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Who needs four seats?
Just about everybody who buys airplanes.
Who got the message?
The American Aviation Corporation.
What did they do about it?

They designed

THE TRAVELER

by Stephan Wilkinson

The Traveler

Suddenly, people shopping for a light four-place family plane have a choice.

by Archie Trammell

IF THE AMERICAN TRAVELER has nothing more to recommend it than its appearance on the market, backed by a stable, enthusiastic, growing organization, it would be an exciting new airplane. Study the list carefully and it becomes obvious there is only one other airplane in the Traveler's class. Beechcraft's Sport and Piper's 140 are four-place, but they are basically trainers, lacking in the features and refinements that make an airplane comfortable and convenient on long family trips. Beechcraft's Sundowner, Cessna's Cardinal and Piper's 180 are the next step up from the Traveler, with higher performance, higher initial cost and higher operating expenses.

That leaves Cessna's 172/Skyhawk, the best-selling airplane in the world (with the exception of their 150 trainer). The 172 has done a magnificent job of meeting the need for an economical, four-place, easy-to-fly family airplane. The size of the market, however, has undoubtedly contributed to their success; competition from the Traveler will probably cause new exploration of the family-plane market and lead to exciting events during the next decade.

To become that sort of catalyst, the Traveler will have to be a good airplane; I'm convinced that it is. If you were expecting a four-place version of the AA Trainer, forget it. According to publicity, American Aviation engineers took a Trainer, tacked on a few more inches here and there, hung a bigger engine up front, threw in a couple of extra seats and switched the name to Traveler.

Superficially, it does appear that's what they did. And why not? After all, except for a too-tightly cowled engine, the Trainer has rightfully earned a reputation for having a very well-built airframe. Any carry-over into the Traveler could only be considered a plus. Look closely and you'll notice little extra-quality details: like hand-filed metal edges to dress out tooling marks—something other manufacturers don't always bother with, even on aircraft costing much more. On the Traveler, this kind of attention to detail is more obvious than on the Trainer. They've added a striker-bar and a rolled seal at the rear edge of the canopy to shut off a major source of noise in the Trainer and a hinged cowl over the engine to make preflight inspections convenient and quick. In the flesh, the airplane is not as square and boxy-looking as it appears in pictures, nor is it as stubby as the paint scheme makes it seem. When you see one unpainted, it has a long, lean and sleek look that will hopefully be accentuated in future paint designs.

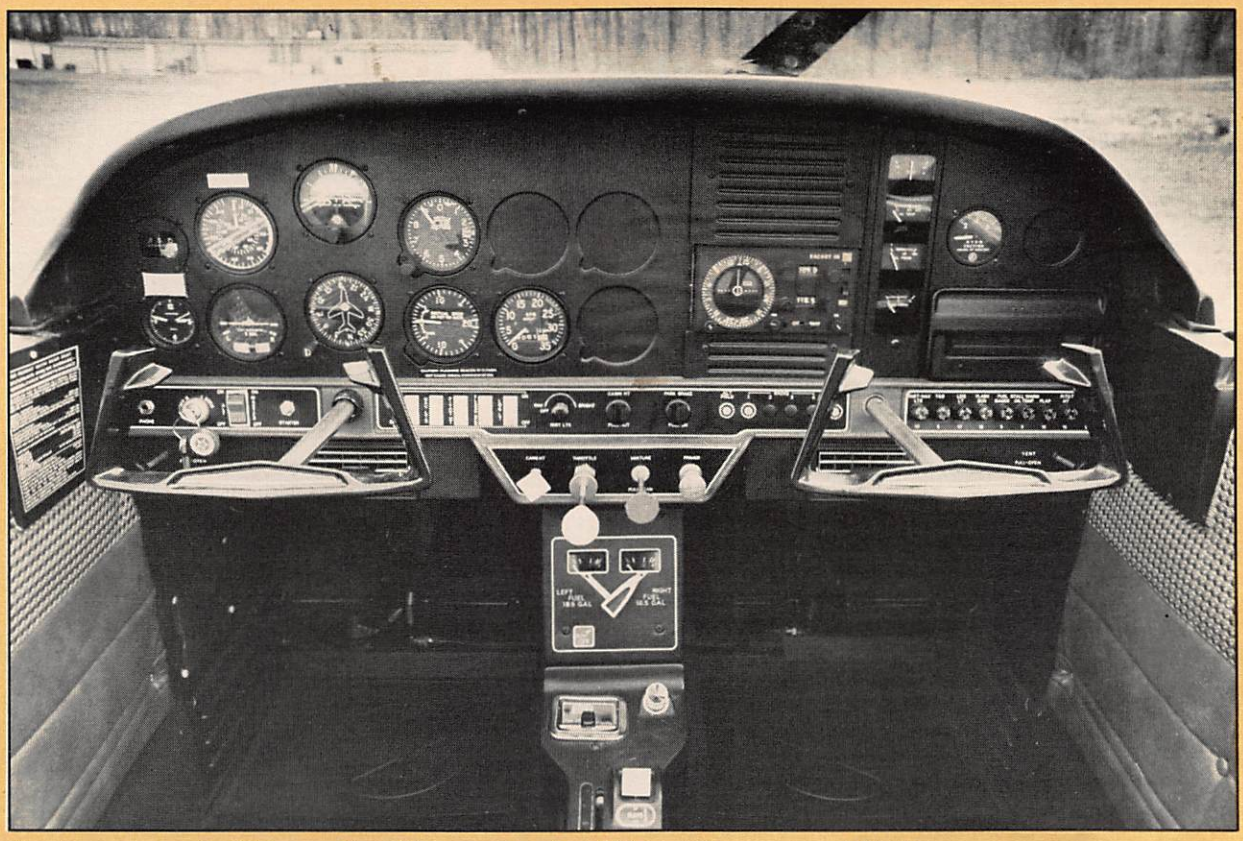
The Trainer and Traveler have distinctly different flight characteristics, and for good reason. The Trainer is a trainer, and it must answer to the flying schools for its traits. The Traveler is a traveling machine requiring a different sort of handling, and all the Traveler's differences aim at comfort. The Trainer is ultra-responsive to control pressures; the Traveler is just plain vanilla-responsive. Its crispness, compared to other machines that have a reputation for great cross-country handling, is refreshing. You can slow the airplane into its pre-stall buffet and still have enough aileron and elevator for easy 30-degree banked turns. Cross the controls, and there is a hint of roll-off at the stall break, but by working at it with lots of rudder action, you can pick up the down-wing without dumping the nose. Even with full flaps the Traveler will fly out of a balked landing cleanly, and if you get too slow in the approach, you can pick it up smoothly with a touch of power—a very important plus. Pitch and trim changes with flap movement are hardly noticeable. This is important because it makes the Traveler a safe airplane in the pattern when you're returning home after dark.

On takeoffs and landings, the Traveler does very well if you fly it in the modern flat-attitude style. Don't let the nosewheel touch first on landings (it will crow hop, necessitating a go-around). If you try to raise the nose early in the takeoff run or hold it off after touchdown, however, your reward will be mild embarrassment. It takes a lot of back pressure to get the nose up early, and when it does come up, it over-rotates unless you quickly ease off. On landings, if you hold the wheel full back (not easy to do because the mechanical geometry goes askew towards the end of the pull back, requiring that you lift as well as pull on the wheel) the nose will start down, then abruptly rear up before finally dropping to the runway. On one of my landings with four aboard, the ventral fin smacked into the runway during a nose-high roll-out. It was like flying an early Cessna Cardinal. In those first Cardinals, this characteristic led to a series of landing accidents and a redesign of the stabilator aerodynamics and linkage. The Traveler has a conventional horizontal-stabilizer-and-elevator arrangement; nevertheless, a careful review of how to land properly well back on the heels of the mains while lowering the nosewheel softly would be in order in a Traveler checkout.

In cross-country cruise, the airplane fares well, even against higher-priced machines. In a full-throttle race with my Skyhawk at 3,000 feet, it won by five to 10 mph. Wheel fairings should add another two or three mph, so the Traveler should cruise at the 135 to 140 mph claimed for it at altitudes between 7,000 and 9,000 feet.

The charts say fuel consumption is eight to nine gallons per hour, but most operators of Lycoming's O-320 report using a half-gallon or so more than that. With 37 gallons of useable fuel, the Traveler is, therefore, short-legged for IFR flight. (But so is Cessna's Skyhawk.) For VFR, endurance, range and payload are good. With modest equipment (which is the only way to equip this class of machine), including wheel fairings, the empty weight is 1,270 to 1,290 pounds. Adding fuel and oil (237 pounds) brings it up to between 1,507 and 1,527 pounds. A gross of 2,200 pounds means 673 to 693 pounds are left for people; that's four adults and no baggage, or two kids and 120 pounds (baggage limit) of luggage.

COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL MUNSON



There's panel space for IFR extras, but add too much and you'll have to leave someone behind.

The noise level in the two airplanes I flew was excellent, even with heater vents open. Front-seat comfort is good and control placement is correct, with the exception of the trim wheel, which is on a console between the seats and an inch or so too far aft for convenience. The excellent location of the fuel-selector valve (in full view just below the throttle) offsets this somewhat. The fuel gauges (they use sight tubes on the Trainer) are mounted just above a selector that points to the gauge of the tank being used.

The rear seat is typical of today's airplanes and cars: roomy but low. If you stretch out, you have to rest your feet on the round spar that passes under the front seat. Entry to the rear seats is easier than getting into the rear of most low-wingers—provided ladies are wearing slacks or culottes. An interesting and useful feature is folding rear and front seats, allowing instant convertibility to cargo configuration, or a switch from airplane to bedroom. Front seat entry is just like getting into the Trainer. Most of us don't object to hoisting a leg over the side, but some folks do. Traveler and Skyhawk salesmen will probably have a hot debate over that issue.

All things considered, the Traveler is an excellent addition to the 150-horsepower, four-place, fixed-gear class. If this airplane doesn't stimulate the lower end of the family-owned market, nothing will.

AMERICAN AVIATION TRAVELER AA-5

Basic price	$13,995
Basic IFR price	$17,500
Engine	Lycoming O-320-E2G
TBO	2,000 hrs.
Propeller	McCauley 73-inch, fixed pitch
Length	22 ft.
Height	8 ft.
Wingspan	31 ft. 6 in.
Wing area	140.12 sq. ft.
Wing loading	15.7 lb./sq. ft.
Seats	4
Empty weight	1,200 lbs.
Useful load	1,000 lbs.
Payload with full fuel, average equipt	680 lbs.
Gross weight	2,200 lbs.
Power loading	14.7 lbs./hp
Fuel capacity (standard)	37 gals./222 lbs.
Baggage capacity	120 lbs.
Baggage area	12 cu. ft.

Performance

Minimum runway requirement	1,600 ft.
Rate of climb	660 fpm
Service ceiling	12,650 ft.
Maximum speed	150 mph/130 knots
Cruise (75% @ 8,500')	140 mph/121 knots
Econ cruise (65% @ 8,500')	129 mph/112 knots
Range @ max cruise (45-min res., std. tanks)	450 sm/390 nm
Range @ econ cruise (45-min res., std. tanks)	500 sm/434 nm
Duration @ max cruise (no res., std. tanks)	4 hrs.
Stall speed (clean)	62 mph/54 knots
Stall speed (flaps down)	58 mph/50 knots

Flight characteristics

Handling qualities (cruise)	Excellent
Handling qualities (slow flight)	Excellent
Stall recovery	Excellent
Hands-off stability	Good
Runway and taxi handling	Good
Crosswind handling	Good

Pilot utility

Visibility	Excellent
Seat comfort	Good
Occupant-protection features	Nee more effort
Accessibility of switches, etc.	Good
Panel layout	Excellent
Instrument lighting	Good
Taxi and runway lighting	Good

Cabin comfort

Entry-exit ease	For the nimble, good
Front-seat room	Good
Rear-seat room	Good
Ventilation (in flight)	Excellent
Ventilation (on ground)	Excellent
Cabin sound (@ 75% power)	Good

Quality

Interior finish	Good
Exterior finish	Good
Accessories and mechanisms	Excellent