

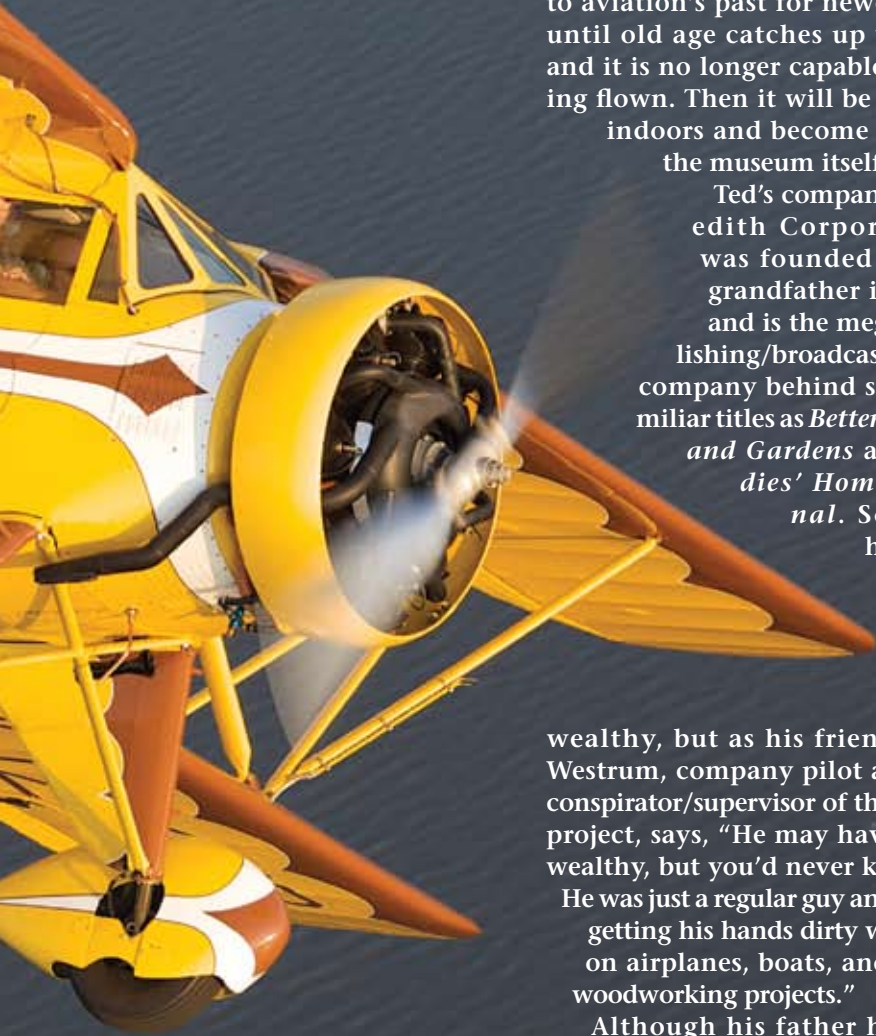
A yellow and brown biplane is shown in flight against a clear blue sky. The aircraft is a high-wing biplane with a yellow fuselage and brown wings. The name "JIM KOEPNICK" is visible on the side of the fuselage. The registration number "NC 472" is also visible on the tail section. The plane is angled upwards and to the right, with its landing gear visible.

*A Family  
Heirloom*

# Finds a New Home

The Meredith family

BY BUDD DAVISSON



**T**ed Meredith came from a long line of pilots. A very long line. In fact, it was a photo of his father standing in front of his personal Waco UEC in the early 1930s that kicked off a saga that will ensure that the late Ted, his wife, Katie, and their family are remembered for generations to come: He and Katie created the ultimate family heirloom by restoring the very UEC his father was pictured with, and even before restoration began, stipulated that it become part of the EAA's flying museum. It is to continue opening the door to aviation's past for newcomers until old age catches up with it and it is no longer capable of being flown. Then it will be moved indoors and become part of the museum itself.

Ted's company, Meredith Corporation, was founded by his grandfather in 1902 and is the mega publishing/broadcasting company behind such familiar titles as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. So, yes, he was

wealthy, but as his friend Troy Westrum, company pilot and co-conspirator/supervisor of the Waco project, says, "He may have been wealthy, but you'd never know it. He was just a regular guy and loved getting his hands dirty working on airplanes, boats, and other woodworking projects."

Although his father had his own airplanes before the war, the company didn't. It was after World War II that the need for transportation grew along with the company and it began flying those airplanes that pioneered corporate transportation as we now know it:

Twin Beeches, a Bamboo Bomber, Lockheed Lodestar, and others that led up to their more modern aircraft, including a pair of Lear 60s. Through it all, Ted remained a pilot and builder at heart.

His wife, Katie, says, "He built a Christen Eagle in the mid-'80s and was really good with his hands."

At some point in the very early '80s Ted found a photo of his father standing in front of his Waco cabin biplane and wondered whether the airplane still existed. Thus began, first, the quest to find and purchase the airplane (both efforts being neither simple nor insignificant), and second, to breathe life into it again, should it still exist.

Finding the airplane turned out to be not as complicated as first expected, but that could not be said of acquiring it.

Troy says, "He tracked the airplane down to the last owner, who was a retired test pilot from Wright Patterson Air Force Base. When contacted, he said that yes, he had the airplane, but really didn't want to sell it because 'someday I'm going to rebuild it.' This was in 1981."

The "someday I'm going to rebuild it" syndrome has caused more airplanes to stay in more barns longer than almost any other single reason. The central characters in this syndrome are usually individuals who purchase a project airplane and put it away in the hopes that the time will eventually come that they have the time, the energy, and the money to put the airplane back together. In many cases, they know they'll probably never work on the airplane, but just knowing it is out there in the barn waiting for them has a soothing effect on them.

Troy says, "Ted was really excited and wanted to get the airplane and restore it, but it took 20 years before the owner called Ted to tell him he was ready to part with it. This was in late 2000.

"When we went down to look at the airplane, it was more or



With its stunning golden color scheme, the Meredith family Waco UEC reminds us that the 1930s was a period of great color and excitement in aviation.

JIM KOEPNICK



BONNIE KRATZ PHOTOS



Ted Meredith's own handwork is evident in the work done on the interior and, in particular, the instrument panel.

less all there, but a real basket case," says Troy. "In '63 it was put on its back, which did some damage, and it was put into storage immediately. So, it had been sitting for 37 years. The fuselage was uncovered but on its gear, and the interior was

in tatters. The wings needed complete rebuilding, but the project was definitely doable and, because of the family connection, really needed to be done. We started restoring it as soon as we got it back to Des Moines."

**The familiar lines of the UEC can be traced to the very popular Waco F-2 series of open-cockpit biplanes.**

Once the carcass was rescued from oblivion, decisions had to be made as to how they were going to do the restoration. A cabin biplane of any kind is an enormous project both because of its sheer size and the complexity of much of the woodwork and other components. It was too big for Ted to handle alone, so he farmed it out to a series of restoration shops.

Among the features that further complicate a restoration like the UEC are the “wraparound” windows in the back, which Waco literature of the time says were included so passengers used to being able to “look around while flying” wouldn’t feel cooped up after being used to open-cockpit airplanes. The framing was wood and quite fragile, so virtually none of those original airplanes made it to modern times with the framing intact.

Troy says, “We were lucky, as the wood was all there but in really poor condition, but we still could use it for patterns.”

Those first cabin Wacos were an

who could afford airplanes probably drove to the airport in their Packard limo or Duesenberg, and they expected similar surroundings in their airplanes. Waco’s response to that was to design a new fuselage for its sprightly F-2 open-cockpit biplane that could easily accommodate four people— five if those in the back were smaller than FAA standard size, which many in the ’30s were. Since the majority of the country still depended on dirt and gravel roads, or trains, for transportation, the 115-120 mph cruise of the new cabin birds made them wildly practical for those who had to be someplace else in a hurry. However, since those first Waco cabin biplanes were based on the F-2, they inherited the F-2’s friendly nature and ability to get in and out of short strips with a load. That was to make them popular with rural/bush operators, sportsmen pilots, as well as companies.

Katie remembers, “Even though Ted was getting sick, he remained excited and an integral part of the res-

tic for the interior. He was involved in the tiniest details right up to the end. From the dog-eared magazines, (we) were able to piece together the color scheme after he was gone.”

Troy continues, “He was as hands-on as he could be, considering the airplane actually went through two restoration shops and a number of subcontractors for specialty services. For instance, he wanted the panel to be a specific type of wood, and he was a really good woodworker. So, he went up to a wood house and came back with a big piece of exotic veneer. Then he researched the various methods of vacuum forming the wood to the panel and sat down and did it himself. So, when you look at the panel, that is Ted Meredith’s own craftsmanship. At the same time, most of the instruments are the originals that we had overhauled, and the comm and transponder are the tiny Becker units in original holes and you hardly notice them.”

The fuselage itself had not only been ridden hard, but the years and the elements hadn’t been good to it.

Troy says, “We wound up replacing at least 25 to 30 percent of the tubing because of rust and damage. If there was any doubt, we simply took it out and put new back in. And the same thing with the tail. It had been banged around and was rusty, so we straightened everything out while we were replacing the

bad tubing. A good percentage of the tail is all new.”

The engine in the airplane had originally been a 210-hp Continental W-670 radial, hence the “U” in UEC (part of Waco’s nearly indecipherable model designation sys-



BONNIE KRATZ

effort to respond to a growing market for business and personal travel by individuals who demanded more comfort and amenities than could be found with their popular open-cockpit biplanes. With the Depression blanketing the country, those

restoration project right down to the smallest details. He picked the paint and actually scanned a Hershey chocolate bar to get the brown for the trim. He’d dog ear magazines that had articles with details about Wacos and researched and selected the fab-



JIM KOEPNICK

tem). However, sometime right after World War II, when 220-hp W-670s from Stearman PT-17s were a dime a dozen, the airplane was converted, and when Ted brought the airplane home that's the engine that was on it.

"The engine only had 400 hours' total time on it," Troy says, "so we sent it down to Saunders Aircraft in Mustang, Oklahoma, to have it overhauled. At the same time, we replaced the original fixed-pitch Curtiss Reed prop that had been shortened too much with a Hamilton Standard ground-adjustable unit."

None of the sheet metal on the airplane could be used for anything other than patterns, and that included the cowling.

"The cowling was really beat up, and to try and repair it didn't make sense," Troy says. "But John Swander of DeSoto had a UEC and had actually tooled up to make new cowls. He was not only doing the aluminum, but was making better, stronger attaching hardware, too, so we went that way. John was an incredible help in every aspect of this project, and we were lucky to have him in our corner. The same has to be said of Forrest Lovely in Jordon, Minnesota; he was a huge help with parts and advice."

The landing gear was rebuilt with newly manufactured parts, and the old mechanical brakes and wheels were replaced with more modern, more easily supported 10-inch Cleveland units controlled with toe brakes, rather than the original Johnson bar. At the same time, they installed a lock on the original tail wheel and used the Johnson bar as a tail wheel lock control. Because this was to be a heavily flown airplane, reliability and safety were constantly on Ted's mind, so these small deviations from original were deemed necessary for the mission.

The same concern for safety and consistency led the Meredith team to replace all the old wood in the wings, rather than try to save some of it. It was all 70 years old, and it didn't make sense to take any chances.

"We used most of the original fittings, but none of the wood in the wings. The same was true with the fuselage. It has a lot of stringers and formers, and we just made new ones. The door was the same way: The one we had was falling apart and barely good for a pattern, so it, too, is new," says Ted.

When it came time to cover up all that gorgeous steel and woodwork, they went with the Stits/Poly-Fiber system all the way from first coat to final color, rather than

try to be traditional and put dope over cotton or linen. This way the finish and fabric wouldn't be a factor in the airplane's usability.

After more than six years, the airplane was barely finished in time to make its debut at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2007, and as would be expected, it was an instant hit and took home the Silver Age Runner-Up award. Then in a stunning display of generosity, Katie officially handed over the airplane to Tom Poberezny and EAA during the Memorial Wall ceremony on the last day of AirVenture.

Katie says, "Ted and I had been going to Oshkosh for years, and he had been on the President's Council, so his idea of making the airplane part of the EAA was natural. He didn't want it to just go into the museum—he wanted them to continue flying it and, when possible, take people flying in it. Maybe they would be Young Eagles or just people who showed an interest. He wanted to share his love for old airplanes and history with others and saw this airplane as a way to do it. I only wish he had lived to see it fly."

The airplane has now become one of the more active residents of Pioneer Airport, so it appears Ted's dream for his father's airplane has been realized.

