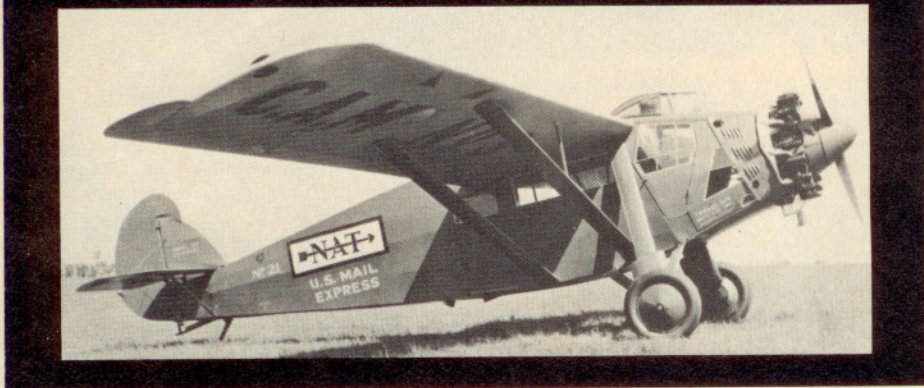


Yesterday's Wings

Big single-engine monoplane was highly regarded as airliner and general 'workhorse' in late 1920's. Some Travel Airs, the 6000/6, still active today

The Travel Air 6000

by PETER M. BOWERS / AOPA 54408



■ The Travel Air 6000 was typical of the "big" (220-450 h.p., 6-8 place) single-engine cabin monoplanes that were in production in the prosperous years of 1928-1929. The big Travel Airs were just about tops in their power/price range and as a result saw more use as airliners, nonskeds, and company-owned planes than they did as private-owner types.

Travel Air 6000s, many of them secondhand, were one of the principal models used to establish air service in Alaska in the early 1930's. Extra speed was not a particular asset there; the ability to haul big loads in and out of small unimproved fields was. Because of these characteristics, the big Travel Airs held on in Alaska and in mountain operations in the West long after they had been replaced by more modern equipment elsewhere. Although a couple of predecessor models became famous for transpacific flights, the Model 6000 did nothing to get into the record books; it was just one of those unspectacular working airplanes that everyone took for granted.

The Travel Air monoplane line came into existence despite difficulties. Walter Beech, president of the Travel Air Manufacturing Company of Wichita, Kan., was an all-out biplane man. He resisted the efforts of one of his partners, Clyde V. Cessna, to convince him that the monoplane was the coming thing. Finally, after Cessna built a high-wing monoplane on his own outside the plant, he got Beech to authorize the development of a single-wing Travel Air. Cessna's early 1926 original was a conservative and boxy design, but it pretty well crystalized the design concept for the big single-engine monoplane; subsequent production models by

Production Travel Air MA, later known as Model 5000, built for National Air Transport. Note the cupola over the pilot's cockpit, his private entry door, and the horn-balanced ailerons.

Beech Aircraft photo

several manufacturers presented recognition problems in their day similar to those between today's *Muskeeter* and *Cherokee* and between some of the various Beech and Cessna twins.

While Cessna wanted to produce a really clean monoplane, Beech maintained that the strut-braced design was enough of a step forward for the time and followed that route. Cessna had to quit and start a new company of his own in order to develop his advanced ideas [Jan. 1971 *PILOT*].

The new Travel Air, originally designated Model MA, was well timed and quickly found customers. Pacific Air Transport (PAT) bought the prototype of the five-place mail-and-passenger high-wing, which was powered with a 200 h.p. Wright J-4 Whirlwind radial engine. Slightly refined production

models with 220 h.p. Wright J-5 engines went to National Air Transport early in 1927.

The MA, which became Model 5000 in a 1927 revision of the Travel Air designating system, had a conventional cabin for the passengers but put the pilot in a separate and private "office" of his own, complete with private entry door. On the prototype, this was an open cockpit ahead of and above the cabin and recessed into the leading edge of the wing. On the production models, the cockpit was enclosed by what could best be described as a cupola.

Aviation history made two of the MA/5000s famous. PAT sold the prototype to a California pilot, Ernie Smith, who intended to make the first nonstop flight from California to Hawaii. Two Army pilots in a Fokker trimotor took off ahead of him on June 27, 1927. Knowing that he had a faster plane, Smith took off from the same field two hours after they left, hoping to overtake them. He was forced to return, however, and it is well that he did, for his equipment was quite inadequate for the trip. His navigator quit the expedition immediately upon landing back at Oakland.

Undaunted by the Army's success, Smith decided to be the first civilian to make the trip. Taking off from Oakland again on July 14, Smith and his new navigator, Emory Bronte, reached Hawaii after 25 hours 2 minutes in the air. However, they were far short of their Honolulu goal when they ran out of gas and force-landed in trees on Molokai.

Hawaii also called another MA/5000 to fame. This was a production model powered with a J-5 engine that was bought by Oklahoma oil tycoon Frank Phillips for movie stunt pilot Arthur C. Goebel to fly in the Dole Race from Oakland to Honolulu. Phillips named his new ship "Woolaroc" for the woods, lakes, and rocks on his Oklahoma game preserve (he also gave the name to several subsequent executive airplanes). The original "Woolaroc," with Goebel piloting and Navy Lt. William Davis navigating, won the race in a 26 hour 17 minute flight on Aug. 16-17, 1927. Another MA/5000, named "Oklahoma," was also entered. The first to take off, it soon returned to the starting point and did not try again.

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE

	6000	A-6000	B-6000
Span	46 ft. 6 in.	54 ft. 5 in.	48 ft. 7 in.
Length	30 ft. 10 in.	31 ft. 2 in.	30 ft. 10 in.
Wing area	280 sq. ft.	340 sq. ft.	282 sq. ft.
Powerplant	Wright J-5, 220 h.p. @ 1800 r.p.m.	P & W Wasp 420 h.p. @ 2000 r.p.m.	Wright J-6-9 300 h.p. @ 2000 r.p.m.
Empty weight	2,430 lbs.	3,225 lbs.	2,608 lbs.
Gross weight	4,100 lbs.	5,250 lbs.	4,230 lbs.
High speed	120 m.p.h.	140 m.p.h.	130 m.p.h.
Cruise speed	102 m.p.h.	120 m.p.h.	110 m.p.h.
Climb	650 f.p.m.	1000 f.p.m.	800 f.p.m.
Service ceiling	12,000 ft.	18,000 ft.	16,000 ft.
Range	560 mi.	680 mi.	550 mi.
Price	\$12,000	\$13,000	\$18,000

Since only two planes finished the race, second-place winner Martin Jensen tells a good story relative to his position: "I came in second and Goebel finished next to last!"

The MA/5000, although used commercially, never did qualify for an Approved Type Certificate (ATC). It finally received the lesser Memo Approval 2-27 in February 1929.

The MA/5000 was followed late in 1928 by the Model 6000, which was essentially a refinement still using the J-5 engine. Major change was in the cabin, which was lengthened fore and aft to accommodate six (some carried seven). Entrance door and rear seats were aft of the wing. The separate door for the pilot was a carryover from the 5000 to the prototype 6000 but was not used on production models. By this time, Travel Air as well as other manufacturers had stopped treating the pilot like a coachman and put him in the main cabin with the passengers. On the 6000, he even had a copilot at dual controls. The prototype 6000 had a tailskid; the production models had a steerable tailwheel and cut out the bottom of the rudder in order to fit the oleo shock absorber to the rear of the fuselage.

The 6000 was awarded ATC 100 in January 1929. The addition of twin floats changed the designation to S-6000. As with many contemporary designs, it was quickly caught up in the "more performance from more horsepower" race. An A-6000-A model soon appeared with the 420 h.p. Pratt & Whitney Wasp engine. Actually, the A-6000 was a slightly stretched 6000, not just a hopped-up version. It got a new ATC, 116, in February 1929. Only 25 were built. An oddity was the fact that a separate ATC, 175, was issued in July

1929 to a seaplane version of the A, designated SA-6000A. Special bush-flying features like a larger loading door, etc., might have contributed to the recertification of the SA-6000A, of which only two were built.

The most popular 6000 model was the B-6000 (or 6000-B; it was called both), which was essentially the basic 6000 using the new 300 h.p. Wright J-6-9 Whirlwind of necessity because the J-5 had gone out of production. The J-6 increased to 330 h.p. in later B-6000s; those that survived World War II had no trouble in fitting war-surplus Wright R-975s, which were later military versions of the J-6-9 that delivered 420 h.p. Some 55 B-6000s were built under ATC 130, issued in March 1929.

In 1929, Travel Air was acquired by the Curtiss-Wright Corporation, which had been formed earlier in the year by the merger of Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company and the Wright Aeronautical Corporation. Travel Air was merged with the older Curtiss-Robertson Manufacturing Corporation of St. Louis which is best remembered as the manufacturer of the Curtiss *Robin* monoplane [Oct. 1969 *PILOT*]. This new C-W subsidiary, with separate divisions in Wichita, Kan., and St. Louis, Mo., continuing its original product lines, was named Curtiss-Wright Airplane Company. Walter Beech was made president and also became a vice-president of the parent Curtiss-Wright Corporation.

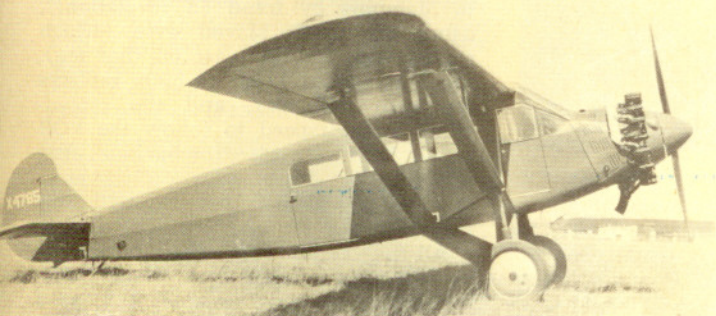
The merger had little initial effect on the airplanes themselves. Under Curtiss, however, the old Travel Air system of designating basic models by "thousands" was pruned; the 6000 became Model 6 and evolved into the J-6 powered 6B which was awarded ATC 352 in August 1930. The 6B could be distinguished from the B-6000 mainly by slight

changes in windshield and vertical tail shapes.

The corporate name change took a long time to catch on with the airplane users and never was completely accepted. When the Curtiss connection was acknowledged in the contemporary press, it was usually in combination, as Curtiss-Wright Travel Air. The 6000/6 models that survive today are all called Travel Airs by their users and the aficionados, regardless of what the paperwork says. Actually, they should be called North Americans since North American acquired the old Travel Air and Curtiss design rights when it bought the Curtiss-Wright Airplane Division and its Columbus, O., plant in 1949.

The depression practically wiped out the market for most of C-W's current Wichita and St. Louis products. The Wichita plant was closed and production and personnel were moved to St. Louis. Only four 6Bs were built there before that model was phased out. An additional four 6Bs were assembled by Air-Tech in San Diego, Calif., from factory parts and drawings.

Because of their load-carrying and short-field capabilities, a remarkably high percentage of 6000/6 models was still operating after World War II; 33 show up in the 1947 FAA inventory. However, they were still too much airplane for the average private owner; they had to work to survive and they did this by hauling freight and smoke jumpers in the western mountains. While the hobbyists in the antique airplane movement have provided homes for many flyable antiques of similar vintage, the big Travel Air is notable as a missing link in that worthy activity. Current FAA figures show only eight 6000s and three Model 6s on hand today. □

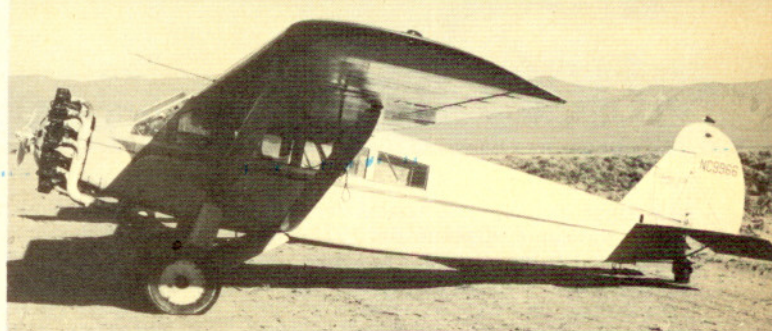


The prototype Travel Air 6000, with Wright J-5 engine. Compare the longer cabin and modified windshield with the MA/5000 model. Forward entry door and tailskid were features of the prototype only.

Beech Aircraft photo

Model B-6000 was essentially the basic 6000 with a Wright J-6-9 engine; on floats it became SB-6000. While many airplanes of this period added an auxiliary fin when converting to floats, this Travel Air merely enlarged the original vertical fin.

Gordon S. Williams photo



The Travel Air A-6000 was an enlarged 6000 with 420 h.p. Pratt & Whitney Wasp engine. Compare tailwheel location at rudder post and cutout rudder with the prototype.

Peter M. Bowers photo

Curtiss-Wright 6B was a refined Travel Air B-6000 with a different windshield and revised vertical tail shape. This one, photographed in 1968, has an oversized door for aerial supply drop, smoke jumpers, etc.

Peter M. Bowers photo

