

You can generally spot any Travel Air product by the shape of its tail and the robust, ready-to-carry-anything airframe. Small airlines like Scenic Airways loved them.

Back from the Aerial Dead

BY BUDD DAVISSON PHOTOS BY PHILIP MAKANNA

Looking back at the Travel Air Manufacturing Company of the late 1920s from this end of history's telescope, it looks like an aviation dream team. Of course, at the time, there was no way to know that each of the company's founders, Walter Beech, Clyde Cessna and Lloyd Stearman would go on to become aviation icons.

The time they formed the company, 1925, was a heady period to be in

aviation. Advancements were made almost daily, the most important being a whole new series of more reliable, more powerful engines: radials from Wright and Pratt & Whitney helped fuel the new designs.

Travel Air initially produced a series of big, three-place open biplanes but quickly started on a new concept: a high-wing, fully enclosed monoplane capable of carrying four passengers. The initial Model 5000 morphed in to the A-6000A,

powered by the 420-horsepower, R-1340 P & W (direct drive), that was introduced in 1929. The airplane bordered on being luxurious (relatively speaking), fast (very relatively speaking) and powerful for the times, and offered spacious accommodations for five passengers. It quickly became the airborne darling of executives and fledgling airlines alike. Among the many airlines using them was

Scenic Airways.

Scenic's entire business was carrying tourists over the arduous terrain of 1920/1930s Arizona to the unmatched beauty of the Grand Canyon. Starting with an early single-engine Stinson, they then went into a fleet of Trimotor Fords, adding a Travel Air A-6000A to the stable in 1933. They worked the airplane for nearly a decade.



Now flash ahead 70 years, and John Siebold is running Grand Canyon Airlines, the last incarnation of Scenic Airways. Being very conscious of the extraordinarily long aviation tradition of his company, he decided to establish a flying museum that featured one of every airplane Scenic/Grand Canyon had operated and base them at the Valle, Arizona, airport just south of The Canyon. That included a Travel Air A-6000A.

Only about 150 6000s were built in the first place and they all eventually lived a very hard life. Being a good load lifter, when its airline glory days were past, it naturally found itself working as a mule in areas where mules were needed. This is another way of saying that many died in harness: wrecked on high-country airstrips, abandoned at old mines when the ore ran out, or, in the case of N4942V, left to rot at the edge of an Alaskan airstrip. It apparently was the victim of a much-less-than-successful landing.

Not much of the airplane was left. The fuselage was more or less salvageable. One wing, however, was represented only by short stubs of broken spar sticking out of the badly rusted fuselage. The other was mostly there, but after many decades in the weather, was there in spirit only. It was barely good for patterns. The airplane was a basket case in which most of the basket was empty.

When the remains found their way to John Siebold, the work was divvied up, with Twin



Above: The executive versions of the Travel Air A-6000As featured luxurious interior appointments, but the airlines preferred to save the weight and went for more spartan accommodations.

Otter (Jimmy Helfrich, being the hands-on guy) in Las Vegas rehabbing the fuselage and Chuck Wentworth and his guys at Antique Aero in Paso Robles, California, building new wings and other parts.

Now Travel Air A-6000A, N4942V, not only enjoys the comfort and safety of living in a first-class aviation museum, but when the urge arises, is also taken out to revisit life in its element, the air. After all, an airplane that isn't flown is an airplane in name only. ✈



SPECIFICATIONS

Powerplant: Pratt & Whitney R985, 450hp
Propeller: Hamilton constant speed
Length: 31 ft. 2 in.
Height: 9 ft. 3 in.
Wingspan: 54 ft. 5 in.
Wing cord: 84 in.
Wing area: 340 sq. ft.
Seats: 6 + 1 pilot
Empty weight: 3,225 lb.
Gross weight: 5,250 lb.
Useful load: 2,025 lb.
Payload: 995 lb.
Fuel capacity (100LL): 130 gallons
Oil capacity: 9 gallons

PERFORMANCE

Rate of climb, sea level: 1,000 feet per minute
Max level speed, sea level: 140mph IAS
Normal cruise: 120mph IAS
Landing speed: 60mph IAS
Service ceiling: 18,000 feet
Range: 680 miles
Fuel burn: 25-28 gallons per hour
Value: New in 1929: \$18,000; Today: Priceless



The Travel Air A-6000 left the factory with a P & W R-1340 as later used in T-6s but it was a direct-drive engine, rather than being geared, so only produced 420 horsepower. When the superb R-985 P & Ws (450 horsepower), as used on BT-13s, became plentiful after WW II, one found its way onto N4942's nose.



Restoring a total basket case antique aircraft the size of the Travel Air A-6000A isn't for the faint of heart. Chuck Wentworth, here warming up the P & W, built the wings from nothing and Jimmy Helfrich brought the abandoned fuselage back to life.