

## THE LAST FRONTIER

Jill's home in Aptos, an unincorporated town in Santa Cruz, had exactly 28 wooden steps leading up to the front door. It faced north, so it never seemed to shake the coastal dew. Just inside her home was a tile step down onto a small tile entryway with a piece of carpet laid out on top of it to counteract the slickness of the surface below. One day, Jill says, "I come home, I step down, and there's no carpet. I slip and I break my ankle. I'd never had a broken bone. I was appalled." Evidently, the landlord had forgotten to replace the carpet after using it to help position a new water heater.

As it turns out, size doesn't matter. That carpet may have been small, but in the end, it was the difference between business as usual and a very disappointing x-ray. With her ankle in a cast, Jill decided her current home was too much of a gamble for the good ankle remaining, so she moved in with her friend Donna for the next month. Donna had a split-level, where Jill only had to manage just a few stairs to make it to her temporary home in the lower floor.

"I started getting online, because, what am I gonna do?" In addition to setting new records in web surfing, Jill also raided Donna's library. Both she and her husband were pilots, so their collection was heavy on the aviation theme, specifically, Alaska bush flying. "So I thought, 'I'm gonna find a job in Alaska!'" says Jill. Excited by a fresh sense of purpose, she sent out more than 70 resumes to jobs across the state. "Half of them didn't respond. Other ones said, 'Thank you for your interest. We are a single-plane single pilot operator.' And others were like, 'We need 500 hours of Alaska time.'"

What Jill discovered after diving further into the Alaskan pilot job market, is that companies preferred to hire seasonal low-time pilots that they could train in their own style of flying. And that's just what she did in the end. Jill got a job with the now defunct LAB Flying Services of Haines, owned and founded by Layton Alden Bennett. A lifelong teetotaler born in Washington, Layton would be remembered as an iconic pilot by Southeast Alaskans after his passing in 2016. He kept LAB alive for 52 years, one of the longest uninterrupted stretches of any Alaskan airline to date.

Jill's first real acquaintance with Layton was her flight test, which she had to pass upon arrival. At the time, he was in his late 70s. She still remembers his loud, scratchy voice, which is an unsurprising observation, given that he chose not to wear his headset during their ride together. He strapped his handheld radio to his hip, and they both settled into one of LAB's cozy Piper Cherokees for the test ahead.

Precision landings were a key part of her flight assessment. Under typical circumstances, this would've been a breeze for Jill. But because, as she mentioned to Layton several times in the air, the airplane's trim tab was broken, she had to exert a constant and considerable force on the plane's pitch controls to compensate. It was hard, but Jill didn't care. "I'm sitting there yelling 'Woohooooo!' because I'm flying in Alaska. I was so excited."

The rush continued after they returned to the base and got out of the airplane, completing Jill's very first flight in Alaska. "I'm shaking from adrenaline and because of my muscles. One of the pilots comes up to me and he goes, 'We heard that whole flight.' I said, 'What? What do you mean?'" It turns out that Layton's handheld radio, which he carried clipped to his belt during the flight, hit the door on the way in at just the location of the microphone button. It was on for their entire flight. "No one could talk to each other when the company

needed to call another pilot or ground people, and all they heard was him yelling at me and me going ‘Woohooooooooo,’” laughs Jill.

When she returned to her new apartment, which she shared with the three other female pilots with LAB at the time, she was met with another pleasant surprise: the lower bunk was hers for the taking.

Sometimes it’s the small things that count.