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rutan varieze:

homebuilt of the 1980s?



Meyers 200: fast, classy, and rare

Schweizer 1-35: watch out, European superships

The Smugglers: aircraft dope isn't always paint



Gid Miller toed the ground in his law-shucks manner, listening quietly to my accusation that he was a flaming fanatic. Then, as my spiel ended, he smiled a slow country-boy smile and said, "Well, we've got the best, fastest, strongest, easiest, most reliable, and finest-looking airplane ever built in the U.S. It's not that we're fanatics, we just know a good airplane when we see one."

And that sums up a unique little one-man show called Gid Miller's Aero Sales Inc. Miller sells and leases airplanes (between hops as an airline pilot), but not just any old airplanes. Oh sure, once in a while he'll let an occasional Aztec or Mooney trickle through his hands. But 99 percent of the time, when he uses the word "airplane," he's talking about one particular little bird, the Meyers/Aero Commander 200, a pugnacious little iron and aluminum ingot for which Miller makes many claims, most of which, it should be noted, are absolutely true.

The 200 Meyers is the last of a small family of aircraft designs that enjoys a fantastic reputation for two things; quality and performance. The beautifully proportioned Meyers 145 of the early '50's gave up to 160 mph (if you can believe old sales brochures) on only 145 hp. And the 200 scarfed up FAI speed records like they were croutons and supposedly still holds the world's speed record for its weight and horsepower class.

The production 200 Meyers first hit the pavement in late 1958 with a 240-hp Continental which was quickly replaced by a 260 in '59. Meyers only knocked out around 44 of these machines before Aero Commander, then looking around for a single-engine craft to flesh out its product line, bought Meyers lock, stock and tooling jigs and set up shop in Albany, Georgia. However, what Aero Commander failed to fully appreciate was that the Meyers wasn't, and isn't, an

airplane that lends itself well to mass production. It appears to be a normal, all metal, stressed-skin airplane, but what you are actually seeing is a chrome-moly bird cage with aluminum wings and tail cone hung on it. The entire cockpit/centersection area is framed in size 4130 gas pipe that runs from the firewall to the back of the passenger deck and crossways from gear to gear. The hundreds of feet of tubing have saved more than one pilot's life, but tubing and sheet-metal composite structures mean lots of hand fitting and man hours.

As we used to say in Oklahoma, the Meyers 200 is hell for stout, which is one of the reasons Aero Commander had no trouble finding a buyer for the manufacturing rights when they realized they couldn't hack it in the four-place market. They had turned out around 80 AC 200s at that point. The new owner, Interceptor Corporation (that still owns the type certificate and all tooling), hung an AiResearch 331 turbine on it which punched out 400 screaming horses. The only major modifications they made to handle the power and the 270-mph cruise speed was to go to heavier skins for the wet wings and nail a handful of hat-section stringers down the tailcone to help support the new highly swept tail. For their work, they got an approved increase in gross weight of nearly 1000 pounds. Unfortunately, the Interceptor 400 strangled on its own hundred-grand price tag in the midst of the marketing situation of the early 1970s.

All of this history becomes the cherry on top of Gid Miller's high-speed fantasies. If it's a Meyers, he either already owns it or can find it for you. At the time I talked to him he owned four 200s, two 145s and an OTW.

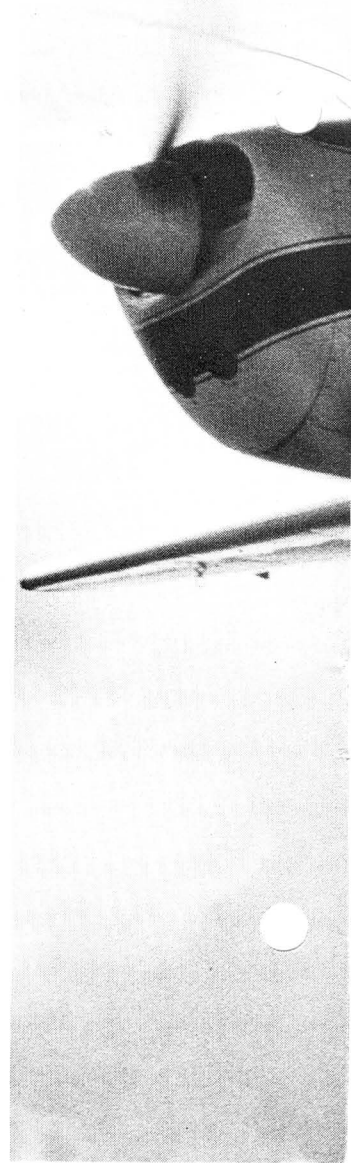
My initial contact with Miller was more out of curiosity than anything else. I'd been seeing his frantic ads in *Trade-A-Plane* for some time and I

"...BEST AIRPLANE EVER BUILT?"

A lot of Meyers 200 owners think so.

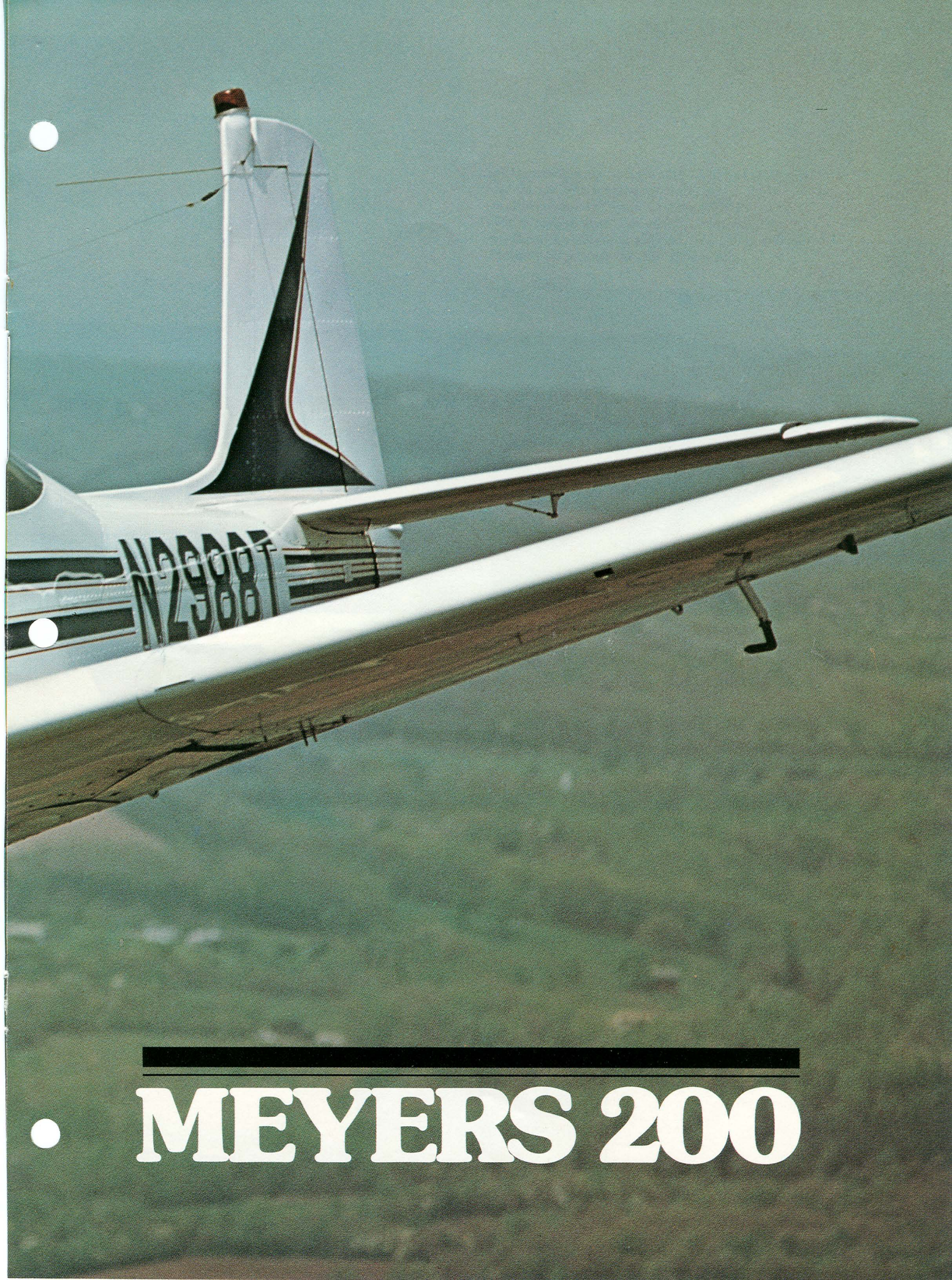
Text and Photography by Budd Davisson

Reprinted by AIR PROGRESS for:
GID MILLER'S AERO SALES, INC.
R.D. #1, Skymanor Airport
Frenchtown, New Jersey 08825
(201) 996-4508









• **MEYERS 200**

The Meyers 200D—the version manufactured by Aero Commander—sports a slightly higher roofline and 15 more horsepower than the straight 200 model. Despite hot cruise performance, the Meyers is docile on landings; but watch out for torque on takeoff!



got tired of passing them off as typographical errors. At times he had as many as four OTWs, as well as mini-herds of 200s listed. I shouldn't have called. It was all true.

Cornering Gid Miller was no easy process. In the two weeks I worked with him, he bought and sold two 200s, picking one up in Colorado and another in California which he ferried to Long Island in 13½ hours. Business appeared to be booming and when I finally ran him down, he was walking through one of his stockpiles of airplanes at Sky Manor Airport in central New Jersey, one of several places where little heaps of Miller-Meyers are to be found in the Frenchtown, New Jersey area he calls home.

It has been said that the Meyers 200D (D models have slightly higher roofs and 285 hp) bears a resemblance to a Navion, but as I squinted at Miller's 200 I felt that comparing it to a Navion is like saying a Datsun B210 fastback resembles a Maserati Bora because they both have back windows. The Meyers hunkers down close to the ground, giving a crouched, well-muscled appearance like Dick Butkus ready to pounce. It's both sleek and masculine, streamlined and chunky at the same time.

A careful walk around reveals many contradictions in construction and thought. The airframe is obviously aerodynamically clean, not sanitary maybe, but pretty damned slick. However, there are many aggravating drag-producing little nits all over it that seem somehow out of character. For instance, the landing light adjusting screws stick a full half-inch forward out of the cowl. The centersection shows numerous twists and bends in the outer surface where the sheet metal is screwed to the tubing framework, especially on the bottom, and the outer panels have several curiously obtrusive corners of aluminum sheet sticking up in the air. On the bottom a healthy looking air dump of some sort hangs down off the aft fuselage in what may or may not be a low pressure area. All of this on an airframe that sports glass smooth leading edges and micro-shaved flush rivets everywhere you look. Some body filler and attention to detail probably would do minor miracles.

There are two things I've never been able to climb onto worth a damn, horses and airplanes, but I was already inside the Meyers figuring out the panel before I realized I was boarding. The door is located well forward and wraps quite a ways up over the top of the cabin, giving almost a straight shot at the front seat. The back seat is equally accessible. Once inside, the form-fitting and luxurious look of the back seat caught my eye. They are buckets that seem

to flow into the package deck. The Aero Commander version replaced the integral look with two head-rested individual bucket seats.

I've got to admit that with a very few exceptions, I liked the panel and general cockpit layout. The panel gains lots of extra useable space because almost all switches and breakers are located on a small console that forms a long armrest on the pilot's left. At first I was dismayed to find the gigantic polished gear lever pointed right at and nearly touching my right knee cap, but I soon forgot it was there. Also, the forest of verniers sticking out of the lower panel kept me confused for the first couple landings because there are four knobs of the twisty variety where there are usually only two or three. The fourth biggy is (can you handle this?) the elevator trim! You twist it in for up-trim, or is it the other way around? It's a game that keeps you guessing when being checked out. And it's a little embarrassing to find the yoke trying to poke a hole in your chest when you think you're screwing the prop back. (No! It's the middle knob, dummy!)

Flicking on the master switch on the left console and then hitting the starter button and boost pump switch at the same time got the 285-hp Continental (same as a Bonanza's) fired up, and we headed for the runway. Contrary to what I had heard, the direct steering nosewheel didn't seem to require any more than normal rudder pressures, although supertight turns are a lot easier with some inside braking. While rubbernecking around for traffic at the end of the runway, I

came to appreciate the visibility the Meyers has built into it. It is as close to 360-degree vis as you can get without a full bubble canopy.

In retrospect, I'd have to say that the Meyers requires unusual pilot attentiveness only during a takeoff on either a narrow or bumpy runway or in a hard left crosswind. Gid isn't going to like me saying things like this about his airplane, but that little dude has as much torque on takeoff as anything I've ever flown, including P-51s. So, if there isn't much runway to goof around on, or a left wind is helping that prop screw you off into the weeds, you'd better stay on your toes. After a few takeoffs, I found that if I anticipated the torque and didn't let the nose get off-center, it's no sweat. Things get hairy only if I let the nose wander off and then tried to rein it back in.

I was screwing the power in slowly at first but I could tell that the Meyers was just begging for me to let it really do its stuff. So, I unlocked the vernier and pushed the throttle in fairly rapidly, which transformed the takeoffs into asphalt-blurring launches. You can be as sedate as you like about it, but if you really want to get your jollies, push on the throttle and see how fast the airspeed rips up to the rotation speed of 75-80 mph. At that point, just a gentle tug on the wheel puts you 50 feet in the air and climbing.

There's a short period directly after leaving the ground where the airplane is groping for a more comfortable speed, about 100 mph, and the pilot is asking it to climb. It's a momentary dead spot that works out very nicely as a time to get the gear up before airloads build. The gear handle, incidentally isn't exactly of the flick-and-diddle variety. It's an honest to God wrap-your-fist-around-it lever that takes a healthy yank to get it out of the detent before it can be muscled in to the up position. There'll be no mistaking this one for a flap handle on rollout. A pilot would have to be half gorilla to make that mistake in this airplane. Once the gear is up, as indicated by the three lights on the left console, the gear handle has to be returned to a neutral position which deactivates the hydraulic system and puts out the incredibly bright hydraulic warning light.

Best rate of climb is 115 mph which gives something between 1200 and 1400 fpm at a nice shallow nose angle which makes traffic dodging easy. At a cruise climb of 140 mph it still goes up at around 600-700 fpm and appears to be nearly dead level.

All the way through the climb a conscientious pilot is going to be standing on a goodly chunk of right

MEYERS 200D AERO COMMANDER 200

ENGINE:
Continental IO-520-A, 285 hp

WEIGHTS AND DIMENSIONS

Length.....	24 ft 4 in
Wing Span.....	30 ft 6 in
Height.....	7 ft 4 in
Wing Area.....	161.5 sq ft
Gross Weight.....	3000 lb
Standard Empty Weight.....	1985 lb
Standard Useful Load.....	1015 lb
Wing Loading.....	18.6 lb/sq ft
Baggage Capacity.....	200 lb
Fuel Capacity.....	80 gal

PERFORMANCE

Max Speed at Sea Level.....	215 mph
Cruise Speed (75% power).....	210 mph
Stall speed (dirty).....	62 mph
Stall Speed (clean).....	77 mph
Rate of Climb at Sea Level..	1,400 fpm
Service Ceiling.....	18,500



rudder to keep the ball centered. None of the airplanes, Meyers or Aero Commanders, ever had rudder trim and even the prototype Interceptor 400 had none. It's something you learn to live with.

Many pilots, especially those who fly Beeches, are going to moan about how heavy the Meyers controls are. Initially, I was one of those. To make anything remotely resembling a steep bank takes what many will diagnose as a lot of muscle. However, I think part of that is an illusion that comes from two slightly unusual features. The first is the size of the control wheel. The part of the yoke you actually grasp is about the size and shape of an anemic thumb, much too small in diameter. The result is that you have to really squeeze it to hang on while maneuvering. If it had the palm-filling bulk of a Beech-type wheel, the control pressures wouldn't be nearly as noticeable. Also, although the pressures themselves are higher than you'd expect, the response is also quite high. So, with a little deflection of the wheel, you're rewarded with a rapid movement of the wings. The combination of the small yoke and the short, slightly heavy throw of the wheel, at first makes the Meyers feel truck-like in its maneuvers, but it's actually quite nimble. The ergonomics and control ratios are misleading.

As an instrument platform, I'd be hard pressed to pick anything better than the Meyers, at least anything with only one engine. Trim it up and give it its head and it'll probably truck straight ahead until it runs out of fuel or falls off the edge of the world. It's dead stable in all axes. Also, its span and wing loading combine to help it chop through turbulence that would upset many other airplanes. The panel, at least on the one I was flying, was set up beautifully, and, as I mentioned before, has lots of room for radio equipment or custom instrument placement.

I suppose I should probably have started out with the "big number" . . . the magical cruise speed that most pilots skim through pilot reports looking for. But I didn't, so here it is: Running 24 inches and 2400 rpm and

making some effort at being precise during two-way speed runs, I came up with a speed of slightly over 204 mph, with two people and 60 gallons or so of fuel on board. In old sales brochures numbers as high as 218 mph can be found, but 204 is still faster than any other normally aspirated civilian single I can think of with the exception of the Italian Siai-Marchetti S.F. 260. Okay, so it's only a mile or so faster than a new Bonanza, but the Meyers is a long way from new. I'd guess that after a weekend of detailing and cleaning up, Gid's airplane could get up to a solid 210 mph or even better.

At that power setting we were burning between 15 and 16 gallons per hour, which translates into an even five hours or a skosh over a thousand miles range, zero wind, no reserve. However, one of the things you are guaranteed to hear every time anyone mentions the Meyers 200 is that its tiny payload won't allow you to carry much fuel.

The useful load of the bare airplane is 1015 pounds. Knock out 150 pounds for avionics and you're down to 865 pounds useable. That can be divvied up any way you want but with four seats filled with standardized bodies, that leaves you with about 31 gallons or less than two hours maximum endurance. For each body you heave overboard you gain more than an hour and a half, or 300 miles. No-reserve range, then varies from a thousand miles with two folks on board down to about 400 with full seats. All of this is based on a speed of 204 mph and a fuel burn of 16 gph.

One of the most endearing features about the Meyers is that even though you're punching a pretty quick hole in the air, it's not a pain to get into the pattern and down on the ground. Its placarded gear extension speed is an incredible 170 mph and the wheels can be thrown out in an emergency at 210 mph. That means all you have to do is pull the throttle back and by the time you get a good grip on the gear handle, the airspeed has bled off to a safe level. Even though it's kosher to pop the gear down that fast, most 200 owners work at a lower figure, around 140-150 mph, which Gid



Miller says is a little easier on everything in the system.

I've never been red hot at getting airplanes slowed down, but when I came boiling into the pattern at Sky Manor, I had no problem getting Miller's 200 down to a liveable 110 mph. Just chop the throttle, count five, drop the gear and you've got approach speed. In that respect, I think it's far easier than almost any other high performance single to fly, even easier to slow down than the Mooney, which is considered by most to be a real grandpa's airplane.

Throwing the gear out produces practically no pitch change, although if you go to full flaps in a single step, there is a pretty healthy pitch up. If you push the flap lever down until it stops, you get half flaps (20 degrees). Just push it the rest of the way down for a full 40 degrees.

I got to see the Meyers at her worst because all the landings I made were going either up or down the side of a fairly steep hill, and there was a crosswind to boot. The only surprises the Meyers handed me were, first, a fairly high sink rate, especially with full flaps, and second, a speed bleed off during flare that prevented floating and demanded you flare almost in ground effect.

It would be possible for a first-time pilot to get a little slow and find himself facing a rate of descent that requires a lot of power and altitude to correct. However, this isn't a bit different than any other airplane of comparable performance and is better than at least several I can think of. I don't think the sink rate is at all objectionable, especially in view of the flap system which allows you infinite control of your drag configuration. As for flaring fairly low, that's the nature of a high performance airplane.

There is a rumor probably started by Gid Miller himself that somebody may soon be cranking out brand new Meyers/Aero Commander/Interceptor 200s. It's the old renew-a-type-certificate game, something that smacks of negative progress in most cases. However, if somebody can't get together the economic fortitude to design and certify a brand new airplane, I can't think of a dormant design that is better resurrected. By going through the paperwork with an increase in gross weight and maybe an STC turbocharger installation, the Meyers would be right in there with the very best of them. But, if the Meyers 200 doesn't find an angel to breathe new life into it, don't dismay; there's always Gid Miller. For \$20-30,000 he can put you into your very own "best airplane ever built." As a matter of fact he showed me one owned by a little old lady in Omaha who only flew it when she..... □