

AIRPORT HISTORY

OLD GRAND FORKS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Presentation

by

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at

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I was approached by Dan Finley a short time ago and he requested that I give you a short talk at this gathering tonight relating to the history of the old Grand Forks Airport. It was probably logical for him to ask me as I have been involved with the airport since 1941. I have likely met most of you during the 35 years I have been connected with the Grand Forks Airport and deem it a privilege to be here and to be able to speak to you about its history. I did considerable research and if I were to relate everything that took place from the early thirties until February 1, 1964 we would all be here for hours. I think it is very appropriate that we refresh our memories regarding past history as we do not want to forget that it is the past that made us what we are today. In my speech this evening I am going to bring out as many of the highlights as possible and I hope you will forgive me if I neglected to mention something that may have been quite important.

Due to the fact that the history goes back to the 1920's, I am unable to give you much information relating to those times as I did not become actively involved in aviation until 1941. I do know, however, that at the time Carl Ben Eielson, the famous Arctic explorer, and Sir Hubert Wilkins made the first non-stop flight from northern Alaska, across the North Pole to Spitsburgen, Norway on April 6, 1928, that Grand Forks did have a cow pasture type airport with probably only one storage hangar. I am calling your attention to this as Carl Ben Eielson was born and raised in our nearby community of Hatton, North Dakota. In a later flying expedition into the wilds of Northern Alaska in 1929, Mr. Eielson crashed and lost his life. I attended a memorial service in his honor when I was about 10 years old and as a result of seeing numerous old time aircraft flying in for the occasion, I became quite fascinated with flying. This was the spark that really got me interested in the flying game.

During most of the thirties, the airport remained a small and rough field with a gully running through it, a dump ground situated on one side of it, and, of course, a power line on one edge of the field. Much of the flying activity consisted of barnstorming pilots flying from one cow pasture to another, hauling passengers on pleasure rides. There was also activity involving those who dared to climb into an airplane to learn to fly. Up until the middle thirties, Northwest Airlines was operating scheduled flights using the single engine, seven-place Hamilton aircraft hauling passengers and mail between the Twin Cities and Pembina, North Dakota with intermediate stops at Fargo and Grand Forks.

Northwest Airlines owned the hangar and administrative facilities at the Pembina airport at that time. I was quite surprised to hear that Art Bergom, who served as a C.A.A. and FAA Flight service station specialist on the Grand Forks airport from October 1941, until his retirement in 1965, was employed by NWA as a radio operator at the Pembina airport in 1932 for a short period of time. NWA flights would terminate at Pembina and Canadian aircraft would come in from Winnipeg to pick up or drop off passengers traveling into Canada. Mr. Bergom frequently made radio contact with Capt. Orbeck who was then one of the old line pilots flying the Hamiltons for NWA. I have been told that during this early period the Hamiltons were equipped with skis for landing on snow during the winter months. The stops at Grand Forks were terminated in 1935 due to the bad condition of the airport.

In the middle thirties the city fathers did realize that there was a definite need for a better airport and that it be capable of serving scheduled air carrier aircraft. The city did proceed to acquire additional land bringing the total airport acreage to over 250 acres. With the assistance of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) considerable improvements were made between 1936 and 1941 including removal of the old city dump ground, filling in a large gully, doing a lot of drainage work, installing fencing, leveling off ground for runways and taxiways, surfacing runways with an oil seal coat, installation of boundary lighting, etc. A low frequency range was also installed by the FAA during this period as a navigational aid for pilots.

Titus Richards became manager of the Grand Forks Airport in the year, 1937, on a half time basis and operated a flight school on the side. Lester Jolly also commenced operations as a fixed base operator at this time and a short time later became involved with the Civilian Pilot Training Program which was subsidized by the Federal Government.

I just recently learned that Robert Hewitt, one of our present field attendants, received flight instruction from Titus Richards in 1937 and 1938 and acquired his private license in 1939. Bob worked as an aircraft and engine mechanic after 1946 and did a lot of aircraft maintenance work thereafter. He also acquired a commercial pilot's license and continued doing aircraft maintenance work through 1952. There was an unfortunate accident which occurred on December 20, 1940 involving a collision of two training aircraft flying over the airport. Both aircraft crashed killing all three occupants.

On August 31, 1941, improvements on the airport had reached the stage where the city saw fit to have dedication ceremonies. NWA considered the airport safe for air carrier operations and inaugurated service into Grand Forks using their twin engine Lockheed 10A aircraft which are similar to the Twin-Beech D-18 aircraft.

I became interested in learning to fly in the fall of 1941 and wandered on to the Grand Forks Airport on October 21st. The first person I met was the Airport Manager, Titus Richards. I looked at his airplane which was a 50 h.p. Taylorcraft and got my first flying lesson. I was so enthused I flew every day and soloed on my ninth day in Grand Forks. At \$8.00 per hour for dual instruction my money was going fast so I asked Mr. Richards for a job. He put me to work at a salary of \$35.00 per month which was upped to \$70.00 per month two months later when Frank Frazee, the Assistant Manager was dismissed. Lowell Mutchler, a flyer from Northwood, also was placed on the city payroll to help out with the airport work load during the calendar year 1942.

There were only about eight privately owned aircraft on the field when I started working. They were owned by Lars Letnes, Ward Mahowald, Lloyd Maves, Jerry Lindstrom, Les Raymond, Guy Wright, Ray Berg, and the one owned by Titus Richards. Usually about five of these aircraft were stored in a 60' x 50' steel hangar.

Onto this hangar, a lean-to was attached which provided space for the Airport Manager's office, a coal fired furnace and a large heated area used for storage of construction tools used by the WPA construction workers and a warming area for the WPA workers who were still in the process of making drainage improvements on the airport.

In addition to the steel hangar one additional wood frame hangar of approximately the same size was leased to the Jolly Flying School. This fairly new building served as a storage area for Lester Jolly's five training aircraft, and it had an office and classroom area. A portion of the hangar area could be heated during the winter so that repair work could be done on aircraft. Many CPT and Navy students continued to receive flight instruction through the Jolly Flying School during 1941, 1942, and 1943. The training included both primary and advanced flight training.

Other structures which were on the airport when I started flying in 1941 included a 14' x 24' wood frame building which was located North of the old steel hangar and used by NWA for its airline operation and a U.S. Customs inspection station. Russell Henderson was then serving as Station Manager for the NWA operation and Elmer Russell served as Deputy Customs Inspector clearing all air carrier and other aircraft arriving from Canada. Mr. Russell served in that capacity until September of 1961 at which time Donald Porter became Customs Inspector and is still serving in that capacity.

The Civil Aeronautics Administration also had a 14' x 28' wood frame building on the field which served the same purpose as our present day FAA flight service station. It was the only building on the airport, by the way, that had an indoor restroom and a cistern for water. Mr. Wilfred Rova was the Chief of the CAA Flight Service Station in 1941 and was ably assisted by Arthur Bergom and others. These quarters were abandoned in 1945 when new facilities became available on the second floor of the new terminal building which was completed in 1942.

As the years passed by from 1945 until the FAA ceased operations at the old airport in 1965, many new navigational aids, radio aids, and services came into being; thus, greatly enhancing the safety of all persons using the airport. Paul Bossolette, who was FAA Maintenance Chief for the Grand Forks station during the 50's and 60's was responsible for seeing to that all Radio and Navigational aids were in good working order at all times. Other important individuals who served as Flight Service Station Chiefs from 1942 thru 1964 included Victor Kleweno, R. B. Shields, Walter Allard, Jon Kornick, Lon Daharsh and Wes Campbell.

You all likely remember Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, when the United States became involved in World War II. All civil airports were closed for a short period and regulations were issued by the old CAA which required that any civil airport wishing to reopen would have to be guarded 24 hours a day, that flight clearance officers would have to be appointed to clear all aircraft departing, and that flights could be made to only those airports that met these requirements. I was appointed as one of the clearance officers for the Grand Forks Airport and during the following two years 1942 and 1943 I issued thousands of clearances. It was pretty much of a requirement that everyone join the Civil Air Patrol, have a CAP decal on his aircraft and all pilots were required to have a picture ID if the intent was to get into or fly a private aircraft. Due to the fact that all aircraft owners in the country were required to store their aircraft on an approved airport we had quite an influx of aircraft from all the surrounding small country towns and farms.

During the winter of 1941-42 work was in progress on construction of a new brick terminal building and the 150' x 100' aircraft storage hangar. Work on these two structures was completed in the early summer months of 1942. On July 27, 1942, a Glider Training Program originated, with the University of North Dakota taking care of the academic training and the flight training by the Army under a contract with the Jolly Flying Service.

The airport was used for a short time as a base of operations with administrative personnel occupying the second floor of the terminal building. Considerable aircraft maintenance work was conducted on the airport during the program. The flight training was conducted from six auxiliary fields out in the country. The students would learn to fly and then practice dead stick landings. When this program started it was quite a surprise to see all forms of Army vehicles almost completely filling the road between the University and the airport and seeing the 120 tandem Pipers and Taylorcrafts coming in formation flights and landing on the airport. This program terminated in the early part of 1943. Hie Rhonemus with a crew of 50 mechanics serviced the 120 aircraft in the new 150' x 100' hangar which had just been completed. Approximately 11,000 hours were flown during the glider program without a serious accident.

Northwest Airlines inaugurated DC-3 service during the summer months of 1942, and as soon as their quarters were completed in the new terminal building in October, they moved in and operated from there. The airport cafe became fully operational on August 31, 1942, and my wife Fay, who was then the operator, had to have water hauled in in cream cans as water and sewer facilities were not available until July 21 of 1943. The customers were quite happy with the service anyhow, especially the hot pecan rolls every morning and the good home-made pies. During her tenure as operator of the airport cafe, Fay did serve several celebrities including Sir Hubert Wilkins, the English explorer who flew with Carl Ben Eielson in 1928, the comedians Abbott and Costello and Company, and the Prince of Norway. Other operators who were involved with the operation of the airport cafe between 1944 and 1964 included A. B. Dickie, Mrs. Oliver, Clarence Austin, Martin Austin, Oscar Tullberg, J. B. Olson, Joe David, Francis Evenson, and Yvonne Helle.

It is of interest to note that in early 1942, the Cessna Aircraft Corporation ferried a large number of Cessna Bobcats into Canada using Grand Forks as a fueling stop. These were twin engine aircraft used by the Canadian Air Force as navigational and pilot trainers during World War II.

At one time we had ten of these aircraft fly in at one time. Delta Air Corporation from Monroe, Louisiana operating specially constructed Huff Daland duster aircraft, conducted the first aerial dusting operations from the Grand Forks airport on their arrival in August of 1942. They operated for two more seasons from the airport. In addition to the names of the aircraft owners which I referred to previously, the following pilots and aircraft owners could be seen during 1942 on a regular basis including Harold Chandler, Orren Chaffee, Ed Goebel, Dwight Holmes, Leo Mondry, Gilbert Saxowski, Roy Omlie, Odney Flaatt, Thorvald Stevens, Verne Hornbaker and many others. I would like to bring up one amusing incident which took place in 1942 involving Roy Omlie, who was then an instructor for the Jolly Flying School and one of his students. Due to the fact that many of the students did not carry a watch, Roy would hang his pocket watch on the dash of the plane so that the student would know when to return to the field. Roy further instructed his students that if they ever had to bail out while in flight they were to save the watch. Students were required to wear a parachute while on solo flights so in case of trouble they could bail out of the aircraft. Well, one day, while several students were flying, a fog rolled in over the airport and this one particular student got caught on top. He couldn't see land anywhere so he decided that he had better bail out. Roy and others on the ground became quite worried as the plane did not return and they knew also that the plane would run out of gas. As soon as they had determined that the Piper Cub had exhausted its gas they decided to start a search. About this time the student walked in with his parachute hanging on his back and the first thing he said when he saw Roy Omlie was, "Here's your pocket watch." The plane was located a short time later. It had hit the ground in a landing attitude, however, the wings were drooping to the ground like a very tired bird.

Titus Richards, serving as part time manager of the airport, was replaced by Carl J. Amundson in March of 1943.

Mr. Amundson, who was hired on a full time basis, served in this capacity until his retirement on November 15, 1960. I served with him as Assistant Manager until his retirement. The year 1943 proved to be a very busy one for Mr. Amundson and myself as we became involved with a lot of new construction and a lot of new flying activity resulting from the Army Indoctrination Program which involved in the operation of about 30 aircraft, 25 flight instructors, administrative personnel; etc. The flight program was run by the Jolly Flying Service and its purpose was to give each Army-Air Force applicant 10 hours of dual instruction and determine from that whether or not the student should be recommended for additional flight training in the Army-Air Force. Gilbert Saxowski served as Chief Pilot for the War Training Service Program and Hie Rhonemus served as Head of Maintenance. The program continued for 13 months and terminated during May of 1944. Thousands of hours were flown without a serious accident.

Northern Construction was busy during 1943 on many major improvements on the old airport involving building up the three runways with several inches of stabilized base, a six-inch asphalt lift and a seal coat. New taxiways were constructed of similar material. Concrete aprons were constructed in front of the new terminal building and the big hangar, installation of water and sewer for the terminal building and big hangar, and completion of the drainage system. The field was closed from August 10th to October 12 and during this period airline service was suspended and the major portion of the flight school activities were carried out on an auxiliary field close to the airport. Flush type runway lights were installed on all runways in 1944.

Northwest Airlines resumed operations on November 13, 1943, and continued on without interruption thereafter with Russ Henderson as Station Manager in charge. Jack Heinz, who later became station manager at Fargo, became Station Manager for NWA in July of 1944 and he was followed by Bob Hadtler in 1947.

Howard Peterson, who had previously served as radio operator at the airport in the mid forties, became Station Manager for NWA on January 1, 1951, and has served in that capacity until the present time and at all times trying to match wits with the weather, scheduling problems, runway problems and other items pertaining to airline operations in this area.

Getting back to general aviation activity, Kermit Severson who was one of the 25 flight instructors engaged in the Army Indoctrination Program in 1943 and 1944 continued on as a flight school operator at Grand Forks after the program terminated and continued in business until he transferred his operations to Crookston in 1948.

Art Brusegaard, who was also a flight instructor during the Army Indoctrination Program, continued on as a flight school operator and taught hundreds of students during the forties and early fifties. Some of his early students included Dr. R. A. Ogelvie, the Osowski Bros., Peter Gerszewski, George Hoff and many others.

Ralph Anderson and Hie Rhonemus were both involved in the aircraft and engine repair business following the termination of the Army Indoctrination Program in 1944. The so-called yellow hangar from which the Jolly Flying School operated during the war years burned down in 1944 and until this building was replaced by a concrete block building in 1948 the airport was without good shop facilities. Until the new shop was completed, repair work was done in temporary buildings and in the back end of the old steel hangar. Ralph Anderson remained in business on the airport until 1955 and Hie Rhonemus, operating as Valley Aircraft continued operations at the old airport until it was closed on February 1, 1964.

From 1945 and on aerial dusting during the summer months became very big business. M. B. Huggins from Timmons ville, S. C. would bring in a fleet of aircraft dusters each summer and was actively engaged in dusting potatoes up and down the valley until 1955.

Also, Terry Aircraft from Helena, Arkansas dusted potatoes in this area on a large scale beginning in 1946 and continuing through 1948. They used surplus Stearman aircraft purchased at the close of World War II. These aircraft were purchased by aerial spraying and dusting firms all over the country as they were about the only thing available at the time and could be converted quite easily. Guy Wright also became quite active in dusting operations in 1947. He also did a lot of Fox hunting during the winter months flying on ski-equipped aircraft. On January 1, 1946 the airport received a designation as Port of Entry for Canada and from that date on was called the Grand Forks International Airport. Traffic across the Canadian border was increasing tremendously each year.

James Montgomery started a flight operation in August of 1947 under the name of Larson and Montgomery and then went on his own as Montgomery Airspray, Inc. a short time later. In the beginning Mr. Montgomery was involved primarily in dusting and spraying operations and this later developed into a complete fixed base operation including a flight school, charter, aircraft and engine maintenance, etc. His operation was conducted from the old steel hangar until he constructed his own facility in 1957. His spraying and dusting aircraft were kept in storage in the old steel hangar until the old airport was closed. The new structure which was constructed in 1957 was relocated to the new airport in the fall of 1963 and has served as a base of operations for Montgomery until the present time for his fixed base operation.

Due to lack of aircraft storage space on the airport a new 8 stall T-hangar was erected in 1947 and we filled it in a very short time as the local plane population was increasing at a very rapid rate.

Dalton Le Masurier, owner of radio station KFJM in Grand Forks and another station in Duluth, Minnesota started his flying career in 1943 and in 1946 he was instrumental in purchasing a twin-engine Beechcraft and a twin Cessna Bobcat and made the first attempt at an intra-state air service in North Dakota called Northern Airways. The service started on May 20, 1946 and linked the cities of Grand Forks, Fargo, Bismarck, and Minot but due to being unprofitable was terminated in October of 1946. Lester Jolly and James Radke served as the pilots in this venture. Dalton was actively engaged in flying in this area until 1950.

The terminal building was expanded to the south in 1949 to provide NWA with heated equipment storage and baggage cart space and to provide U.S. Customs with more customs inspection space for accommodating the ever increasing number of passengers flying to and from Canada.

In 1950 the airport finally got rid of the old flush type runway lights which were quite difficult to keep clean during the winter months. Medium intensity elevated contact lights were installed on the N-S and the NW-SE runway and this was sure an improvement for all concerned. A concrete driveway to the terminal building was also constructed.

1 The airport equipment maintenance building was also constructed in 1950 so we finally got heated storage for our snowplow equipment and a heated place to do repair work. In the spring of 1950 the entire area was involved in one of the biggest floods in history. Even the Coast Guard had a large helicopter stationed on the airport for several weeks to do rescue work. Northwest Crop Sprayers, Inc. operated by Lester Jolly, started spraying operations on the airport in 1950 and continued for two seasons. John Jenson became involved in flying in 1950 and later became a crop spraying pilot for Montgomery Airspray, Inc. After flying with Montgomery for several years he went into business for himself as a crop spraying operator and is still in that business. By 1951 approximately 40 aircraft were regularly stationed on the Grand Forks airport.

NWA was using DC-3 and Martin 202 equipment in 1950 and because of some problems with the Martins took them out of service on March 15th, 1951, and switched to DC-4's. In the spring of 1952 we noticed the first effect of heavier aircraft on our runways which were now nine years old and had to close the airport to all aircraft larger than a DC-3 for a period of about 2 weeks. Closing the airport every spring became a yearly ritual from then on with the exception of a couple of years when we were lucky.

Wisconsin Central Airlines, now known for a long time as North Central Airlines, started service into Grand Forks on June 6, 1952, using DC-3 type equipment between the Twin Cities and Grand Forks. James Butala was appointed Station Manager for the local station and has served in that capacity until the present time. North Central inaugurated service from Grand Forks to Omaha on June 1, 1957, and to Minot in April of 1959. DC-3 type equipment was used on all three routes until operations commenced from the new airport in 1964. The airport was quite involved for a long period of time in the storage, heating and fueling of North Central's overnighing aircraft. Providing NCA with inside storage in the big hangar resulted in the airport constructing a new 60'x 80' open space hangar in 1956 to accomodate the private aircraft that were displaced.

In 1954 I gave flight instruction to Tom Ronan from Manvel, North Dakota. He later became a commercial crop spraying pilot and has been in the crop spraying business ever since, operating from his own strip near Manvel. In 1964, when the old airport was closed, Tom purchased the old steel hangar which was abandoned, moved it to Manvel and set it on a new foundation near his runway so the forty year old building is still getting a lot of use.

Ardell Bestland and Doyle Kargel started a new aerial spraying business in 1955 known as B-K Airspray. They had several aircraft and operated until 1960. During this period all spraying and dusting was done by local operators.

Doyle Kargel was appointed Assistant Airport Manager in 1960 and held that position until the new airport became operational and for a short time thereafter. Ardell continued on in the spraying business after 1961.

NWA continued to operate with DC-4 type aircraft until 1961 when they started using DC-6 equipment. During the five year period 1956 to 1961 when NWA was using only DC-4 type equipment the runways were deteriorating more and more each year due to their excessive weight and considerable money, time and effort went into repairing runways each year. The DC-6's weighing considerably more, meant still greater problems. On June 3, 1962, NWA started using the Jet-Prop Lockheed Electra Aircraft. Instead of repairing runway breaks on a daily basis we now had to go out after each aircraft landed to fill the ruts with hot asphalt, level it, pack it and wait for the next DC-6 or Electra to land. Conditions finally got so bad that NWA transferred its operations to the new airport on November 15, 1963. During the last four years, it was quite a hassle to keep the airport safe for light aircraft operations because of the ruts and roughness of the runways but we did manage somehow.

By 1961 approximately 55 aircraft were stationed on the old airport. Because of the need for a new bridge across the Red River, the need to construct an interstate highway through the old airport, lack of expansion space for the old airport and the deteriorated condition of the old airport, the City finally decided to build a new airport West NW of the city. I was appointed manager of the airport November 14, 1960, and was quite involved in the planning and construction of the new airport. This included among other things planning the construction of storage hangars which would have to be erected to house all of the aircraft in storage on the old airport. This turned out to be quite a challenge as no money was available for these buildings and some of the other facilities needed. Over \$600,000.00 had to be borrowed from the city general fund in order to accomplish the task.

This money has now been completely replaced from sales of land from the old airport property which eventually turned out to be quite valuable.

The new airport was constructed in 1963 and even all the buildings were substantially completed by February 1, 1964, the day that everyone moved to the new airport. Not everyone liked the new airport as it was so far from town and there were only two runways but eventually nearly everyone became accustomed to it and accepted it.

There are many other things I could have mentioned regarding the old airport and activities thereon, however, time is of essence. If you have any questions I would be glad to talk to you after the program.

Thank you.