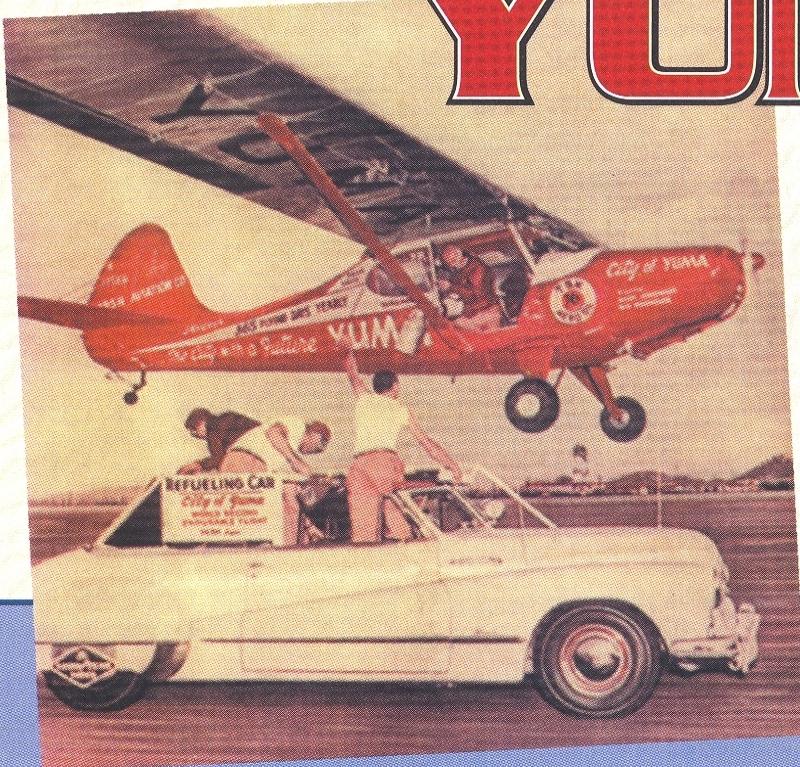


# CITY OF YUMA

IN 1949, AN AERONCA SEDAN  
LIGHT AIRCRAFT SET AN INCREDIBLE  
ENDURANCE RECORD BY  
STAYING

ALOFT FOR NEARLY 47 DAYS

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL O'LEARY



**B**efore the United States entered World War Two, a frantic program of building new aircraft and air-fields was undertaken by the government — finally recognizing the threat posed by the Axis. In Arizona, a large bombing and aerial gunnery range was located between Yuma and Gila Bend. In Yuma, city supervisors suggested to the Army that funds be allocated to their local Fly Field to make it into a functional Army Air Corps base.



This was done with work being completed in January 1942. Two paved runways (4200-ft by 150-ft) were completed and in June further funds were advanced to create a major training facility. Captain Barry Goldwater told Yuma businessmen that the field would be very important to the American war effort and the first class arrived in January 1943.

Needless to say, this facility — along with other military installations in the Arizona desert — brought a great deal of prosperity to Yuma and the region. However, the end of the war saw a major cutback to these installations and Yuma Army Air Field was declared surplus in September 1946. The Fly Field portion of the base went back to the county but the government still maintained control over the military hangars and other buildings although they were empty.

The closing of the air base and facilities led to a very steep drop in the economy of Yuma and nearby communities. This left the city fathers in a dilemma — how could they promote Yuma assets such as clear skies, sunshine, and unrestricted visibility in an attempt to bring business to the area? In a January 1949 chamber of commerce meeting, it was noted that a record flight at Fullerton, California, had generated a lot of publicity for the area. The aircraft was an Aeronca Sedan named *The Sunkist Lady*.

Accordingly, a decision was made to obtain an Aeronca

Sedan and attempt a record flight to promote that fact that Yuma had 365 flying days a year. City officials reasoned that this might cause the air base to reopen.

Aeronca Sedan N1156H was loaned by local businessmen Claude Sharpensteen and Mickey Lorang. Marsh Aviation made its hangar facilities available along with their head mechanic. A small group of workers was assembled to modify the Aeronca for the record flight. The Model 15AC Sedan was a four-seat light aircraft that was the last plane to be produced by Aeronca before the company abandoned aircraft to concentrate on military sub-contracts and other work. The Sedan appeared in 1947 and entered series production the next year. However, the market was flooded with surplus aircraft and new planes from other designers and the post-war general aviation boom never materialized. Several hundred Sedans were built before Aeronca tossed in the hat.

Standard fuel capacity for the Sedan was 36 gallons. To add fuel for the record, two extra tanks, associated hoses, and pumps were installed in the fuselage — one horizontal, one vertical and both in the baggage area. The tanks took up all the baggage area and part of the rear seat.

During the flight, the off-duty pilot would use a hand-operated rotary pump to transfer fuel from 2.5-gal cans (transferred to

the plane from a speeding Buick convertible) into the fuselage tanks and, later, into the wing tanks. With the extra tanks, fuel capacity increased to a bit over 80-gal. Another system was designed and installed that allowed monitoring of oil quantity in the crankcase along with a means to add and extract oil from the crankcase — making 100-hour oil changes possible.

Bob Woodhouse and Woody Jongeward, both ex-Navy pilots, became



*The City of Yuma was flown during our photo mission by Michael Taylor.*

*The City of Yuma airborne near Parker, Arizona. All the markings were accurately created from vintage photographs.*

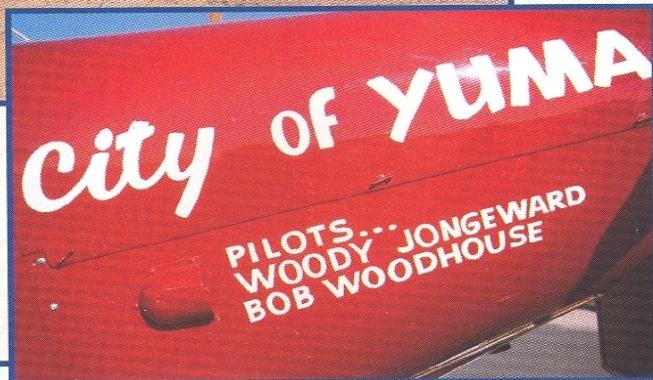
pilots for the record flight. News releases were sent out to papers and radio stations across the country. The plane was painted up as *The City of Yuma* with "The City with Future" emblazoned along the fuselage.

The first attempt started on 21 April 1949, but the plane came down after 74 hours due to engine problems. A second attempt started on 5 May but the plane landed with engine detonations after 155 hours in the air. However, the third attempt was a success. It should be noted that the plane had to stay airborne at least 1010 hours to beat the previous record set by *The Sunkist Lady*. Starting on 24 August, the Aeronca took to the



The Aeronca Sedan would swoop low over Fly Field to be refueled from a speeding 1948 Buick convertible. In over 1500 such refuelings, the Buick sustained a few broken side mirrors!

*The City of Yuma* is available for airshow displays and further information may be obtained at (928) 344-3860.



The original control yokes had been replaced by more modern units but after a great deal of searching, original yokes were discovered and installed.

A foundation was set up to return *The City of Yuma* home and a deal was finally struck in 1997 and the aircraft was taken apart and trucked back to Yuma. The restoration would not be straightforward since the plane's engine had been upgraded, float fittings added, along with numerous other modifications. The plane was taken apart and carefully restored back to its record flight condition but this was a slow process.

All the hard work by many Yuma citizens finally paid off when *The City of Yuma* once again took to the air — the mission being the same, to promote the city and its citizens. We had a chance to fly with *The City of Yuma* at Parker, Arizona, and enjoyed flying with the vintage Aeronca — although it was a bit difficult envisioning what it would be like staying airborne for going on 47 days! **AC**

## SPECIFICATIONS AERONCA SEDAN

<b>Span</b>	37 ft 6 in
<b>Length</b>	25 ft 3 in
<b>Height</b>	7 ft
<b>Wing Area</b>	200 sq ft
<b>Max Speed</b>	129 mph
<b>Cruise Speed</b>	114 mph @ 75% power (sl)
<b>Climb</b>	800 fpm (initial)
<b>Ceiling</b>	12,400 ft
<b>Range</b>	456 mph
<b>Powerplant</b>	Continental C-145 145 hp

air and the wheels did not again touch ground until 10 October — after 1124 hours, 14 minutes, and five seconds airborne which totaled nearly 47 days aloft.

Refueling took place from Fly Field with the Buick speeding down the runway while the pilot flew formation and the other pilot would make a grab for the fuel cans, food, and other supplies. This alone was a very difficult process and over 1500 "formation flights" were required during the record run.

The event did bring a lot of publicity to Yuma and the military eventually did move back to the airfield — today it is MCAS Yuma.

And what of the valiant Aeronca? It was eventually sold and disappeared. Most involved with the record flight believed the plane was destroyed in a crash.

In 1991, Jim Gillaspie started a search to see if 56H still existed in any form. He was thinking that it would be a good idea to find the plane, return it to Yuma, and restore the craft to its record-setting configuration. Amazingly, he found that the plane was intact and flying regularly in Minnesota with Charlie and Chris Neal. They were contacted and were interested in selling the plane once they found out about the ambitious project.