



U. L. “Rip” Gooch: From the Bottom Up By Ben Henderson

In the Southern States of the United States of America in 1877, Martial Law was lifted after the Civil War and very quickly white organizations were formed to reverse the results of a war that lasted four years and took the lives of 700,000 soldiers. During this process, organizations such as the white citizens counsel, KKK and other groups that advocated violence as a way to return economic control and lives of African Americans back into southern hands, began to regain legal and economic control.

African Americans were denied all of their basic human rights. They were denied the right to vote, hold public office or participate in the administration of public affairs that accounted for their welfare. Many other states north of the Mason-Dixon line had similar practices that limited opportunities for African Americans.

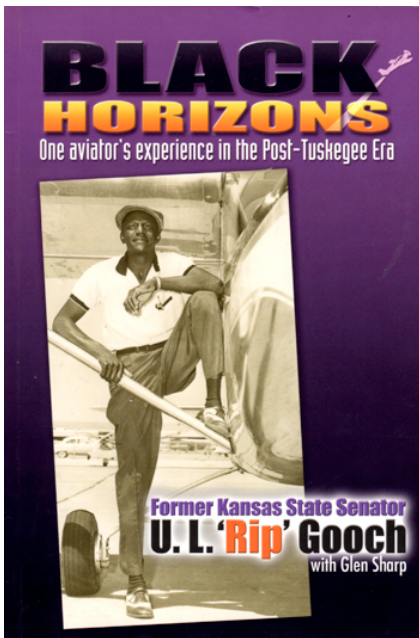
“Rip” Gooch transcended all of these prohibitions and reached a high level of achievement during his first eighty years of life. Born on a western Tennessee farm in 1923, he lost his mother at age three and from that time on lived with relatives or on his own. He went from the cotton fields of Tennessee to the Senate of the State of Kansas.

In addition to being a US Senator, he was a pilot with 20,000 flight hours and held various positions during his career such as a bank executive, flight instructor, aircraft dealer and fixed-base operator with an airport in Wichita, Kansas. He gives aviation credit for opening many doors of opportunity to him that may not have otherwise been opened during his many careers.

As I read his book, it brought back many memories that I had of the South during my youth. I remember that employment for African Americans was at the mercy of the “White Society” that had complete control of the Southern economy and its social structure. So meticulous and refined was this system of “warped logic” that complete segregation of the races existed from birth to death. Growing up in a small Texas town, my father was custodian at the county courthouse. I remember being with him one day when he was cleaning the restrooms. There were four toilets he had to clean: White Women, White Men, Colored Women and Colored Men. In the supply room, there was a shortage of toilet tissue and my Dad said, “I am going to make sure the Colored toilets have tissue first.” I suppose it was my dad’s way of striking back with what limited opportunities that availed. I have often thought how consoling this must have been for my dad as a toilet cleaner to have this kind of power. There was no way any white person could verify his act because, by law, white people were not allowed in black toilets.

When I finished reading U.L. “Rip” Gooch’s autobiography entitled, “Black Horizons,” I realized how much my life had paralleled his. In his book, “Rip” talked about how he would look up at airplanes as they flew overhead and wish for an opportunity to get into the air. I too had similar experiences. At the age of fifteen, I remember looking up in the sky in 1949 from a cotton field in East Texas after hearing the roar of a B-36 Bomber Airplane flying overhead at low altitude headed in the direction of Fort Worth. Little did I know that in less than four years I would become a mechanic on one of these monstrous airplanes! The B-36 was a large Bomber Airplane

with 10 engines - two jet engines on each wing and three reciprocating (piston powered) engines on each wing.



I found, after reading his book entitled, "Black Horizons," I was able to understand and appreciate many of his disappointments. After earning his pilot's licenses through the G.I. bill, he was unable to secure employment in the aviation industry. This lack of opportunity inspired him to start his own flight business, which eventually led to business, politics and government in the State Senate of Kansas.

Almost identical to my birth status, "Rip" was born the grandson of emancipated slaves and the son of sharecroppers in rural Tennessee. He was orphaned at age four and was forced to take control of his welfare at an early age. He grew up working in the fields and looking up overhead at airplanes, which perhaps helped to instill in him the desire for a better life than the one in the cotton fields of Tennessee and cemented his attachment to aviation.

As a young child in Tennessee, his playmates were the Haley brothers who became notable in their adult life. Alex Haley wrote the books entitled, "Roots" and the "Biography of Malcolm X." His brother, George Haley, became a lawyer and US Ambassador to the country of Gambia.

After getting his pilot's licenses, he became a pilot for the owner of the Negro League baseball team "Birmingham Black Barons." He built up his flying experience by flying the team owner to various cities where games were being played. After he achieved his flight instructor's rating, he would fly student pilots to supplement his income as a college student.

During his working career, "Rip" worked at the Boeing assembly plant in Wichita, eventually working his way up to a quality control inspector before he decided to go into business for himself as a Fixed-Base Operator with a Mooney Aircraft Distributorship that provided complete service for its customers. During the Vietnam War, he was able to secure a government contract for overhauling helicopter hubs. His business as a distributor for Mooney Aircraft came to a close when it went out of business - owing him \$100,000.00. Sixteen years of aviation activity came to a close and he had to look for other employment.

The life story of "Rip" Gooch is living proof that starting at the bottom does not mean that you have to stay there. I met "Rip" at an International Black Pilots Convention in Phoenix, Arizona for the first time several years ago and I purchased his book "Black Horizons" and I read it. In August of 2012, I attended another convention and purchased a second book because I had lost the first one. I read it again and found it as interesting as I did the first time. Fully retired now, "Rip" attends conferences to sell his book, give talks and act as a consultant. "Rip" is living proof that starting at the bottom is not always a bad thing as long as you are not contented to remain there. I highly recommend reading his book, even if your interest is not aviation because there are so many lessons about life and character in his book that make reading it a must.