

Helicopters, airplanes and other flying contraptions in Bluff Comments from Gene Stevenson May 12, 2023

I think the first landing strip in Bluff was in bladed out in 1945 when Norman Nevills from Mexican Hat convinced the County's road-grader operator to smooth out a landing strip on the west side of Cottonwood Wash. It was located roughly southeast of where the new elementary school now sits.



(USGS aerial photo, May 20, 1947) Photo clearly shows the "Nevills landing strip"

Norm Nevills was just about the only one to use it. He flew over from Mexican Hat to Bluff so he could retrieve his mail, and fresh milk and groceries at the old Twin Rocks Trading Post (Bluff Store). This air strip lasted until 1952 as Kenny Ross had clients fly in and leave their plane to go with Kenny on river trips down the San Juan River.

In those days, if you didn't have access to a plane, then you better have 4x4 vehicle to get around. Some of the Comments I've read make a big deal about 4x4 rigs as if they are something special and only used to ferry tourists around in. That might be true if you are romping your way down Comb Wash to get to archaeological sites along the river. But the roadway from Bluff to Mexican Hat wasn't paved until 1957, and even then, it was unreliable, so 4x4 rigs were almost a must. As noted in the Comments, Gene and Mary Foushee moved to Bluff in 1959 and owned a 4x4 jeep to get around, as did others who stayed in Bluff but worked the oil fields in the area, or just wanted to go buy groceries in a bigger town. But Gene didn't own it for exclusively taking tourists for pay; it was simply the only practical way to get around. I'm not sure when Gene convinced the County to scrape a landing strip west of town, but he was an avid pilot and I know he had a single engine airplane when I first met him in 1969, and it was parked out west of town. I flew a lot of this country with Gene, or other pilots too, where we took off and

landed from that dirt strip. It remained a dirt strip well into the 1990s before being paved and a hanger built, by Gene Foushee and Jim Hook.



Me (on far left) and others from Bluff waiting for a plane to land at air strip, 1992



Me with pilot, Gene Foushee, on landing approach to newly paved air strip, 1998

Since that strip was paved, far more planes use it; even movie stars like Tom Cruise flying a twin-engine Cessna. If you were going to fly into Bluff, it was common practice to fly low over town at least once, so that whoever you had scheduled to pick you up would know you were on your approach to

land. Then you would drive out to the Bluff airport and pick up the pilot and passengers. But fly-overs were rare.

Of course, other high-flying airplanes would be noticed overhead from time to time, but if you saw or heard that distinct whappity-whap of a low flying helicopter it usually meant it was either for an accident or possibly a fire somewhere nearby. As a river guide for many years here on the San Juan, and elsewhere, I had more than one occasion to have med-evac situations where choppers were called in to rescue folks; so, I respect their versatility. Over the years I've lived here, helicopters have occasionally landed at the airport, but normally, they were "Flight for Life" or Government copters on a mission, but even when well above Bluff, that distinctive sound of copter blades made you look up.

Then in late 1990's along came the balloon crowd, but they are more of a novelty and only bothersome for a couple of days each January. Other than scaring the bejeezus out of pets and horses, they are annoying, but harmless; mostly. And not too many years ago we experienced the occasional Drones flying over the house and crashing in our back lot, but after talking to the manager at the Bluff Fort about the Drones, we thankfully don't see or hear much of them on this side of Bluff.

So now along comes a proposal for helicopter tours including a landing pad adjacent to the Desert Rose motel. Talk about noise, dust and danger! Why not use the paved airport facilities located a whopping 4 miles away? Helicopters and the unique sound they make should remain a sound we associate with emergencies, not a daily or hourly whappity-whap for tourists. A close friend of mine, who was also a pilot, said "helicopters consist of 3,000 moving parts that constantly needed to be replaced and required high maintenance; and they don't glide worth a damn!"

I suppose it's personal, but I think helicopters for joy rides should not be based in town. They are noisy and dangerous, and should not be flying in and out of populated areas, except for emergencies.

Why not just fly a Kite?

Gene Stevenson