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Silver Wings
Russell Williams goes
analog for vintage airplanes

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Flying Silver and 'Spinach'

BY JAMES BAVENDAM

Own-
ing an antique airplane is a choice of character over convenience. Critics complain that antiques need too much servicing, they smoke, they're noisy, they don't go fast, they use too much fuel, and you can't see out of them very well.

Enthusiasts smile and say, "Yeah, isn't that great?"

One such enthusiast is Russell Williams, who spent years developing software for digital computers. His spare time is spent in an analog world of antique airplanes.

Flying a modern airplane high and fast will get you to a destination quickly. Flying an antique airplane low and slow lets you smell newly mown grass; hear the throaty, warm growl of a radial engine, and enjoy a community of people who appreciate the beauty, originality and craftsmanship of earlier times.

The Ryan

Responding to a classified ad, Williams first saw the Ryan at a small strip in the Mohave Desert. Powered by a 160 horse power

radial engine, it cruises at about 110 mph, burning 10 to 11 gallons of fuel per hour.

Polished aluminum is not for everyone. There are no short cuts to polishing sessions that can last 30 to 40 hours. It was obvious that the craft would need work. But the Ryan was uncommon and striking.

After months of negotiations, Williams and the previous owner agreed on a price and in June of 2000, Williams flew to southern California to bring the airplane home to Renton. When Williams fired up the engine, the cockpit became a solid cloud of white smoke as the engine burned off oil that had seeped from its aging radial engine during months of storage.

At the first fuel stop, Williams noticed that his feet hurt a little, but didn't think much of it. By the second stop, his feet really hurt. He took off his shoes to discover his feet were blistered from hot air coming through a hole in the firewall. Duct tape to the rescue! Taping the hole shut allowed Williams to get home and make a proper repair.

Working on an antique vehicle can be like an archeological dig as you discover the remnants of years of

skilled and unskilled craftsmen. The Ryan was no different. Over time it became clear that the Ryan needed a new cowling, wheel pants, wiring, radios and more.

"It's all part of the joy of ownership," smiles Williams.

For years, he has flown the Ryan to the Antique Airplane Association's annual fly-in in Blakesburg, Iowa, a three-day journey each way. This year, there may be a flight of two antiques.

'Spinach'

If you watched TV in the 1950s, you may remember Robert Cummings in "The Bob Cummings Show" and later in "Love That Bob." Cummings was a pilot, both on and off the screen.

The TV show highlighted his Aerocar. Off-screen, he also had a 1936 Porterfield he painted green and called "Spinach." Williams had heard of "Spinach" passing from one owner to another over the years.

Running the website for the

Antique Airplane Association brings Williams into contact with aircraft owners searching for information. As it turns out, the airplane's owner contacted Williams for help with its antique engine. They became friends and when the owner decided to sell, Williams bought "Spinach."

More well-known than the Ryan, "Spinach" is also more of a handful.

"Coming in for a landing, you can't just look forward and see the runway," Williams says with a smile. "You have to peer through an opening between the cylinders in its radial engine or slip the airplane sideways, then kick it around straight at the last minute. In fact, it's a challenge to even just get in and out."

"Spinach" doesn't have an electric starter. Williams secures the airplane, then stands in front and rotates the propeller by hand to start the engine.

Green toenails

Not only is the airplane well-known due to its celebrity owner, John Ennis – who restored the airplane

in the 1970s – added his own character and humor. Where the pilot's feet sit on the floor, are two aluminum outlines of feet with green spots for toenails.

Ennis flew the airplane to many fly-ins with his trombone wedged in the back seat, and gave spontaneous evening concerts. Above one of the windows, a miniature trombone is mounted on a small plaque. Most visible, Ennis chose a different shade of green for the airplane and a more flamboyant lettering style for the name.

"Spinach" has its own list of needed repairs. The fabric covering on the plane's fuselage and wings will need to be replaced. There are also improvements underway for the carburetor and engine. This will all get done in due time without losing the character that makes it unique.

This year, Williams hopes to have a fellow pilot fly one of his planes, so the antique fly-in at Blakesburg will see the Ryan approach from the Northwest, accompanied by a helping of "Spinach."



Photos right from top to bottom.

Russell Williams in his shop at the Renton Airport. Photo by James Bavendam.

Russell Williams and former owner, John Crittenden, at Whiteman Airport (Calif.) shortly before "Spinach" is flown home to Renton. Photo by Ursula Tobler.

Russell Williams flies his 1938 Ryan SC-W at the Antique Airplane Association fly-in at Blakesburg, IA. Photo by Gilles Auliard.

Russell Williams preparing to depart Whiteman Airport (Calif.) in his newly purchased 1936 Porterfield 35-70 Flyabout. Photo by Ursula Tobler.

Photo left, Williams' 1938 Ryan SC-W at a fly-in in Broadhead, WI. Photo by Rob Bach.