

# This flying machine is his labor of love

By Steve Barnaby  
editor

Most of us are used to the idea of seeing amateur mechanics feverishly working on their cars during weekends. After all, in the motor city a car is more than transportation. For many it's a livelihood. For others it is a love affair.

But, for Steve Benesh, when it comes to putting in the garage, you're talking about a horse of a different color. Visitors to his Farmington Hills home get a hint when they see his car forlornly sitting in the driveway.

The license plate on its front reads, "I'd rather be flying." The car, you see, has been evicted from its traditional shelter for the sake of a 1949 Piper Vagabond airplane.

And while many modern-day flyers, used to being whisked across the skies in jet-age comfort, would look askance at the Vagabond, Benesh feels much differently.

Proudly, the 30-year-old truck driver talks about his flying machine as he caresses its fabric body. At present, the plane is being completely refitted by Benesh with a polyester fabric which "is better than the older fabrics" of cotton or linen, he says.

"YOU KNOW I never finished one model airplane that flew when I was a

kid," he jokes. "But when I'm done with this one, I'll get another one," he vows.

And for the layman examining the craft, it does have characteristics which come closer to resembling a model than the sophisticated aircraft which we are used to. The thin fabric is stretched over a delicate steel-frame body which is powered by a 65-horsepower, four-cylinder engine and fueled by an 11-gallon tank.

Shades of the Red Baron abound. Benesh proudly tells how you start his craft.

"It takes two people to start the plane. One guy spins the propeller. Actually the guy that helps you fuel up has to help you start up," he says.

And that can be a problem, he admits, since there are fewer and fewer people around who are familiar with his craft.

His Vagabond, however primitive looking to the uninformed, is actually a rare find for the airplane aficionado.

"There are less than 100 flying in the country today," he says while leafing through an edition of "Trade-A-Plane," a publication chocked full of classified advertisements for planes and accompanying parts.

Only one Vagabond is listed for sale and the owner is asking \$9,000. Like rare automobiles, this type of craft appreciates in value, he says.

Benesh came across the plane in 1979, bought it for \$4,000 and got nine hours of free flying lessons to boot.

THE 650-POUND craft sold for \$1,995 when first produced.

But with exclusivity comes some problems. Replacement parts are few and far between.

"I make a lot of my spare parts," he says as he looks over his handiwork. "There are a lot of nuts and bolts but there also is a lot of fabric, glue and paint."

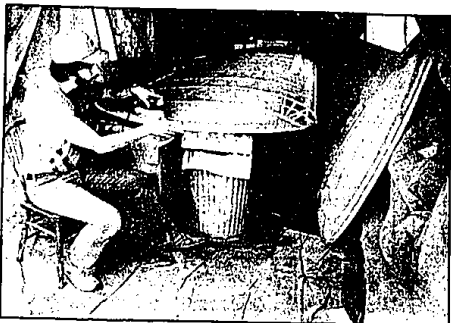
The former North Farmington student admits that working on the plane is almost as much fun as flying it.

But flying is part of the family way in the Benesh household, he says. His father flew P-51s while in the military and now owns a Cessna airplane which, Benesh points out, also is much more expensive to fly than his older Vagabond.

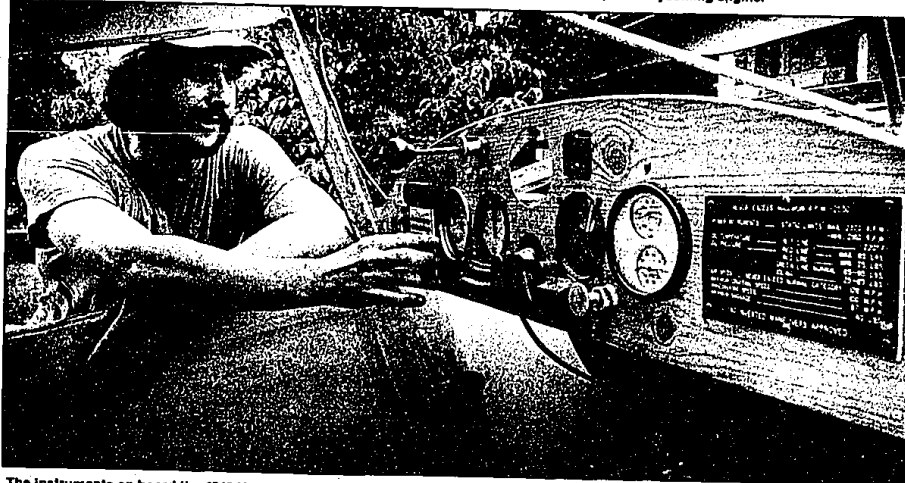


Please turn to Page 8

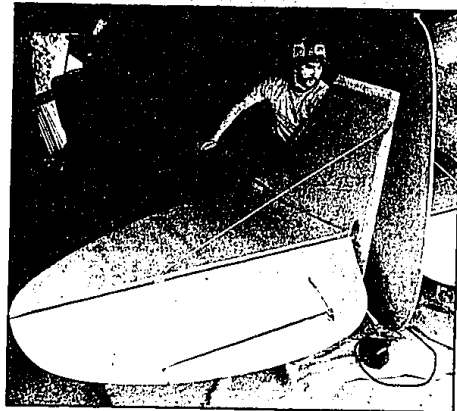
Steve Benesh checks over the 65-horsepower, four-cylinder Lycoming engine.



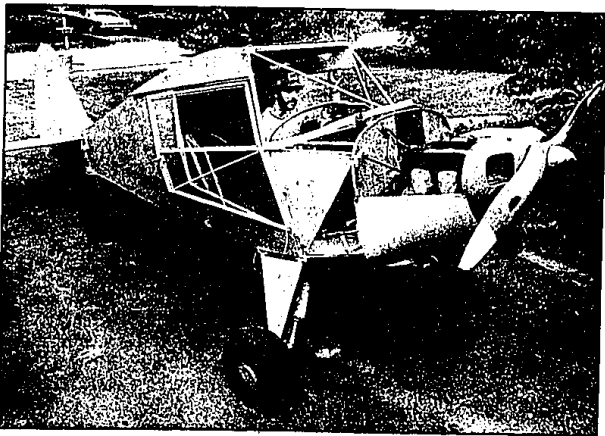
Covering the wings with fabric is one of the critical steps during restoration.



The instruments on board the 1949 Vagabond are a far cry from the computerized flight decks of modern aircraft.



With the wings removed, the airplane fits neatly into a two-car garage. Benesh drags the plane out when he has to paint and sand the fabric covering.



It was necessary to remove the wings so they could be refurbished.

Staff photos by Randy Borst

## MEET OUR PERSONAL SHOPPERS

They're here to help you plan your wardrobe with fabulous fashions from our Woodward Shops, a terrific time-saver for the working woman. And as our shoppers get to know you, they'll suggest new pieces for your collection as they arrive in our stores. Just call for an appointment

to learn how they can help.

Oakland, call Rose Dauphin.

585-3232, ext. 2020.

Northland, call Janet Cole.

569-3232, ext. 2263.

Fairlane, call Lee Duke.

595-3232, ext. 2213.

Eastland, call Betty Magee.

371-3232, ext. 2758.

*Personall Service*

hudson's