

Harry L. Ogg and His Private Air Office

By Barbara Schultz

Beginning in the 1930s, several aircraft companies began catering to the business market. Waco offered its QDC while Beech promoted their Staggerwing. Both were fast and comfortable. In 1947, Beech introduced their distinctive Bonanza. It became known as the businessman's time machine. It would be several years, however, before an aircraft was built large enough to accommodate a flying office conceived by Harry Lamb Ogg in 1929.

Born in Newton, Iowa, on September 2, 1884, Ogg entered the University of Iowa following high school. He took his electrical engineering courses seriously yet found time to assist in the establishment of the first radio station in Newton and participate in X-ray experiments. Unfortunately, one test resulted in devastating burns to his right arm that necessitated amputating it below the elbow. A quiet, yet innovative young man, he overcame the handicap and accomplished a great deal despite of it.

In 1908, Orlando B. Woodrow, a clerk for the Jasper County Bank, dreamed of a washing machine powered by electricity. He submitted plans for his invention to the patent office and received one of the earliest approvals for the manufacture of an electric washing machine. John Nelson, a mechanic for Skow Manufacturing, was selected to build the washers. Ogg, a recent university graduate, contributed his electrical knowledge. Little did he know that he would launch a prosperous career marketing electric washing machines.¹

When several of Woodrow's machines were completed, systematic testing began. Woodrow, Nelson and Ogg each

took one home. Several others were tried out by the inventor's neighbors. All test runs proved successful and the newly-formed Automatic Washer Co. began manufacturing five washers a day in the front room of a laundry building. Ogg, now in a leadership role, knew if the company wanted to outperform the competition, it was essential to continually improve their washing machines. With the assistance of Nelson, Ogg received patents for upgrades in the speed regulator, a combined washing and wringing machine, and an efficient agitating disc. By 1917, production necessitated the building of a 100,000 square foot, four-story factory.

Despite the growing local success of the company, Ogg wanted to expand sales opportunities across the nation. The astute manager soon found a solution, perhaps inspired by an ad for a Travel Air 6000.

450 miles since morning – two engagements filled and home in time for dinner. Breakfast at home – leisurely attention to office mail – Indianapolis in time for luncheon – important engagements filled and back to Chicago by each evening. Not an idle dream, but an everyday occurrence for the modern business executive who travels by air.

How to Save a Day – how to gain a day on competitions, is fully answered by using the Travel Air cabin monoplane. It takes off quickly and smoothly, climbs fast, cruises at 100 miles per hour and lands slowly, without shock.



Automatic Electric Washer Co.'s new four-story manufacturing facility. (Author's collection)

In the late 1920s, Walter Beech offered a luxury model, the Travel Air 6000. The 6000-A model, powered by a 450-hp Wasp engine, received certification in February 1929. The 6000-B, powered by a 300-hp Wright Whirlwind J-6, was granted a type certificate the following month. Marketed as an executive aircraft, both models ultimately received widespread acceptance for their size by the airlines. The high-wing monoplane possessed a handsome interior, room for six, wind-down windows with pull-down shades, seat belts, and was well insulated. Known to be a versatile utility, it was made to order for businesses that served regions that were often far off the beaten path and required operation from landing fields that were little more than pastures.²

Advertisement promoting the Automatic Washer.

Ogg contacted the Travel Air Co. in Wichita and set up a meeting to discuss his basic requirements in the spring of 1929. His prerequisites were an aircraft that was safe, attractive, comfortable and possessed a practical working air office. His other needs were explained on blue prints created by an architect. They indicated the exact location of every piece of equipment for his Travel Air office. Following clarifying correspondence and visits, Ogg's order for his Model 6000B was confirmed in April 1929. On August 5, Beech sent the following reply.

We are very much pleased to receive complete information of desired equipment on your machine. Think you are to be congratulated in ordering a machine of this type, and wish to say that we believe this will be the finest machine that is turned out yet by Travel Air.³

To provide Ogg with an efficient Travel Air, its wing span was increased by four feet to accommodate the weight of the extra equipment. This was also done to Wallace Beery's Travel Air 6000A the previous year. Ogg also ordered optional equipment for night-flying. This included a storage battery; engine driven generator; two parachute flares of one million candle power for emergency night landings; and five pistol flares of two million candle power. In November 1929, Ogg's pilot successfully demonstrated a night forced landing by dropping flares and bringing the airplane in low enough to land safely if necessary. The pistol flares, shot from a window, were later employed to make a safe landing during a snow storm.

Travel Air, frame number 6B-2012, received a paint scheme patterned after the company's latest Automatic Model 22 Duo-Disc Washer. The fuselage sported two shades of green divided by an accent stripe. The wings were deep orange with the company's name along with its slogan, Start the Week with a Smile, lettered on the leading edges. The entry door was inscribed in gold leaf - Private Air Office of H.L. Ogg.

The *Gossiper*, the company's newspaper, provided a detailed description of the aircraft's interior. Included were three dome lights for night illumination; two seats set to face

aft; washroom and toilet aft along with a baggage compartment; and two electrical outlets – one for an Ediphone dictating machine painted to match the aircraft donated by the Edison Co. and one to connect a washing machine for demonstration purposes.

Ogg's desk served for storage and operation of his Corona portable typewriter, a contribution from the company. The Rome Wire Company of Rome, N.Y., presented Ogg with radio shielding to prevent the ignition interfering with radio reception of weather reports from a special receiving set. The Recorder Company of Cleveland, Ohio, furnished Ogg with one of their recording meters that kept an accurate record of the length and number of flights made each day. Kodak presented Ogg with motion picture equipment to demonstrate to dealers how the washing machines were manufactured. Ogg communicated with his pilot with a telephone placed left of Ogg's seat. To alert the pilot of a call, Ogg pressed a small electric button that activated a light on the instrumental panel. Vanity cases, two floor heaters, electric cigar lighters, and ash trays completed the aircraft's conveniences.⁴

To select the name for the airplane, Ogg presented his employees with a contest to find an appropriate name. "The winner would receive a washing machine. Two central station employees picked the same name, which we felt was fitting in more ways than one, so we awarded two washing machines to the winners. *Smiling Thru*, the name chosen, tied in with the company slogan. Any housewife could 'smile through blue Mondays' if she owned an Automatic washing machine. The company's advertising campaign declared "Ten o'clock and the washing is done." The story behind the saying reportedly claims that Woodrow's wife, using a hand-operated washer, would call him from home at 10 a. m. every laundry day. To ease her job, he had no choice but to motorize the machine. Ogg gave a third reason for the name choice. He believed that wherever the airplane appeared, anyone who received the privilege of a sky trip in it would come out smiling.⁵

Ogg selected Wilfred Gerbracht as his agent and private pilot. Gerbracht and his brother Joe both received aviation training during WWI. In 1924, they established the first airport in Ames, Iowa. Their company, the Gerbracht Aeronautic Corp., offered flight training and charter flights in a Travel Air 2000 named Pegasus (NC1076). In 1928 Wilford flew planes built by the Bolte Aircraft Corp. at shows pending their approval by federal inspectors. Well-known to Ogg, he would prove to be an excellent choice. In February 1929, Gerbracht used his skills to save *Smiling Thru* and its passengers after the engine quit shortly after takeoff. Aware that a crash with a powerline was inevitable, he banked the ship sharply that resulted in the right wing smashing into a fence. The force of the impact pulled the fence post from the ground and sent it through the wing. Other than this damage, the Travel Air was intact and the passengers, although shaken, were unharmed. Gerbracht repaired the aircraft sufficiently to ferry it to the Wichita factory for repairs. The inspection report indicates repairs made to the right wing, lower right fuselage longeron, and new fittings provided for the right wheel. *Smiling Thru* was back in the air mid-February.



1. Travel Air Smiling Thru showing the details of its paint scheme in front of Ogg's Newton, Iowa, hangar. (Author's collection)

2. Artist color rendering of the plane's paint scheme. (John Barner)

3. Interior shot of Ogg's air office looking forward. (Author's collection)

4. Ogg's air office looking aft. (Author's collections)

5. H.L. Ogg; his air secretary, Katherine McBride; and Ogg's personal pilot and agent, Wilfred Gerbracht in front of Smiling Thru. The pilot's uniform appears to be custom with the left arm patch appearing to be a version of the company's (Automatic Washer) logo. (Author's collection)





Demonstration of the washing machine powered by the airplane. (Author's collection)

All Ogg needed now was a hangar for his aircraft and an aerial secretary. His requirements were a young lady of light weight, attractive appearance, and a good disposition. After interviewing a limited number of young ladies, he selected Katherine McBride to become the first air secretary taking dictation up among the clouds dressed in her semi-aviation uniform. To house his pride and joy, Ogg built a special hangar out of steel, painted bright orange to match his flying office. The interior was heated and contained a repair shop and waiting room. Constructed at a grass airfield on the north side of Newton, the hangar served as Ogg's base of operation for two years.

Gerbracht took delivery of Travel Air NC677K in Wichita on August 20, 1929, and flew it to Des Moines where Ogg, his secretary and representatives from the *Wichita Beacon*, *Newton Daily News* and *Des Moines Register and Tribune* boarded the plane. This assured first page placement for the Automatic Washer Company. *Smiling Thru* was accompanied by a nine-plane formation for the last leg into Newton. Mrs. Ogg christened the aircraft *Smiling Thru* by breaking a bottle of champagne across the propeller. Its proud owner declared that traveling by air would save an immense amount of time for his company, connect with his dealers, and "spread the gospel of Newton as the Washing Machine Center of the world." Following an elegant luncheon, company employees enjoyed flights in *Smiling Thru*. Ogg left in his flying office the next day for Milwaukee and Chicago to promote the company's washing machines.⁶



Souvenir card commemorating a ticket was one of Ogg's marketing promotions. (Author's collection)

In September, Ogg made a 30-day sales tour through the Dakotas, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa, covering the properties of the Northern States Power Company. Every town's newspaper was alerted to the dates of his arrival, typically letters typed on board *Smiling Thru*. To announce his arrival, Ogg would fly low over a town and switch on the airplane's siren. Curious about what it was all about, people would travel to the airfield. Once enough people were gathered, Ogg would demonstrate his washing machine and deliver his sales pitch. To hook up the machine, it was necessary to remove one seat. Four washers could be carried by taking out the furniture module and the passenger seats if a rapid delivery was necessary.

Airway Age magazine interviewed Ogg about doing business aloft. "I conduct my office business aboard the *Smiling Thru* without any disturbance and with a rapidity that will surprise business executives. With a secretary at hand, I can dictate messages and have them ready for mailing before the plane has landed. As soon as business men realize that it is possible to conduct business while flying, they will discover that aviation presents still another means of saving time. I do not mean only time saved in traveling from point to point, but also in the case of long hops when work can be done enroute. We find that we are cutting lost working time in half. Of course, as ships of the type of mine and equipped as completely, become more common, some of the publicity advantages will not exist, but the saving in working time will remain invaluable to the average business man."⁷

Ogg's most persuasive marketing strategy, integral to future sales, proved to be providing a brief, but scenic flight for his salesmen and local communities. Each passenger taken aloft received a small button pin with the image of the airplane and the slogan "Start the Week with a Smile." There were also souvenir flight tickets and postcards featuring the airplane and washing machines. Passengers included governors, Indians, hunting groups, national dairy club members and couples to be wed aloft. *Smiling Thru*, decorated with flowers and long satin streamers on the leading edge of the wings, hosted 10 weddings in six states. The couples selected also received



One of the most notable *Smiling Thru* passengers was Iowa actor Garry Cooper, seen here during his visit to Newton. (Author's collection)

flowers, wedding attire and gifts supplied by local merchants. Additional attention was paid to *Smiling Thru* on the airplane's first birthday. Gerbracht took up a party of five Blackfoot Indians in full native costume in Provo, Utah. He then flew two society couples over the airport for an 'aerial' dinner that included a cake with one large candle. The aircraft's gift - seven gallons of new oil.

Smiling Thru's most notable passenger was local Newton boy Gary Cooper. The Paramount star was picked up in Kansas City and flown to Newton for his high school reunion. A short flight to Grinnell, Iowa, followed to celebrate the town's Golden Jubilee that included the airport's dedication, an airshow, and historical pageant. Over 5,000 attended the events and the possibility of a 15-minute scenic flight in *Smiling Thru*. Cooper was then flown to Marshalltown where he paid a visit to former boxing champion Jack Dempsey. Tampa, Florida, via Grand Rapids and Chicago, was the next destination for Cooper to visit Mexican actress Lupe Velez. The Travel Air covered 1,156 miles in just under 11 hours on the return trip to Iowa. Cooper returned to California via Western Air Express.

Traveling across the nation from east to west, Ogg implemented a variety of activities to draw a community's attention to the Automatic Washer Company. Over White Bear, Minn., he dropped 10,000 numbered circulars with the names of the town's businesses that gave away several gifts to those finding the lucky numbers. This would be repeated on a smaller scale in a variety of towns. In Lowell, Mass., leaflets were dropped to announce a contest to take place in the city's theater. To win a washer, an individual needed to guess how many colored photographs of actor Richard Dix were contained



Flying high with *Smiling Thru*, during one of its tours. (Author's collection)

in a washer in the lobby where Dix's movie *Lovin' the Ladies* was playing. An additional contest involved dropping a limited number of small parachutes. The finder of each one was entitled to the first payment of a washer. Unable to reach everyone by air in Iowa, Ogg broadcast his own radio show, *Duo Disc Duo*, from WBZ-WBZA in Newton. By the end of 1930, *Smiling Thru* flew 11,400 passengers and traveled 105,000 miles.

Smiling Thru led two Iowa goodwill air tours, one in March 1930 and the other in June 1931 sponsored by the Iowa State Aeronautic Association. The plane led a 40-plane flotilla on a 1,000-mile route through the state, landing at all the principal cities and towns. Landing at small towns to host aerial parties supported local company dealers. Ogg did not participate in the tour, however. In May of that year, he became seriously ill and found it necessary to leave Iowa to live with his son in Santa Monica, California. He stepped down as president of the company but remained on the board for two more years. *Smiling Thru* was sold to the company for \$1, but the title was not transferred until June 1933. This expedited the sale of the Travel Air to Floyd M. Davis working for the Iowa Airplane Co. in Des Moines, Iowa. One month later, the president of the company, G. G. Herrick, took title to the aircraft. The only furniture included in the sale of *Smiling Thru* was the desk. All other office equipment remained with the Automatic Washer Company.⁸

For the next several years, *Smiling Thru* possessed several different owners. Clarence W. Siehl of Sherburn, Minn., purchased the plane damaged in an accident. He paid \$1,100 for it in January 1935. Records indicate that it was completely recovered, inspected, and documented as airworthy. The plane now recorded 1,017 hours. During the next 18 months, Siehl flew the airplane 678 hours. He then sold the aircraft in November 1936 to Les Mauldin located in Brownsville, Tex., for \$1,950. Mauldin sold the aircraft to Cia Aeronautica del Sur S. A. and exported it to Mexico in January 1937.⁹

During the two years Ogg maintained *Smiling Thru*, he flew to 43 of 48 states demonstrating his washing machines. The aircraft became the centerpiece of his business and,



Han Galpin's restored Travel Air 6000B visited Newton in 2007. (John Jennings/Newton Daily News image)

inadvertently, launched business aviation as we know it today. As he stated in an interview, "I believe this ship to be a forerunner of many ships to follow as executives come to realize the possibilities of air transportation." Ogg took advantage of the modern tools aviation offered and served as an ambassador for aviation. His life was cut short in July 1951. While walking home, he was struck and killed by an automobile. He was 66 years old. The Automatic Washer Co. stayed in business until late 1950 when the Maytag Corp. purchased Automatic's plant equipment.

But that is not the end of *Smiling Thru's* story. EAA Chapter 456 began a seven year journey to restore the airplane's hangar. After the Automatic Washer Co. sold the aircraft, the hangar was dismantled and relocated to downtown Newton where it served as a maintenance garage. The structurally sound building was given to the EAA chapter in 2000. Members disassembled it piece by piece and relocated it to the Newton Municipal Airport. The restoration was completed in November 2006. The building and adjacent tower were painted bright orange that closely matched the original color. Windows were created from the original specifications. Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the airport in 2007, a special dedication ceremony took place to honor the memory of H.L. Ogg, Wilford Gerbracht, Katherine McBride, and the legacy of *Smiling Thru*. Attendees, including Harry Ogg's son and Wilford Gerbracht's son, reminisced as they viewed the historical data and documentation of the restoration displayed in the hangar. →

MOVING

IF YOU ARE PLANNING TO MOVE, PLEASE SEND US YOUR CHANGE OF ADDRESS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. We cannot get your Journal to you if we don't know where you live. To ensure uninterrupted service, please let us know at least six weeks in advance.

Footnotes

1. *The Newton Daily News* 8/16/07
2. Juptner, Joseph P. *U.S. Civil Aircraft Vol 2*. Aero Publishers, Inc., 1964, p. 47. The type certificate was amended in July 1929 to include a seaplane version that caused much confusion when registering the 6000-B as a landplane. The result was designating many Travel Air 6000-B as a S-6000-B.
3. Archived letter courtesy of the Ogg family.
4. *Gossiper* 1929
5. "Private Operation of Office Plane." *Electrical Merchandising*, March 1930, p. 58. During WWII, a B-17 crew chose *Smilin' Thru* as the name for their aircraft. In a mission to destroy a ball bearing in Bavaria, the aircraft was badly damaged but managed to return to England. The crew bailed out before the airplane crashed near Baydon, Wilshire. The date was October 14, 1943. The crew's message – "Smiling through adversity – in the end, return home to a peaceful existence." Research indicates that a B-25G also displayed the same nose art. Another variation, *Smilin' Through*, belonged to a 1919 song, a play, and three movies.
6. Research indicates that Beech designated the model as a 6000D as his sole deluxe model. During the licensing process, the Department of Commerce noted that 135 pounds of office equipment was installed. One stipulation for approval was at least 45 gallons of fuel needed to be added if the office was removed.
7. "Private Operation of Office Plane." *Airway Age*, March 1930, p. 5
8. FAA records
9. Ibid

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