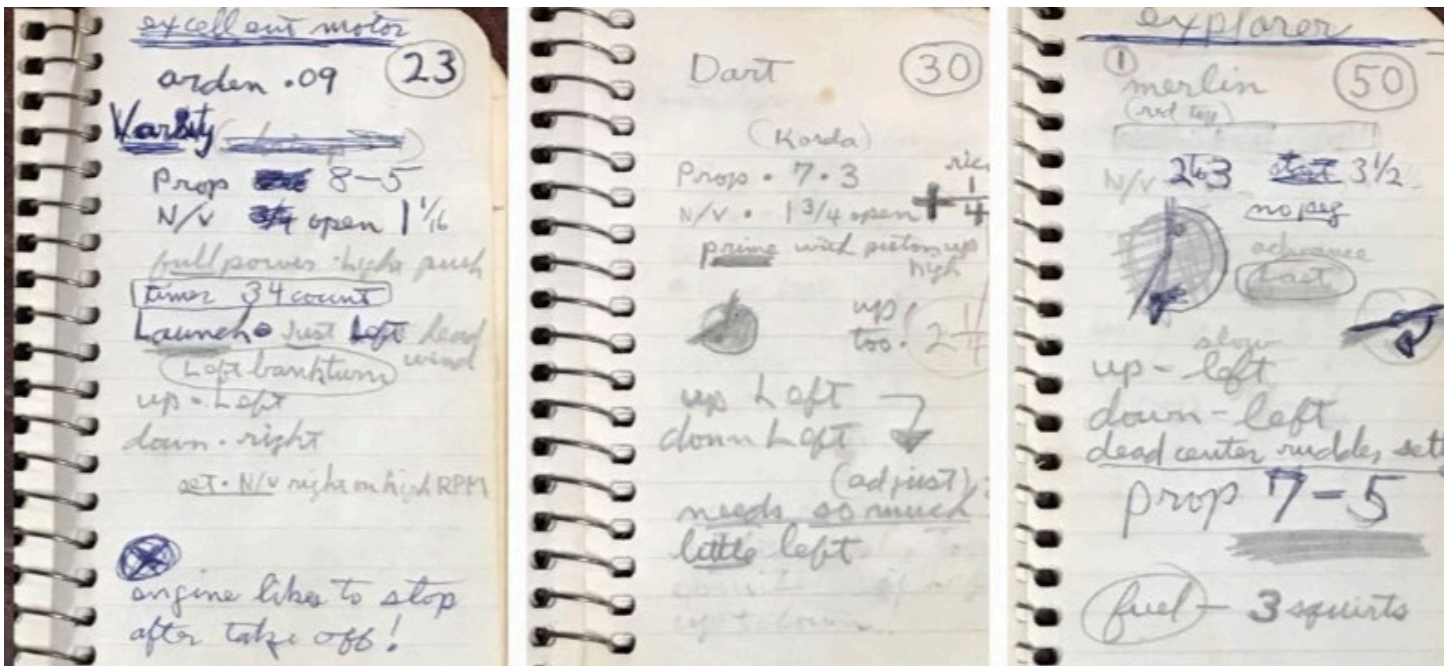


The compression-ignition (no spark plug, no glow plug) powerplants ran on a mixture of ether, kerosene and castor oil or 30wt engine oil, - approximately one third part each. This was

Keith's recipe, unlike the usual 50% ether, 25% kerosene and 25% castor or 50-60 wt engine oil. Keith would mount an engine on a stand in the basement and run it to tune it. Kathy said that she remembers the smell of the smoke coming up through the floorboards of the house.

Once the plane flew to his satisfaction, he would hang it on his wall, and after much thought, begin the next one. Keith kept a very small, spiral bound, red notebook with cryptic field notes to himself in pencil on almost every plane, including how the plane ought to be launched, particular engine settings, and what should not be done. It is full of his simplistic character and is an important but small part of the collection, especially when taking a plane out to fly.





There were a half dozen of the fifty or so planes that were his favorite fliers and he could often be seen watching the lazy glide of one of these favorites returning to earth in great spirals overhead, often landing unceremoniously tipped tail-up amid the dirt-clods.



Instead of spending money on fancy rubber wheels, he designed and evolved his own; large diameter, thin plywood wheels that would, on occasion, allow the plane to bounce over the dirt clods as it came to a stop.

It was during these times, around 1976, when Keith roamed the dirt fields along Road 97-D on his old bike, looking for just the right place to launch and watch his free-flight creations soar, that we became reacquainted and real friends. With plane under one arm and his little toolbox clutched together with one handlebar in the other hand, he would stop and talk with me on the road about the day's aerial adventures or some technical detail he was pondering.



Keith took interest in me, as I was involved in engineering, and I spent many an hour at his house during his later years watching him at work, and getting to know the planes. As generous as he was spartan, he insisted that I take a couple of the planes as my own, to fly with our first son when he was old enough. He seemed to take great pleasure in having a fellow enthusiast who was willing to listen at his pace or ply him for explanations about his particular design modifications. Eventually he had added a half dozen of his planes to my home.



Keith was quite a character. Tall and angular, he had a square, jutting jaw and chin, and bushy, dark-gray brows above his thick-rimmed glasses. Outside, he would usually wear a floppy, short-brimmed hat or, in winter months, a woolen beanie cap pulled all the way down. He never had more than a thin old jacket on for the coldest mornings and always the same old leather shoes. His long arms and big hands belied a delicate touch. I wonder how much of what I remember of Keith was a carry-over from when he was a

dairy farmer. Often with a week-old beard, but always clean and wearing a comfy old flannel shirt and jeans he moved about his yard and house with nonchalance. Never in a hurry, his talk was quiet and his humor very dry. While he was modest and most considerate, especially around women, he was also quite socially awkward, either talking over the other's words as a thought came to him or injecting an unexpected single-syllable laugh at an odd moment. When I was with him in his study, he would often ramble on with some social commentary as he worked, barely discernible, punctuated here and there with that startling laugh. He typically had an old radio on, listening to his favorite San Francisco talk show, and had much to say about the current events. His meals were small and simple, and precisely the same day after day. I think it was a fried egg and spam in the morning and a peanut butter sandwich on white bread with a side of shredded carrots for lunch. A couple of times each month his '60's green Ford step-side pickup would rumble to life and take him into town for some basic provisions.

He pored over just a few old model airplane publications, some from the thirties and forties, and made notes about various planes and airfoils and fuel mixtures in the margins and inside the covers. These notes, from the handful of printed materials of his that remain, provide a tantalizing glimpse into his thought process and are a few more pieces to the puzzle of his lone existence. Then there is the apple box full of his blue-line kit plans and enlarged magazine plans, some cut up and with notes and pin holes from use on his workbench, some waiting for a day that never came.



The late 70's were busy times for Kate and I on Road 97-D with our children coming and my new business started. Keith's daughter Kathy had her dad's artistic eye and had become a pen and ink artist with a wonderfully unique, homespun style. She was a dear friend and became a happy member of our church community, soon marrying and starting a family of her own. One of her original works always hangs in our living room, that of her view of our first little house on that country road, with all the important animals and trees included.



In 1981 Kate and I moved into town as we were expecting our third and had run out of room. It was not long after that; we heard

the sad news that Keith had cancer. Some of my most memorable times with him unfolded in the next several months. Stubborn to the end, he refused treatment, and his life eventually ground to a halt. He was confined to a wheelchair at home. I called him one Saturday morning, after trying futilely for a couple of hours to start the small compression-ignition Mills engine on the little green Pixie. He had given me this one for my oldest daughter, and I was determined to get it in the air. Using a trimmed away one-fingered leather glove as he did on occasion, I fussed with fuel mixtures and compression settings and propeller spinning techniques until I was worn out. Keith was up for a visit and I headed out to his farm. With the fuel tank empty, I remember him feeling the compression as he rotated the prop, squirting in just the right amount of fuel into the exhaust port, giving it three quick spins and it popped to life. He aimed it out the window and turned it loose where it made a short flight out to the grass between his eucalyptus trees. “You just have to know what it wants”, he said with a smile.





This is a photo above is of him starting one of his planes out in the field in earlier years.

Keith didn't last much longer. In the hospital bed a few days before he died, he held my hand and said, "The planes are yours." And that there was no other person that he would want to have own the planes than myself. This came as a surprise to me, somewhat overwhelming in it's magnitude of responsibility and sheer numbers, but I knew that he was serious and that it was right, it was the most reasonable way to preserve the collection, and I began the task of making room in my life. Sadly, beyond his dear daughter Kathy, I do not believe he had any other close friend at the end of his life but myself.

So the planes became the Morejohn-Irwin collection.

Kathy wanted to keep a favorite of hers, Skyrocket, a streamlined, tear-drop shaped beauty with green trim. Finding space for the remainder of the collection was a large organizational challenge as I had to find room in my full one-car garage/shop. This was alleviated a bit by giving a few of them to close friends of mine, other fathers with young children. Looking back now, this split the collection up some, but it is also just another transition where planes have come and gone. When I thumb through Keith's photo album of his collection, full of black and white photos but far too few dates and notes, I see many planes made before my time, including some yet to be identified, that no longer exist in the current collection. I remember Keith telling me stories of planes he lost in thermals only to descend unseen over relatively cooler cornfields. One favorite in particular he pursued by hiring a local pilot to take him up and scout for it for hours until he spotted its white silhouette spread out on top of the field of green corn.

I arranged the planes in my garage hanging like so many still sardines, wingless and strung nose-up from the rafters in rows.



The wings I placed in specially-constructed shelves stacked many deep and high, each identified with the name of its plane under one tip. Here they quietly rested for about two decades, only a few were taken down on those special evenings for flying, or at least gliding them down the street with my kids. The planes possess a fabulous balance and the flat glide angle that makes these well-constructed Old Timers such a joy to watch in flight.

My life in Davis, running my own design-engineering firm over the same two decades from my home, radically changed in 1996. I never expected that an entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, Chuck Taylor, who was starting up a medical device company, would soon coax me to step out of my own business, and become my boss, co-inventor, and close friend. Chuck's story deserves its own volume, but the slice of relevance here is that he is an avid model airplane builder himself, one with an uncanny sense of design and purpose, unrelenting in gaining understanding of how and why things work as they do. A modeler since youth, every plane he ever built was subject to much remodeling and experimentation. Enjoying the range of models from screaming slope-soarers to park fliers to tiny, transparent indoor floaters, Chuck and I immediately had much to share and muse about over my collection of handcrafted Old Timers.

In 1999, Chuck started a second start-up business and took me with him from his original venture to South San Francisco in year 2000. Here, the company Syneon began, a technology-incubator firm inside a large warehouse that Chuck meticulously retrofitted with white walls, spacious shop, laboratory and office space. Chuck

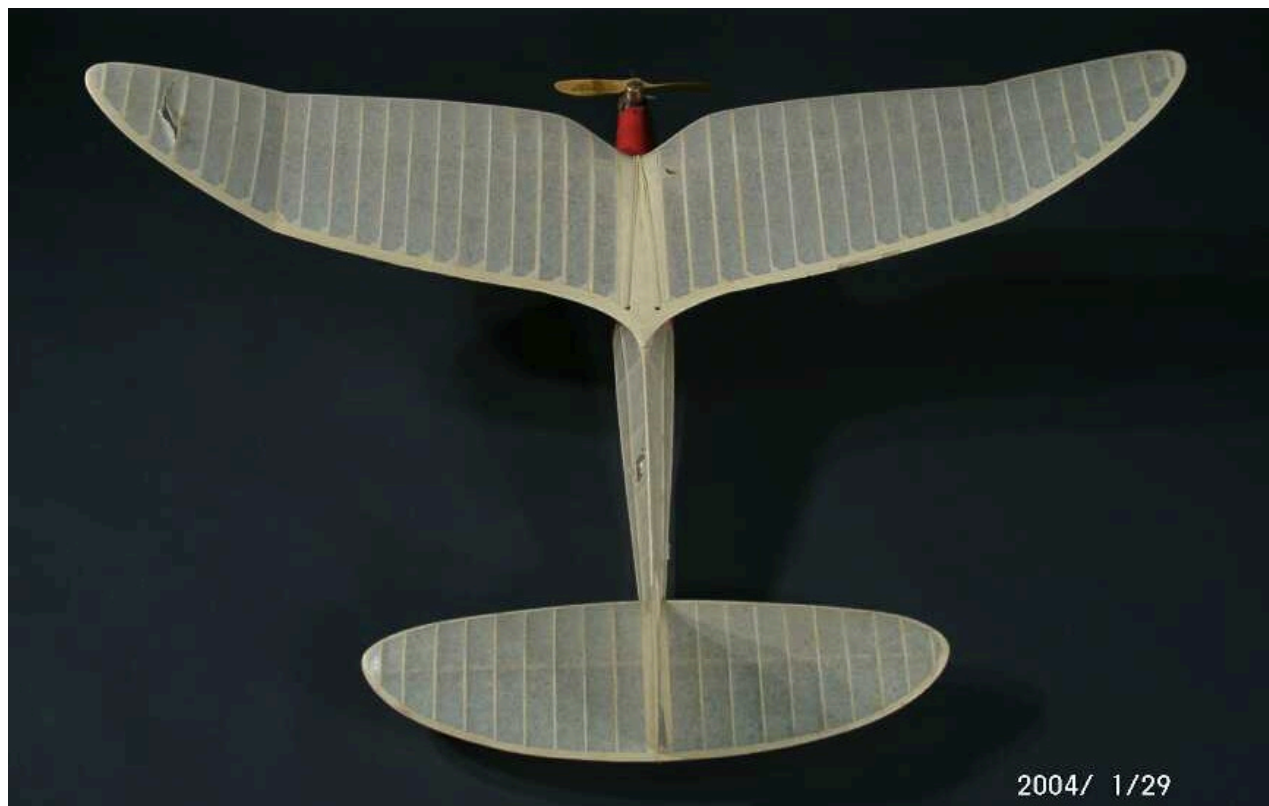
agreed that it was a perfect place to hang the planes! So over my commutes, I transported groups of planes from my Davis home to Syneon where Chuck and I would stay after hours, cleaning, photographing and hanging. And of course, some not without first the 'essential' glide-testing inside their new hanger before being suspended, each with its own string and pulley system.





It wasn't long before the now-named "Morejohn-Irwin model airplane collection" had found a new home; the high, white ceilings inside the warehouse became a perfect three-dimensional volume to safely suspend the beauties as if in flight, for all to see.



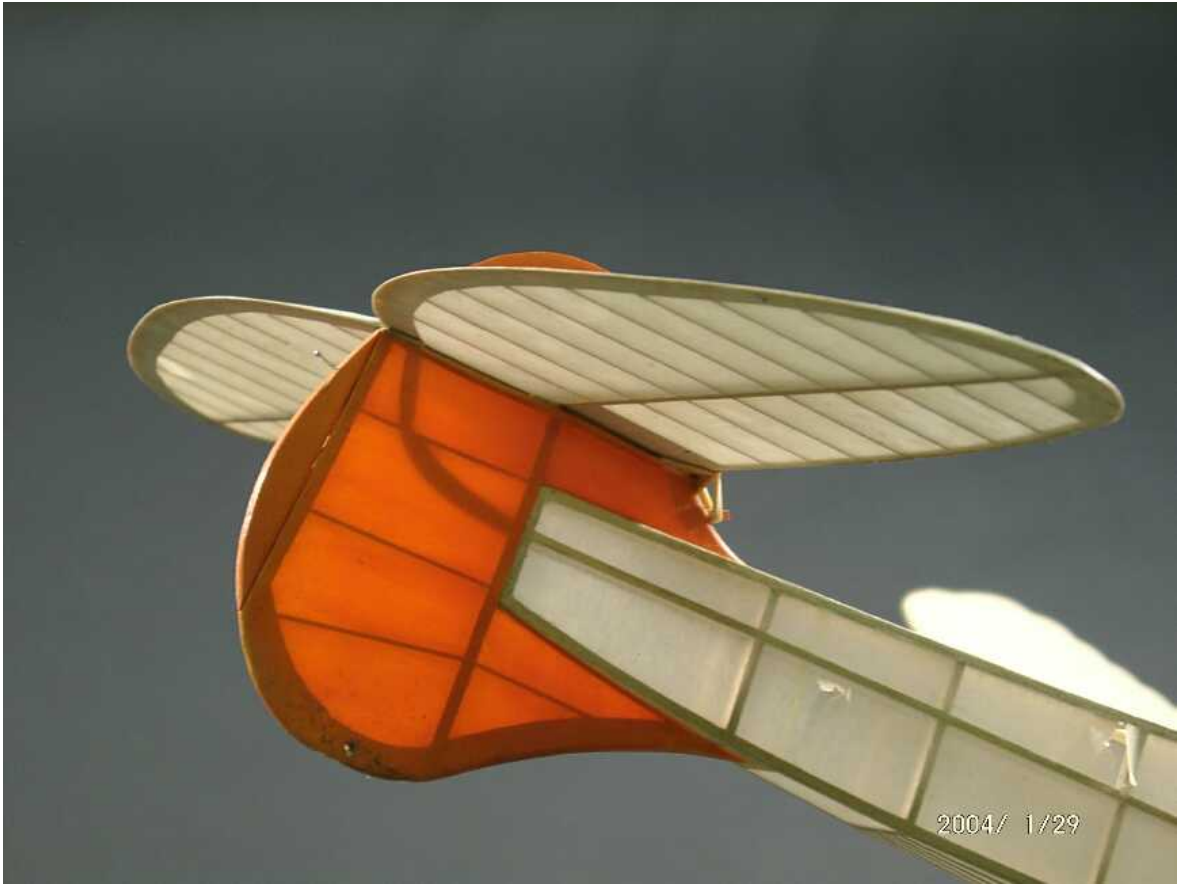


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When Syneon closed its doors, Chuck purchased about a third of the planes which he carefully took back with him to New Jersey and I returned the rest (about 35) to their home; my garage in Davis. I hope to fly some of them with our grandkids someday, perhaps putting RC controls and electric powerplants in a few to make them quiet and easier to control.

So this is the brief overview of the story of the Old Timer planes carefully crafted by my quiet, old-time friend and former dairy dairyman Keith Irwin from the late 1940's through the early 1980's, now on virtual display for all via this website: [www.quietcow.com](http://www.quietcow.com). I hope that you will enjoy and be inspired in your own connection to the world of flying from the photos and specs of the planes on the website, and have enjoyed the rarely told story of the Keith Irwin that I knew.