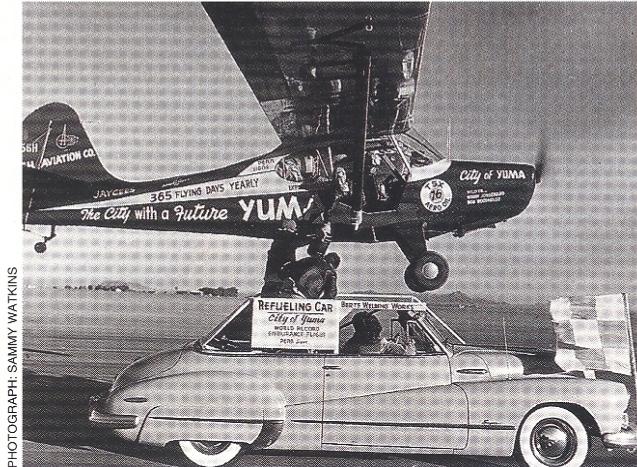


A 50th Reunion, One Unforgettable Flight



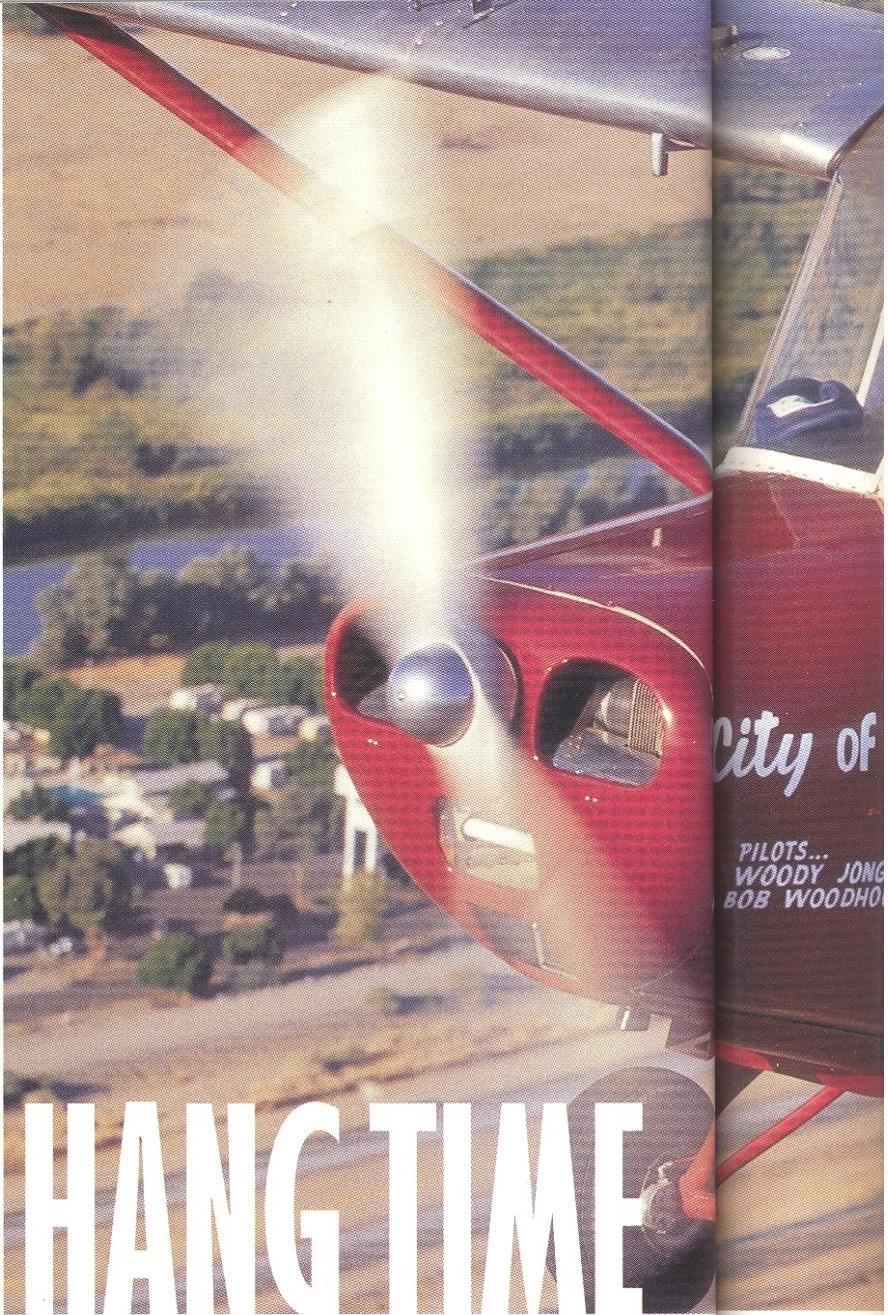
Text and Photography by Russell Munson

On August 24th, 1949, Woody Jongeward and Bob Woodhouse gingerly took-off from Fly Field in Yuma, Arizona, in a borrowed Aeronca 15AC Sedan named the *City of Yuma*. Nearly 47 days later, on October 10th, the dogged duo bounced back down at the airport after spending 1,124 continuous hours aloft. The new world endurance record holders had landed, and thousands of fans, swelled by growing worldwide publicity, were at the airport to welcome them.

This past October, Woody and Bob, along with others involved with the flight, were back in Yuma for a three-day celebration marking the 50th anniversary of their achievement. And in the center of it all, flying everyday from one event to another, was the original *City of Yuma*, beautifully restored under the direction of Jim Gillaspie. It was a time to remember, to be proud, and to laugh.

"It was fun then," Woodhouse said of the flight, "but more fun now."

"I thought it was the dumbest idea I had ever heard of," Berta Woodhouse remembers thinking when her husband first told her of plans for the flight. "But you had to know Ray Smucker. It made sense the way he explained it."



Smucker and other local business leaders were acutely aware of Yuma's postwar problem. That big sucking sound they heard was all the jobs disappearing when the Yuma Army Air Field, a large World War II training base, closed in 1946. Despite the city's advantages of agricultural potential, non-stop sunshine, and abundant land, few people had ever heard of the place. The economic vacuum, therefore, was not being filled. Hidden in the southwest tip of a state best known as an open-air ward for the infirm, Yuma was all but invisible.

Ray Smucker wanted to change that, and a creative, persuasive man he was. As the promotion-minded manager of Yuma's only radio station, KYUM, he had an idea. Breaking the world aviation endurance record, which at the time stood at 1,008 hours, would bring much needed recognition to Yuma, he argued, and economic growth was bound to follow.

Smucker's friends and fellow businessmen Woody Jongeward, Horace Griffen, and F.C. Braden agreed. Jongeward reportedly told Smucker, "You get the airplane, and Griff and I will fly it."

The project, catching everyone's imagination as word spread, became a community grassroots effort. Smucker beat

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Top left: Fuel cans being passed by the refueling crew to Bob Woodhouse in *The City of Yuma*, while Woody Jongeward flies in 1949. **Bottom left:** Fifty years later, the scene is re-enacted with Jim Gillaspie flying the original airplane and Horace Griffen driving a similar Buick restored for the 50th Anniversary Celebration. **Above:** Woody Jongeward, left, and Bob Woodhouse flying *The City of Yuma* on October 10th, 1999, together again after half a century.

the bushes on his morning radio program, "The Sunny Side of the Street." In a matter of days the Aeronca, N1156H, was loaned to the cause by Claude Sharpensteen and Mickey Lorang of the A.A. Amusement Company. Other sponsors joined, among them: Marsh Aviation, a local FBO; Bert's Welding Works; Union Oil Company; Goodyear Tire Company; Penn Signs; Griffen Buick, Horace Griffen's car dealership; Woody Jongeward's Electric Company; and most important of all, the enthusiastic backing of The Yuma Jaycees. There were numerous other supporters—laundries, restaurants, service stations, and an army of individual volunteers.

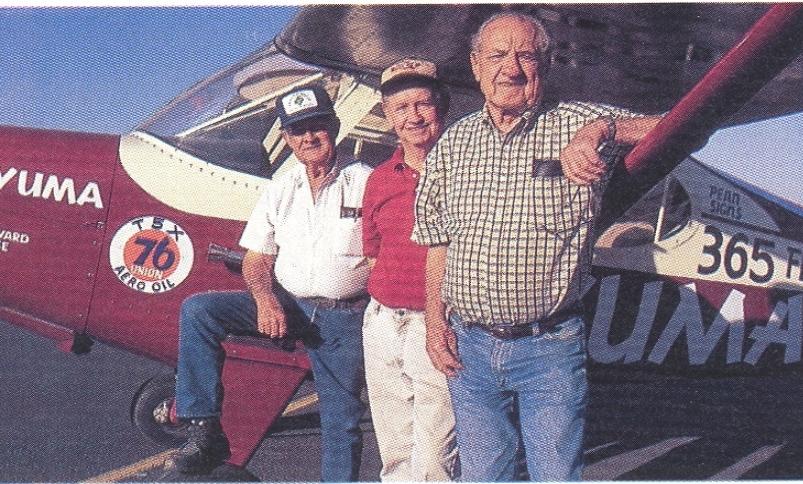
The *City of Yuma* was soon ready. Painted on its red and white fuselage were the sponsors' names, and, "The City with a Future, YUMA, 365 Flying Days Yearly."

But as the demands of the flight became clear, Horace Griffen realized that he could not run his Buick dealership and co-fly the plane, too. The previous endurance record, set only months before in another Aeronca 15AC, "Sunkist Lady," was 42 days. That was a long time for Griff to be away from the car store. His Parts Manager, Bob Woodhouse, jumped at the chance. Like Woody, Bob was a former Navy pilot who loved

to fly. Griff offered to continue Bob's salary during the flight, and supply a 1948 Buick convertible, formerly owned by his Service Manager, George Murdock, as the refueling car.

Refueling car? This is where things started to get tricky. First, a little technical background: the Aeronca was prepared for the record attempt by Paul Burch of Marsh Aviation, a man whose mechanical brilliance was immediately apparent despite his modest style. Knowing that the 145-hp Continental might overheat hauling the fuel-heavy Aeronca to altitude in the hot Yuma air, Burch added air scoops at critical areas, and rebuilt the engine to slightly looser tolerances. He rigged lines from the engine oil tank through the firewall to an oil filter, sight gauge, and a holding tank in the space formerly occupied by the right-hand rudder pedals. The pilots could check oil quantity by the gauge, and change the oil and filter every 100 hours by extracting four quarts into the holding tank, replacing it with new oil, and repeating until the full capacity was replenished.

The right front and rear seats from the four-place 15AC were removed, and Burch's crew replaced the right cabin door with one built by fellow mechanic Dallas Hovatter. It fold-



Top: Bob Woodhouse, left, Horace Griffen, and Woody Jongeward at a 50th Anniversary fly-in breakfast, one of many events during the three-day-long celebration.

Bottom: On the Bet-Ko-Air ramp, Bob and Woody talk to Jim Gillaspie, center, who was the driving force in finding, acquiring, restoring and bringing home *The City of Yuma*.

ed upward and inward, thereby opening the entire area of the original doorframe. In place of the rear seat, Burch mounted two wing tanks from a derelict Fairchild trainer, and plumbed them to the two original 18-gallon Aeronca wing tanks via a rotary hand crank. Turn the crank in one direction, it transferred fuel from the rear tanks to the wing tanks; turn it in the other direction and it replenished the rear tanks with fuel from 2 1/2-gallon dairy cans.

Here's where the fun part began: the cans were handed up to the airplane one at a time by the volunteer refueling crew, who stood in the back of the Buick while it sped down the Yuma runway in formation with the Aeronca.

Horace Griffen, who often drove the Buick, told the anniversary gathering how the refueling process worked. The off-duty pilot, tethered by a harness, would lean out of the open door passing full and empty cans back and forth to the refueling crew. This was done in two sessions a day, later extended to three, and each session usually required four passes down the runway, since the Buick had to accelerate, form up with the Aeronca, pass gas, as they used to say, and screech to a stop before careening into the desert. This little song and dance took place more than 1,500 times, day and night, with never a misstep. Although the Buick's spotlight mounted near the driver's vent window had to be replaced twice after being nudged by the Aeronca's right wheel, but nothing more serious than that.

"I told Woody I was going to send divorce papers up to him the same way," said Jongeward's wife, Betty. "But really, there was never any thought about danger or risk. It wasn't in our vocabulary. We always thought it was going to work. There was so much support from the community of Yuma that we felt like we were just a part of the team." Despite holding full-time jobs, neither Berta nor Betty ever missed a refueling run, nor were they too timid to give their husbands a kiss while standing in the Buick after the cans were secure.

A camaraderie spread throughout Yuma as the flight progressed. The battle cry was "Ten-ten," meaning the goal of beating the previous record 1,008 hours by at least two hours. The *City of Yuma*, plagued by mechanical problems on two previous attempts, was finally going for the gold.

How do you live in a tiny airplane for weeks on end? How do you sleep, stay awake, eat, bathe? Bob and Woody had a routine. One flew while the other rested, exercised, and slept stretched out as much as possible on the right side between the firewall and rear tanks. After a four-hour shift, they traded places.

A low-fat, low-salt diet was prescribed by their family physician, Dr. Ralph T. Irwin. Water for drinking and sponge baths was handed up by the refueling crew along with food and other supplies.

"Everyone wonders how we went to the bathroom," Woody said, fielding questions from a fly-in lunch crowd. "We used a regular relief tube for urinating, and for the other we used a thick, double-layer, waterproof sack placed inside a metal pot. They didn't have plastic bags back then. When we were through, we removed the sack and tossed it out over California."

"One of the things we used to do in the evenings to break the monotony," Woody continued, "was talk to a couple of ex-Navy signalmen on the ground using flashlights and Morse code. And we traded pranks with the refueling crew. One time we told the evening crew that we needed a new replacement part right away. We handed them down an old, cruddy carburetor that the morning crew had sneaked up to us. Little things like that kept us from getting bored."

More serious moments broke the monotony, too. Bob Woodhouse told about an evening to remember:

"One night I was sleeping and Woody was flying the airplane. All of a sudden, Woody said, 'Bob, wake up, wake up. What are those lights down there? I think I might have dozed off.'

"Well, I couldn't see Yuma, and I couldn't see Mexicali. We circled around and finally figured we must be over some fishing villages on the Gulf of California, a little bit south of the border, you might say. We headed back north." Fortunately, they figured right, and had plenty of fuel.

Berta and Betty moved in together to keep each other company during their vigil. Every evening after the last fuel run, George Murdock drove the fuel truck to their house. It had a VHF radio in it so they could talk to their husbands.

"We'd lie out on the lawn and look up at the airplane and talk to Bob and Woody," Betty remembered. "We'd flash the flashlight at them, and they'd flash back."

"Ten-ten!" people shouted.

At 7:15 p.m. on the night of October 5th, 1949, all the lights of Yuma went dark for one minute, and sirens and whistles blew to salute the pilots as they breezed through 1,008 hours aloft to take the endurance record. Once Bob and Woody surpassed the old record, nationwide, even worldwide, media at-

tention intensified. There was an update on the national news every evening.

The flight was well past the old record when the pilots noticed during their routine magneto checks that one mag was starting to run rough. The engine was smooth on both, or the left, but shaky on the right. They relayed the news to Burch, and that evening further reported that the right mag was completely dead.

An improvisational genius, Burch had an immediate solution. He would send up a new mag, wrenches, hacksaw, and tin snips. His plan was to have the off-duty pilot simply cut through the firewall, hacksaw a blocking structural member, and remove one of the two nuts that secured the right magneto while the pilot climbed to 13,000 feet. From that altitude they could glide thirty minutes before reaching the ground. Plenty of time to kill the engine, stop the prop, yank off the bad magneto, turn the new magneto gear to the same position as the old one so it would be timed correctly, bolt it on, and crank her up. No problem.

"And it would have worked," Bob Woodhouse said last fall. "But I looked at Woody, and he looked at me, and I said, 'We already own this record.' So we decided to fly the night through on the good mag and land the next day.

"Do know what day it is?" Bob asked Woody the next morning. "It's October 10th. Ten-ten." Far surpassing their original goal, they had bettered the old record by 116 hours.

After the parades, and interviews, life settled back down. The Woodhouse's, Jongenard's, and Griffen's went about their jobs and raising their families. George Murdock married Woody's sister, Shirley. The elegant Buick convertible, having gone through an engine, many tires and brakes in its dog life of flat out accelerating and braking several times a day for a month and a half, was beat. Griff wholesaled it in California, the official dumping ground of the endurance flight. The *City of Yuma* was sold in 1953, groundlooped in Kansas, and eventually ended up in Minnesota on floats with a 180 hp Lycoming conversion.

And Yuma? Ray Smucker was right. The city was now on the map. After the endurance flight the military base was reopened, first by the Air Force, and today is shared by the Marine Corps and the city of Yuma as a joint use international airport. The Yuma Test Station, northeast of town, was reactivated as well. Agriculture in the area grew along with the population, and booming Yuma became, as the little Aeronca proclaimed on its fuselage, the City with a Future.

The story doesn't end there, however. Woodhouse and Jongeward's record, as all records must be, was broken ten years later by a Cessna 172 sponsored by the Hacienda Hotel in Las Vegas. That airplane is now proudly displayed at Las Vegas McCarran Airport. Note was taken in Yuma. As the 50th



Bob and Berta Woodhouse, left, and Woody and Betty Jongeward greet the crowds after Bob and Woody flew *The City of Yuma* as the final event of the festivities. It was a memorable moment all around.

anniversary approached, some folks in Yuma became increasingly distressed that the town, other than its prosperity, had nothing to show for this significant part of its history. The little airplane that could—and did—bring worldwide recognition to Yuma deserved to be returned home and restored.

Thus began another volunteer, grassroots effort organized by Judy Griffen Spencer, Horace's daughter, her husband Ron, and Jim Gillaspie with the help of many others. The Jaycees again played a crucial role in an effort that brought N1156H back to Yuma, restored her, and culminated in the three day celebration last October.

On the final day, Ten-ten, October 10th, the *City of Yuma* flew simulated refueling runs down Yuma's Runway 35. Horace Griffen, still filled with humor and a love of life, drove a 1948 Buick convertible, owned and restored as the refueling car by George Murdock, down the runway. In close formation flew the *City of Yuma*, piloted by the leader of its rescue effort, Jim Gillaspie. Griff downshifted that big straight eight into second and stomped the brakes at the end of the runway just as he did 50 years ago.

A smartly run Yuma FBO, Bet-Ko-Air, generously opened its ramp and hangar facilities for the celebration. After Gillaspie brought the ship back from its final simulated run, Bob and Woody hopped in and took it around the patch by themselves. What a great finish it was to their 50th anniversary. All that remains now is to find a permanent home for the *City of Yuma*. □

For the complete story of the flight and the resurrection of N1156H, read *The Longest Flight* by Shirley Woodhouse Murdock and Jim Gillaspie. To order send \$10.00, plus \$2.00 for shipping and handling, to Shirley at P.O. Box 7095, Roll, AZ 85347.