The Silvaire Sedan

AWAKENING A SLEEPING BEAUTY

A marketer's nightmare; a pilot's dream

BY THOMAS B. HAINES

The Luscombe Silvaire Sedan originated in an era when cars were cars and airplanes were cars, too. The wide doors and sloping windows of the Model 11A Sedan are reminiscent of automobiles of the late 1940s, and a glance inside reveals more literal classic automobile touches. The Luscombe Airplane Corporation bought upholstery, ashtrays, and dome lights from the 1948 Cadillac inventory for its production Sedans. Engine

gauges and tachometers came from Studebakers of the era. With automobile parts so prevalent in the airplane, it seemed only appropriate that William and Bridgette Wright turned to Cadillac for new paint and fabric for their 1948 Sedan—this time the year was 1986.

"The people at the Cadillac dealership were very helpful, but they did think we were a little strange," explains Wright. "I think after a while they dreaded seeing us come in."

When he bought the tattered Sedan, NC1666B, in August 1986, Wright didn't believe getting to know the local Cadillac dealer would be necessary in order to restore the airplane. And little did he know the United Parcel Service delivery man would become involved in the project, either. But after delivering aircraft parts to the Wright's San Diego home week after week, even the UPS man soon was impatiently waiting for the day the airplane would fly. "You learn many things in restoring an airplane," Wright confesses. Patience is one of them.

William Wright didn't believe getting to know the local Cadillac dealer would be necessary in order to restore his Silvaire Sedan.

But his patience did pay off, and less than two years after the purchase, Wright first flew the airplane. With the paint barely dry and odds and ends still to be completed, the airplane was flown to the Experimental Aircraft Association's Annual Fly-in and Convention in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in late July. After many "ohhhs" and "ahhhs" from the crowd, the airplane was awarded the Classic Aircraft Custom Class C (151 horsepower and up) trophy. Since then, the airplane has won best of show in the classic category at two California shows and two awards at other shows.

"I was completely unprepared for the response," Wright says. "I enjoyed hearing the comments and letting people see the airplane. They picked up on the automobile details right away. 'It's just like a car,' they'd say."

Despite the namesake, the Sedan did not start out as a car-like airplane. Luscombe instead was seeking to move the thousands of post-World-War-II buyers of its two-place Model 8 aircraft up to four-place airplanes. Most of the Model 8s were sold in rural areas, and Luscombe hoped its Model 11A would do well with farmers. In fact, the Model 11A was designed so that, with the rear seats removed, it could carry six milk cans on its flat floor.

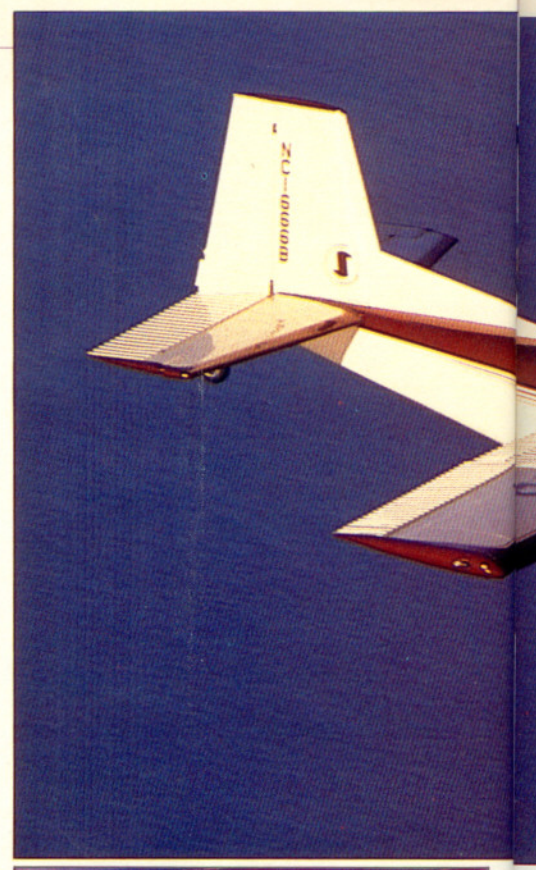
The number of orders was dismal, and when the company surveyed its dealers, it found that only one percent of 11A orders were going to flying farmers. The majority of the purchasers were businessmen. With that, the company dropped the farmer image and went upscale with pin-striped wool upholstery, wool kick panels on the doors, and automobile-type carpeting. To further the automotive theme, Luscombe dubbed the airplane the Silvaire Sedan. Silvaire was the name all Luscombe aircraft carried as a result of an employee "name the airplane" contest.

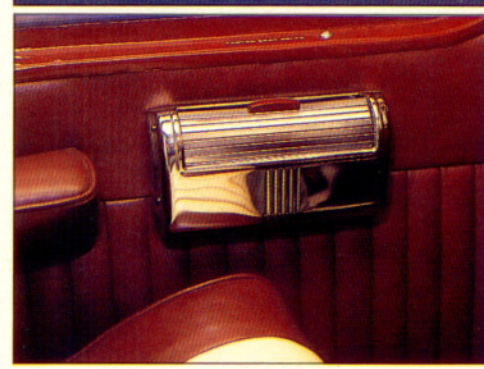
Like the flying-farmer concept, the automotive motif didn't work; Sedan orders languished, and a cash-poor Luscombe went into bankruptcy.

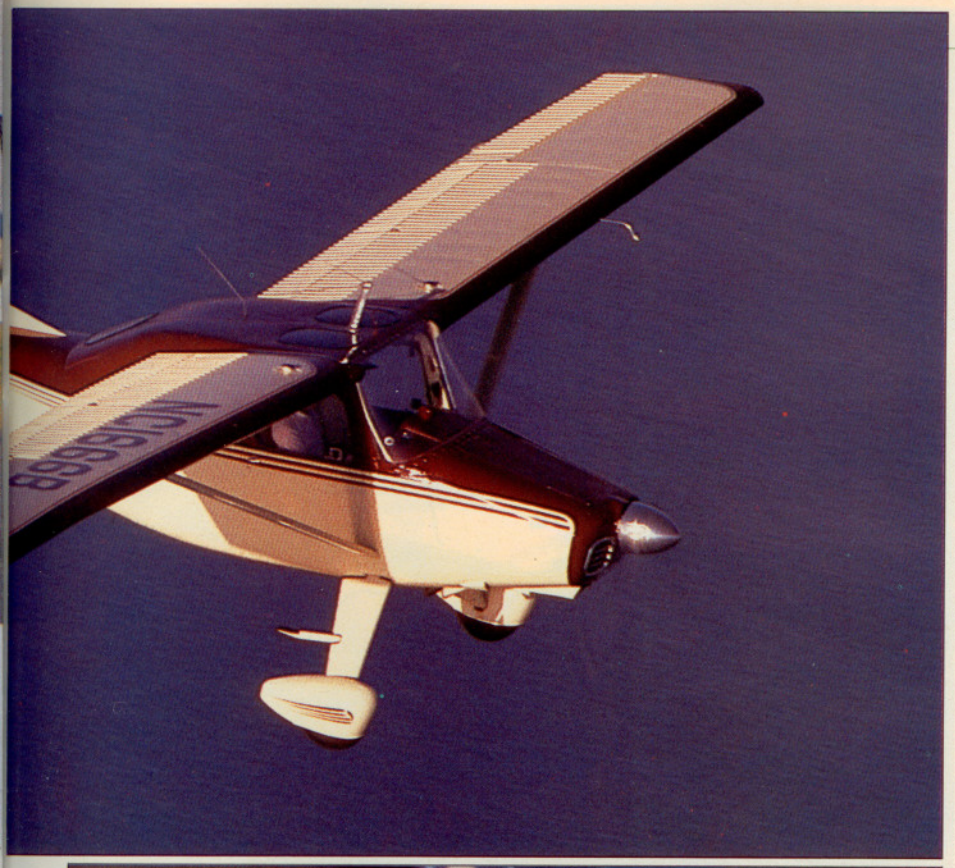
The marketing staff should not take all the blame for the Sedan's failure. The airplane had earned a dubious reputation even before it was certified.

One of several flaws the portly airplane would never overcome was looks. Because of the large, sloped rear window, the airplane looks as if it has a broken back. Some say it looks pregnant. The company unsuccessfully attempted to hide the shape with careful pin-striping along the sides. The second problem (a bit more serious) was the Sedan's tendency to exhibit uncontrollable spin characteristics at full gross weight and an aft center of gravity. In fact, a Luscombe test pilot bailed out of a Sedan during certification flight testing, according to *The Luscombe Story*, a history of the company written by John C. Swick. The pilot was uninjured, but the aircraft hit the ground in a flat spin.

The company was running short of funds by this time and was desperate to get the Sedan certified. Rather than spend additional money in studying modifications to the airframe and risk having to build new tooling and rebuild aircraft already on the assembly line, Luscombe decided to limit the CG envelope and limit upper elevator travel, making the airplane virtually impossible to spin. The Civil Aeronautics Administration agreed to the changes, and a pro-







William Wright

visional type certificate was granted on May 26, 1948. Luscombe could deliver aircraft to dealers, but because final certification was not granted, buyers might be liable for any changes required to satisfy the CAA.

Because of the restricted elevator travel and CG envelope, the tailwheel could not be lowered enough to make a conventional landing. Touchdown on the main wheels was the only option, but pilots of the day preferred three-point landings—another nail in the Sedan's coffin.

Pilot resistance to wheel landings, the broken-back appearance, competition from the Cessna 170, a Luscombe dealer network that had never sold a four-place airplane, and a glutted market doomed the Sedan from the start. Only 92 of the aircraft were built before Luscombe was ordered into bankruptcy in 1949; four of those were test vehicles. Two of the prototypes were eventually sold as production aircraft. Originally priced at $6,995, the aircraft, powered by the Continental E-165-2 engine, sold for $7,470 in December 1948, according to Swick.

Within a few years, most owners had replaced the 165-hp engines with Continental E-185 engines, and the wooden fixed-pitch propellers were traded for metal cockpit-adjustable props.

In 1948, the employees at Luscombe, a persistent lot, attempted to gain market acceptance for the Sedan by proving its reliability. It was decided that Luscombe would use a Sedan to break the light airplane record for continuous flight. The record at the time was 726 hours—more than 30 days. After perfecting an elaborate refueling scheme whereby five-gallon cans were lifted into the airplane from a moving car, two former military pilots took to the sky in a highly modified Sedan.

Fouled spark plugs were a source of concern after a few weeks of continuous flight. The crew attempted different leaning techniques to conserve spark plug life. After 22 days—529 hours of flying, the Continental engine quit in what must have been deafening silence. The pilot managed a forced landing into a small clearing. The crew got out safely, but the aircraft was destroyed. Nearly 200 hours short of the record, the Sedan lived up to its reputation at the time by failing to meet expectations. If only the folks at Edsel had studied the history of the Luscombe Silvaire Sedan.

So 40 years later, why would a San Diego attorney and his wife, a United

Airlines flight attendant, want to sink a lot of money and time into an airplane with such a history? Because, despite its early reputation, the Sedan performs as well as comparable four-place airplanes built before or since; the price was right, when compared to airplanes built lately; and because the Wrights' maroon and yellow Sedan attracts a lot of attention on the ramp. If you see NC1666B, you *will* stop and take a closer look.

"I learned to fly in a Luscombe, and I already had [a Luscombe] 8F, but I wanted a four-place airplane to go with it. I'd heard of the Sedan, and after reading up on it I decided that was what I wanted," explains Wright. He originally tried to buy the Sedan owned by Franklin C. Lamm that was featured in an article in the February 1983 issue of *AOPA Pilot*. Lamm decided he could not part with his pride and joy, so Wright continued his search.

He soon struck a deal with a Florida man advertising a Sedan for sale. In exchange for $1,000, the owner was to fly the airplane to San Diego. If Wright bought the airplane, the money would be deducted from the sales price. If, after seeing the airplane, Wright backed out, the owner could keep the money.

"The airplane was a piece of junk," exclaims Wright. "I told him to take it back. Frankly, I don't know how it held together during the trip out here." The E-185-3 engine had only 187 hours since a major overhaul, but three cylinders were scored and one was cracked. The engine mount was cracked in several places, and the wiring was an abomination, he explains. Layers of paint attempted to hide hail damage, and the 38-year-old magnesium leading edges crumbled at the touch of a finger. In addition, Wright continues, the skylights had been covered over, the aluminum placard panel had been painted over, hoses leaked, door and window seals were rotted, the glove boxes were gone, and the upholstery was a mess. Controls were misrigged, bearings and pulleys were frozen, and hinges were rusted. "It was a flying basket case."

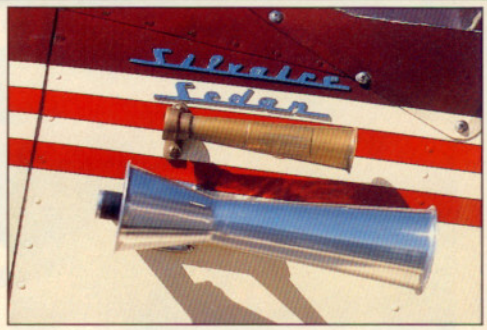
The seller desperately wanted rid of the airplane, and he immediately started discounting the price. "At first, I didn't want that airplane at any price, but I guess everybody has a price," says Wright. "We eventually came to terms. He went back to Florida, and I was left with an airplane that I felt wasn't safe to fly, and I had no idea what to do next." Wright had never restored an airplane. "Ignorance is bliss," he sighs.

The Sedan spent more than a year at a Ramona, California, paint shop. In the meantime, Wright tracked down replacement parts for those missing or beyond repair. Luscombe owners and A&P mechanics Michael LaFrance and Sean Medley joined the project after a few months and offered a shot of encouragement when the Wrights were about to give up.

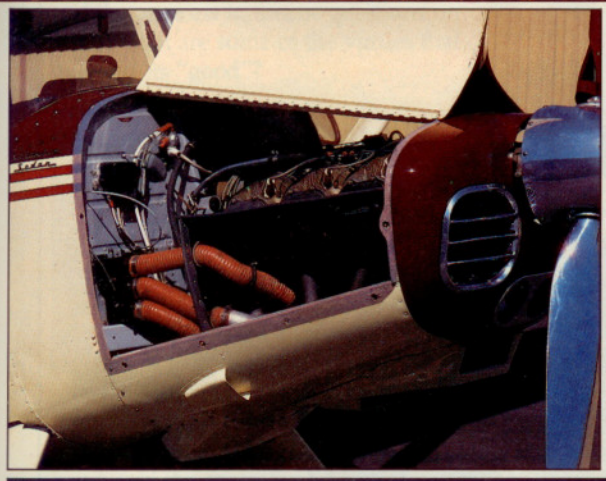
Earlier this year, with the restoration still dragging on, Wright desperately wanted a flyable four-place airplane, so he bought a Cessna 182.

After a concentrated effort in early summer with the goal of Oshkosh 1988 a few days away, the 23-month ordeal was finished, and Wright finally flew NC1666B. "The first time I flew it I knew we had done the right thing. It felt right, and then, when we took it to Oshkosh and everyone raved, well, I was thrilled. Would I do it again? I used to say, 'No!' but now that I know the rewards are such, I'd have to say, 'Yes, I'd probably do it again.' "

Indeed, it is a thrill to tool along above the southern California desert in a 40-year-old airplane that looks as if it just rolled off the production line. Every detail has been considered in this restoration. The skylights have been reopened, seats recovered and rebuilt, wiring re-



Level at 2,500 feet and cruising at 115 knots, it's hard to imagine why the Sedan never caught the attention of the 1940s pilot.



placed, and the engine gauges reworked. With the exception of the new Terra nav/com and intercom, the panel looks much as it did in 1948. Discreetly placed inside one glove box is an altitude-reporting transponder—a necessity in southern California. In the other glove box is an AM/FM radio. From the flashy Cadillac ashtrays in the back to the long pitot tube on the left wing, Wright has polished and reconditioned all of the chrome on NC1666B. Sporty wheelpants, not originally available on the Sedan, dress up the outside.

The Sedan's rugged construction, a result of its barnyard lineage, is first exhibited when a door is pulled shut. It's a deep sound with a crisp latch—as in a quality automobile.

Taxiing the Sedan is not the tap dance some pilots would lead you to believe. Experienced Luscombe pilots say you can effectively use the toe brakes to steer the Sedan on the ground, unlike most taildraggers, which are more sensitive to braking than tricycle-gear airplanes. Once a pilot learns to overcome the fear of braking, ground handling becomes manageable. Because of the Sedan's sloping nose, visibility from the front seats is very good, and S turns aren't necessary. Push the nose over at 45 to 50 knots and the airplane lifts off at about 60 knots. On a 90-degree day, NC1666B with two aboard and full fuel climbed off San Diego's Gillespie Field at 1,200 feet per minute and 85 knots. Level at 2,500 feet and cruising at about 115 knots, it's hard to imagine why the Sedan never caught the attention of the 1940s pilot.

The airplane is solid, and one gets the feeling it wants to fly on and on. It slips through light turbulence with hardly a wobble of the VSI or directional gyro. The controls seem heavy, but that adds to the feeling of stability.

Landing is as straightforward as other aspects of Sedan flying. Approach at about 70 knots. A lever between the seats (it looks like a gearshift in an automobile) controls hydraulic flaps. A couple of pumps and the flaps silently pop down. Plant the mains on the tarmac at about 55 knots and the tail soon settles down. Don't be afraid of the brakes.

Wright describes the Sedan as a sleeper—an airplane that never caught on. Like the Edsel, the Sedan was a good product at the wrong time, targeted to the wrong market. And like the Edsel, a few Sedans have been meticulously restored for all to enjoy. And we do. □