

THE 1961 EXPEDITION TO BUENA VISTA

by DICK SUNDQUIST AND GALE ABELS

This was the second expedition to Buena Vista by the pilots and families of the Denver, Colorado Springs, and Boulder area. The first was in 1959. The 1961 trip was a complete success with many interesting flights being made along with an enjoyable camp-out in the high Rockies.

The airport used by the expedition is about two miles southwest of the town of Buena Vista, Colorado, at an elevation of 8080 ft. and not far from the Arkansas River which was one of the primary routes used by miners on their way to the rich mining area of Leadville in the last century.

A few miles to the west of the airport is the 14,000-ft. Collegiate Range, part of the Sawatch Mountains. An equal distance to the east is a range of hills averaging 10,500 ft. in height which drop off into the broad valley of South Park with an average elevation of about 9,000 ft. The Sawatch Mountains on the west are a bit ominous looking at first, but produced such dazzling thermals starting at 9:00 A.M. that the pilots needed only to fly from peak to peak, relying on the inevitable thermals triggered by up-slope winds. To the south, beginning at the town of Salida, lay the Sangre de Cristo Mountains which held the pilots' hopes for long out and return flights.

The sailplanes and pilots participating were: Gale Abels with his Skylark 3F, Jim Klein and his Skylark 3D, Dave Johnson with his fine L-K,

Ed Smull and Cesar Baez with a group-owned 1-26, and Harvey Hall and Stan Wells with the Boulder Club's 2-22.

On Saturday morning, July 1st, cumulus had formed at around 9:00 A.M. and a rather moist air mass was evident by mid-morning with overdevelopment producing light showers over the valleys at about two-hour intervals. Thermal activity in between was strong and one needed only to fly up and down the 20-mile wide valley avoiding the showers.

The air mass became drier on succeeding days, but not enough to encourage the intended long out and return attempts along the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the south. Even so, the Skylarks and L-K ranged the valleys about 100 miles from south to north.

The Buena Vista area is certainly all that its name implies and a soaring pilot's dream—unmatched high mountain scenery, strong thermals, crisp, cold nights, camping on the airport, invigorating early morning risings followed by the usual dash to the icy cold mountain stream 50 yards away for washing up. Some even bathed in it. Evenings after dinner found the children snug in sleeping bags and parents gathered around the camp gas light sitting on air mattresses, talking of soaring and other important world events.

On July 2nd the best flight of the day was an out and return by Jim

Klein in his Skylark to a point just north of Sand Dunes National Monument in the San Luis Valley which is west of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Harvey Hall in the 2-22 landed north of Villa Grove, also in the San Luis Valley, for an unusual Silver badge distance flight. The Abels' Skylark and Johnson L-K remained in the local area as did the 1-26 with some of the pilots trying out each other's ships. Altitudes up to 17,500 ft. asl were made, which was also cloud base.

On July 3rd it was decided to fly cross-country to the east. The only real cross-country attempted had been the day before when Harvey Hall flew the 2-22 38 miles south in about three hours. Strong areas of down air were experienced by all pilots and this added prestige to Harvey's 2-22 flight.

Last minute photographs neglected on preceding days delayed launchings until almost noon, but Jim Klein was on his way east over the first range of mountains in his Skylark by 12:00. Dave Johnson in his L-K and Gale Abels in his Skylark followed by 12:30 P.M. and flew together until they passed over the first mountain range and into South Park. There, Dave (who had an oxygen system) decided to go for cloud base at 19,000 ft. asl while Gale moved on to the last range of mountains 40 miles east. Dave's intended goal of Colorado Springs, a distance of 80 miles, was reached early and he spent an additional hour entertaining Colorado's tourists atop Pikes Peak before landing. Jim Klein reached the eastern edge of the mountains and flew into several miles of rock stable air before deciding to use his available altitude to return to Colorado Springs for a landing at the intended base of operations for the next and final day.

Gale Abels left the mountains heading east with 17,000 ft. asl, passing slightly south of Denver, but also into a similar, large area of stable air, such as Klein had found, and was over 30 miles east of the mountains before a weak thermal aroused him. The succeeding thermals improved, and he flew on to Wray, Colorado, near the Nebraska line. The distance covered on Gale's flight was 230 miles.

On July 4th the base of operations was a pasture near Dave Johnson's home at an elevation of over 7,000 ft. Dave towed with his Super Cub and two cross-country flights were

Four of the participating sailplanes at Buena Vista. From L to R: Dave Johnson's L-K, Gale Abels' Skylark 3F, Jim Klein's Skylark 3D and the Smull/Baez/Coen 1-26. Mt. Princeton (14,197 ft.) is in the background.

Photo by R. B. Sundquist

