

# Background to the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport

## By Thomas E. "Pete" Jordon

*(Pete Jordon was the first director of the Arkansas Air Museum at Drake Field, 1989-1991.)*

### Introduction

"...Those in charge are continuing a program of open deliberation that is as noteworthy as it is commendable," began a 1968 *Northwest Arkansas Times* editorial on the proposed regional airport. "From the airport idea's conception--marked by the appointment a number of years ago of ad hoc committees by the State Chamber of Commerce for the purpose of determining feasibility of regional airports in Arkansas--the development of the proposal has been cautious, calculating and in full view of the public...."

"The case for the airport is good. It represents intercommunity cooperation of a high degree, and is symbolic of what regional planning hopes to achieve in future projects."

As Northwest Arkansas faces another attack of regional airport fever this author thought it might be enlightening to take a look into the past at other attempts to build a regional airport. The subject involved more than just events from the 1960s and 1970s, it had roots in the very creation of Northwest Arkansas' aviation infrastructure.

This article begins in the 1920s with Fayetteville's original airport and tracks through to the effort before the current and seeming successful one in the 1990s to bring a regional airport into being. Along the way it'll look at the part played by both the State and local Chambers of Commerce, the Arkansas Department of Transportation and Aeronautics Commission, the Federal Aviation Administration, Frontier Air Lines, Scheduled Skyways and the original Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority among other agencies and the parts they played to change Northwest Arkansas.

### Chapter One: The First Effort

"Air Service did not come to Northwest Arkansas, it was brought here and Drake Field was developed to handle the new service," was the comment made by a 1967 Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce publication. Such steadfast support of Drake Field by the Chamber was usually followed within a few months by another announcement that a new regional airport proposal was in the offing and that Drake Field had only a few more months to go as this area's main airport.

Fayetteville's first airport was founded in the 1920's on a site just north of where it is now located. However that site, today the location of the Tyson/Mexican Original plant, proved to be unsuitable for an airport. So in the 1930's it moved to its present site taking the name Drake Field in the mid-1940s, after Dr. N.F. Drake, a long-time supporter of aviation in the area.

The late 1940s were an exciting time for aviation in Northwest Arkansas. Many people were learning to fly in the area under the GI Bill. Area poultry producers were beginning to fly breeding stock into the area that would become the basis for their own herds of breeding flocks. South Central Air Transport (SCAT), a local airline and the holder of the state's first air taxi license, began to make regular flights between Fayetteville and Little Rock.

But the three grass runways at Drake were not suitable for the operations expected to be carried out at the field in the near future. This led in 1949 to the first major improvement to the field since the building of the white hangar in 1943/44, the paving of a 100' by 3,000' runway roughly along the course of the existing north-south grass runway.

Thus it came to pass that Fayetteville had a growing airport, but aside from SCAT no airline service.

Shortly after World War Two SCAT had applied to the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) for permission to fly to several major cities in the Central United States. Hoping to see Fayetteville declared an air carrier airport if SCAT were to succeed in its application, the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce came out in support of SCAT's application in 1949. But their help was not enough, SCAT was not given permission to fly over any of the routes it has asked for.

The winner in the route competition was Central Airlines. Central was an airline in name only. At the time of the award it didn't own any aircraft or fly over any routes, but it was given two years to begin operations. In the meantime Braniff began making

charter flights into Drake Field transporting athletic teams to and from games. Drake Field had a taste of major air service and liked it.

Anyone with eyes could tell Drake Field was not the ideal location for an air carrier airport. There were mountains on three sides of the airport limiting how much the runway could be extended and how effective any landing system installed would be.

This led to the first effort to build a major airport in Northwest Arkansas at a site other than Drake Field. In 1951 a meeting was held in Rogers with representatives of area cities to discuss a plan for an area airport. According to Jimmie Carter of Rogers those talks died aborning because "Fayetteville voted that down."

## **Chapter Two: Fayetteville Becomes an Air Carrier Airport**

"...On December 5, 1954, three airliners landed against a cold north wind and pulled up to Fayetteville's new air terminal ushering in commercial air service to Fayetteville, Arkansas," stated the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce Newsletter.

It went on to add that "Fayetteville has joined hands with fast-growing, ambitious cities and becomes one of the cities of Central Airlines' network with six flights a day in and out of Fayetteville...."

"Despite the cold bluster of December winds, approximately 6,000 people were at the airport to greet the arriving planes and celebrities. The program at the airport included music by the Fayetteville High School Band and the christening of a Central airliner 'THE CITY OF FAYETTEVILLE.'"

Having Drake Field become an air carrier airport had been Fayetteville's goal since 1949. Following the defeat of South Central Air Transport's efforts to become a major interstate air carrier in that same year, the Chamber's efforts did not slow, but shifted to Central Airlines.

The 1949/50 Work Achievement Report stated that the Chamber "will emphasize the fact that Drake Field is a transportation terminal and that Fayetteville is deserving of commercial aviation service." This was echoed in the 1951 report. "The Chamber will work for continued development of Drake Field, and during the year will emphasize the fact that Drake Field is a transportation terminal and will work for commercial aviation service for Fayetteville."

The need for the Chamber to press for improved air service at Drake was brought to light in the January, 1952 newsletter. "Just how much air service means to Fayetteville is highlighted in a recent piece of correspondence from a factory locating service who stated: 'After a discussion with our client concerning Fayetteville as a location we are forced to pass it up in favor of a city with direct air service connections to some of the larger cities of the East.'"

In 1953 at Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) hearings in Muskogee, Oklahoma, 87 persons from the Fayetteville area representing a variety of interests appeared. After several had testified in favor of bringing Central into Fayetteville the head of the Fayetteville delegation was asked if he intended to bring all 87 persons to the stand. The response, according to a Chamber history of Drake Field, was that they intended to keep bringing witnesses to the stand until the CAB called "calf rope."

(Packing the hearing at Muskogee was only part of what went on in the Chamber's efforts to have their way with the CAB. An inspector was sent to the area before the hearing to look over the situation and report back to the Board. Knowing he was coming, the Chamber went to work and prepared a car for his visit. It had the stiffest suspension possible giving him a rough ride over even the best roads. Then, they increased the air pressure in the tires as much as they dared to make the car's handling even worse than it was. And while he was here, they took care to use only the worse roads wherever they went. At the hearing he was said to have reported that if there was ever a part of the country that needed air service, it was Northwest Arkansas. Their roads were the worst he had seen anywhere.)

At the end of the hearings Central was allowed to fly into and out of Fayetteville. Drake Field was now Northwest Arkansas' air carrier airport.

But the battle wasn't won. For Central to fly DC-3s into Fayetteville the paved runway needed 800 more feet added it. Also a terminal building was needed. Central would not operate out of the building South Central Air Transport (SCAT), a local airline, was using for their operations. Instead it would use a small wooden frame building placed at the end of one of the existing taxiways. Central began service as quickly as it's requirements were met. *(Ray Ellis refused to let Central in the white hangar and harbored*

*bitterness towards them for many years. The building used for a terminal was a small wooden house which was called "the chicken shack" by the Central agents. It was located about halfway between the white hangar and where the future white brick terminal would be located. It was used as a passenger terminal until 1960 when the white brick terminal building opened. - Jake)*

Jim Kays, then President of the Chamber of Commerce, had the following to say about Fayetteville's entrance into the new aviation age. "The airport and its lighted paved runway is a thing of beauty to behold as you go down highway 71. The big motors roaring in and out of the airport give us the sound of a busy metropolis. Time has been sliced to a third for the folks of Northwest Arkansas who must go places and who have important emergency shipments in and out."

### **Chapter Three: The Second Effort**

As Central prepared for operations at Drake Field, the field's limitations became well known. So, in 1957, the Fayetteville Chamber asked John Mahaffey to make a site survey for a possible location for a new airport.

The site selected by John Mahaffey was one just outside Fayetteville on Highway 16W. According to Mr. Mahaffey the proposed site would allow a runway of 8,000 to 10,000 feet to be built with only minor obstructions. Such a length should be more than long enough to handle any aircraft of the day or into the foreseeable future.

In January, 1958, as this new airport study was beginning to pick up steam, a Mr. I.D. Miller of the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA), a forerunner of today's FAA, out of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma came to speak to selected members of the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce. In private talks with the Chamber, Miller told them: "Before another airport (either inter-city or another Fayetteville airport) can be installed, it would have to be proven that the Fayetteville airport does not serve its purpose."

He went on to say: "The truth of the matter is that one airport to serve four or five towns has never worked out.... In instances where the town's governing bodies have even been of accord, the location of the airport has been a problem. Furthermore, over 60% of the flying on airports is strictly local business flying, and the flyer is going to land at the airport nearest to the town where he is transacting business...."

"If a large airport were constructed in Northwest Arkansas (for which the need cannot be shown) you would have to continue using the Fayetteville airport as a secondary airport. You have to have airports where they serve your town."

Miller suggested that the Chamber forget about its dreams of a new airport. Instead he told them that the CAA would be more than willing to help them expand and improve the facilities already existing at Drake Field.

So the Highway 16W site was dropped from consideration and Drake Field was improved. Between 1958 and 1961 with Federal assistance a new terminal building (today -1995- used by Aerotech Services) was constructed, the 3800' runway was extended to 5,000 feet and new taxiways were added while existing ones were widened, parking facilities were improved and additional lighting and sewers were added to the field.

With these improvements came expanded service at Drake Field. In the early 1960s Central began to replace its DC-3s with larger Convair 600 aircraft. As soon as the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) granted permission and the improvements to the field were finished these larger planes began using Fayetteville. *(Actually, Central started buying Convair 240s in 1960 to augment the DC-3 fleet and by 1964 had bought eight of them. They bought three more Convair 240s and converted all eleven aircraft to turbo-charged Convair 600s in 1965 - 1966. - Jake)*

Once again the Chamber was proud of what its efforts had brought about. "...With the construction of the air terminal building at the airport, Fayetteville has become a real air terminal," gushed the Chamber's newsletter.

### **Chapter Four: The Regional Airport Study Committee**

What a difference a few years make. The Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce's newsletter of December 1960 informed its readership that: "The Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce has contacted federal authorities to determine whether or not a community airport could be built in Northwest Arkansas and they were informed that:

"Should a community airport be built that all airports in the area would have to be maintained by the cities owning them.

"Since the federal government has seen fit to improve all the airports in the area the government does not feel that there is any need

for any other airports to supply the services of Northwest Arkansas.

"That if a community airport were built in Northwest Arkansas, it would have to be built by the people of Northwest Arkansas without federal assistance and that in addition it would have to be maintained and operated without federal assistance."

But those local doubts didn't stop the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce from asking the Fayetteville Chamber in January 1964 to once more look into the feasibility of building a modern airport to service Washington, Benton, Madison and Carroll counties. Thus the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Study Committee was born.

The committee had four members, M.H. "Bill" Simmons, committee chairman from Siloam Springs, Hal. C. Douglas of Fayetteville, Courtney Crouch of Springdale and Lloyd Peterson of Decatur.

The first meeting of the committee was February, 1964 in Springdale. From that meeting came a proposal that the Arkansas Planning Commission undertake a statewide survey of the state's aeronautical needs. Using that study an Arkansas airport plan could be developed for the benefit of the entire state. Also it could provide the basis for a Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Feasibility Study.

As part of the local effort to collect information on the feasibility of a regional airport attracting jet service the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce asked the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) for their opinion on the new airport being granted jet service.

In a February, 1964 letter to the Fayetteville Chamber John W. Pregge of the CAB commented: "While it would be difficult to state categorically that if a regional airport were built it would command major trunkline service, we, frankly, doubt very much that this would be the case. We also question whether in the reasonably near future you could expect service by turbo-jet aircraft. Turbo-jet aircraft are comparatively limited in their stage length and do not operate economically at less than 300 miles for the small jet and 500 miles for the larger jets. I am trying to be realistic about this for your own benefit."

But the idea of a regional airport was still alive. At a September, 1964 Study Committee meeting Hal Douglas commented that it was "his impression that Fayetteville will do what is necessary to provide facilities for Central Airlines service for the next three to five years." That was the time it was expected to take to build the new airport.

At that same meeting the decision was made to look into what would be involved in creating a Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority patterned after the existing Beaver Water District. To speed this process along Senator Fulbright's office was contacted to determine what legal actions needed to be taken and what possible federal funds might be available.

Thanks to the Senator it appeared that funds for the project would be available not only from the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Federal-aid Airport Program, but possibly from the Housing and Home Finance Agency and the Public Works and Economic Act of 1965 through the Department of Commerce.

### **Chapter Five: The State of Arkansas Air Transportation Study**

On June 23, 1965, A.J. Parry of Leigh-Fisher Associates gave an advanced briefing of the State of Arkansas Air Transportation Study to the Arkansas Regional Airport Feasibility Committee in Little Rock. At that meeting he recommended strongly that no further improvements be made to Drake Field. He also recommended that site and feasibility studies be made at once for a regional airport to serve Washington and Benton counties.

It was quickly pointed out to Mr. Perry that to stop any further development of Drake Field, the region's only air carrier airport, would damage the region's plans to see area air transportation grow and change from piston-driven aircraft to turbine-powered ones. Waiting until a regional airport could be built would mean delivering a crippling blow to the area's transportation system.

This change from piston-driven Convair 600 aircraft to Turbine-driven Convair 580 aircraft was one of the reasons for plans to increase the runway at Fayetteville from 5,000 feet to 6,000 feet in 1966. *(The Convair 580 was flown by Frontier who did not take over Central until October 1, 1967. It's possible the changeover from Central's Convair 240s to Convair 600s was the reason. - Jake)*

In the final report Leigh-Fisher Associates were not so hard on Drake Field. Their report stated: "The Fayetteville/Rogers/Springdale area requires now and in the foreseeable future, an air carrier airport with all-weather capability. Drake Field, the existing

air carrier airport serving the Fayetteville/Rogers/ Springdale area is currently inadequate to accommodate the contemplated scheduled air traffic in the area.

"Therefore, a project should be undertaken to determine if Drake Field can be made adequate to handle current and long term traffic requirements in the area. If expansion is not feasible, a study should be undertaken to construct a new all-weather air carrier airport in the local category to serve the combined requirements of Washington and Benton Counties."

In another part of the study the report went on to note that the air transportation problem in Northwest Arkansas was a local one. This was due to the activities of the University of Arkansas and the area's increasing industrial development.

Early in 1966 funds to finance a preliminary planning and engineering study for a regional airport became available under the technical assistance program of the Economic Development Administration. The county judges of Washington and Benton County agreed that they would co-sponsor an application for those funds. It appeared that the regional airport project was back to life and in the pink of health.

At this same time the Northwest Arkansas Regional Study Committee was approached by Brown & Root Inc., a Houston, Texas, consulting engineering firm, about being the group to perform the study the county judges were asking for.

Following that meeting Brown & Root made an application to the Economic Development Administration (EDA) for a Site Study, General Evaluation and Overall Master Plan for the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport. Brown & Root's estimated cost of the project- \$55,000.

However the EDA funds were not approved, so only a site study was performed. The \$35,000 cost was paid out of local funds.

### **Chapter Six: The Brown & Root Site Study**

In May and June, 1966, Brown & Root presented their Site Study. They presented five sites that should be considered for the regional airport. That list was later cut to three.

Those sites and some of the comments made about them were:

1) A site west of Springdale and east of Elm Springs. This was the recommended site for the regional airport. It was closest to the center of population for Washington and Benton Counties. And it was also near the geographic center of the two counties. The cost of land for the site was near \$800,000 with the total cost of the project estimated at \$4,138,000.

At this site there was room for an 150' X 11,000' main runway, unhampered approaches, well drained terrain and room for a secondary runway of 100' X 3,-4,000'. Also included in the plans was a parking ramp of 300' X 50' for air carrier operations. With an instrument landing system (ILS) installed operations could be conducted at down to 200-400' ceilings. At that time Drake Field was operating with 800' ceilings.

2) A site west of Fayetteville and northeast of Farmington. Despite being the number two site, this site was considered to be almost marginal. The land for it would cost \$613,000 with a total estimated cost for the project set at \$4,048,000. It was noted that a creek ran across the site, but there was still room for a 9,000' runway with clear approaches. A mountain in the area did not pose a problem. The only major problem with this site was that it would "get into town lots in Farmington on approaches."

3) A site southwest of Tontitown. This area was not high on the list of sites because it was "well built up with vineyards, brooder houses and residences."

4) The present Drake Field. This was listed as a marginal site. There were mountains on several sides, it was open only to the northwest and would require the relocation of highway 71 were it to be used. It was also noted that 7,000' would be the longest runway that could be in place at Drake Field.

5) A site between Springdale and Rogers. This site was rejected as being too far from Fayetteville to be realistically considered.

Other recommendations were that once the regional airport was opened Drake Field be kept in operation, but that the Springdale be closed. And that a sponsoring body for the regional airport be formed as quickly as possible to take advantage of Federal funds that would be available for only a short time longer.

There was much dissatisfaction with the Brown & Root study. Many people in Fayetteville felt that the number one site was too far away from Fayetteville to be worthy of consideration. There was talk that the Brown & Root study team had been unduly influenced by the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Study Committee members from north of Fayetteville.

In Rogers, Jimmie Carter expressed his own reservations with the Brown & Root study. The land at site one "is also considered to be some of the highest priced in Northwest Arkansas." The Brown & Root study had not taken into account the needs for new roads and other infrastructure constructions, Carter said. By looking at the whole picture Carter estimated that the Regional Airport would cost more in the neighborhood of ten million dollars.

He went on to say that the "\$35,000 study by the engineers was wasted. A group of local men, given \$2,000 to work with could have selected the same sites... at a considerable savings."

### **Chapter Seven: The Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority**

Research into creating a regional airport authority showed in Arkansas there was no legislation on the books which would permit communities and counties to join together for such a purpose. Backed by several groups who lobbied for such legislation, Act 430 of 1967 (the Interlocal Cooperation Act) was quickly passed.

However after the law was passed and put into practice in Northwest Arkansas it was found that there was a Joker in the Act 430 deck. While the act gave communities the power to create bodies such as an airport authority, it failed to give the authority created a means of funding and paying for its projects. In short the law did not allow for the comingling and then handling of local funds by the authority. That problem would be dealt with by Act 13 of 1968.

In April, 1967 the Fayetteville Board of Directors called for the formation of a Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority under the provisions of Act 430 of 1967. Washington and Benton counties, Bentonville, Fayetteville, Rogers, Siloam Springs and Springdale were proposed as members.

A Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Steering Committee was formed of one member from each city and Benton County. Two members were to be selected from Washington County. The committee as a whole was to then select a 9th member who was expected to come from the University of Arkansas.

However, after the voting, that last member was from Benton County. Fayetteville expressed concern over this noting that Washington County had nearly twice the population of Benton County and would most likely have to provide two thirds of all local funding. Thus it should not have a minority vote on the Authority. Further studies indicated that 80% of all passengers using the new airport would most likely come from Washington County.

In the end the make up of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority was as follows:

Fayetteville- 3 members (Gerald Fox, William Morton and Dr. John Kane)

Springdale- 2 (Cortney Crouch and James Hurley)

Benton County- 2 (chairman Cass Hough and Lloyd Peterson)

Washington Co.-2 (Loyd Luginbuel and Dr. Edwin Whiteside)

Bentonville- 1 (Bill Enfield)

Siloam Springs- 1 (Bill Simmons)

By the end of 1967 all parties to the Authority had signed the agreement and the Regional Airport looked like a done deal. At that time nobody could say that in 1992 we would still be hashing the same issues we were over twenty years before.

### **Chapter Eight: Burns and McDonnell Plan a Regional Airport**

To assist it through the process of planning for a regional airport the Regional Airport Authority selected the Kansas City, Missouri, engineering firm of Burns and McDonnell from the thirteen firms that had expressed an interest in the project.

They were contracted to perform engineering, planning and economic studies that would include site selection and the creation of a 20-year master plan for the proposed airport. The Department of Housing and Urban Development would pay \$7,000 towards parts of the study with the balance, not to exceed \$8,000, to be placed on a separate contract payable at a future date.

At this time only Frontier Air Lines and Scheduled Skyways were serving Northwest Arkansas. Skyways, in operation since 1953 as an intrastate air taxi, flew a single route between Fayetteville and Little Rock. While it was important to the area's aviation trade, it was not the major player in Northwest Arkansas. That was Frontier, the airline that had the official Civil Aeronautics Board approval to link Northwest Arkansas with out-of-state destinations.

At this time Frontier was flying Convair 580 aircraft along the routes served by Fayetteville. But they were in the process of converting their entire fleet of aircraft over to Boeing 737 and 727 aircraft. When that happened, Frontier let it be known, they might have to pull out of Northwest Arkansas. The reason was not financial, but that they intended to be flying aircraft Drake Field was not capable of handling.

In November, 1968, a delegation of Northwest Arkansas businessmen briefed the president of Frontier Air Lines on the regional airport, which Frontier Air Lines was expected to be the sole airline servicing for many years, and of the importance of Frontier in the economic life of the region. "The thin line of commercial air service connecting Northwest Arkansas with air terminals and the web of air transportation in the United States probably has more to do with the total economy of this community than any other single factor," they told him.

Burns and McDonnell operated in a workmanlike manner and produced a series of informative reports. When one looks at their projections for population (197,000 projected in 1990, 213,000 actual in 1989) and air traffic growth (225,000 Northwest Arkansas enplaneinents estimated in 1990, 235,528 enplanements actual in 1990), one gains a respect for what they produced.

"Drake Field," Burns and McDonnell's Air Trade Analysis stated, "which allowed commercial airline service to be ushered into the region, has served well for many years. However, as aircraft of the commercial fleet have become heavier and more sophisticated the physical limitations of the field have become more and more apparent. Sufficient clearances are not available to allow the field to be fully instrumented, and a further lengthening of the runways to accommodate the anticipated jets would make these clearances even worse. The minimum visibility conditions, if an attempt were made to serve the field with jets, would be even worse than at present and the number of overflights and flight cancellations would become even worse than at present. It is improbable that the air carrier would consider bringing its jets into Drake Field.

"If the latter situation arose, the air carrier would probably have no alternative to running a third level type of service [commuter or feeder air lines - Author] through the stations to air lift the region's passengers to their nearest stations served by jets. Such service would obviously be unacceptable.

"It therefore appears undeniable that the only prudent course of action open to the region is that now under way to construct a new regional airport capable of receiving jet aircraft and capable of being fully instrumented to increase reliability of service to the maximum extent possible."

Burns and McDonnell's reports only confirmed a Springdale News editor's comments in January, 1868, after a speaker for an important event was delayed in reaching Northwest Arkansas due to poor weather. "Air transportation into the area is almost unbelievable," the editor reported. He went on to note that it was "uncertain" to schedule a flight out of Fayetteville and that arrivals were "even more so."

## **Chapter Nine: Tontitown Wins the Regional Airport Lottery**

The “ideal site” for the regional airport would be 3 miles southwest of Springdale, just east of Highway 112, and 1 1/2 miles south of Highway 68, reported E.J. Runyan, of Burns and McDonnell. However, it wasn’t possible to build at that site, so Tontitown was given the honor.

“It is concluded that the Tontitown site provides the most equitable convenience for the residents and air travelers of the region,” Burns and McDonnell’s site selection report stated, “and that its development as a regional airport would be consistent with appropriate land planning. The site offers good topographical features and is totally free of hazardous obstructions. While an airport development in any populated area causes some social upheaval, this should be moderate at the Tontitown site.”

“The selection of our area as a possible site was no surprise,” said Tontitown mayor Harry Sbanotto. “They have been talking about it for a long time.”

The regional airport was not a development Sbanotto had foreseen for his town. With the availability of water from Beaver Lake, Sbanotto and many Tontitown residents had envisioned their small town developing into a peaceful suburb “to supplement the rising populations of Springdale and Fayetteville.” Now, instead of housing, Sbanotto noted that the airport would “consume our best area and create an extra noise problem.”

The airport was expected to cost Tontitown the loss of about ten residences, but Sbanotto didn’t see Tontitown as losing any population in the long run. “Employees of the airport will probably want to locate close to their work,” he noted.

Tontitown resident Richard Ardemagni reported that at the request of Fayetteville mayor Don Trumbo, a survey of Tontitown residents was made. “The people were against the proposal 100%,” said Ardemagni.

Some outside of Tontitown felt it was a shame Tontitown would have to shoulder the burden of hosting the regional airport. A Northwest Arkansas Times editorial expressing that very fact was headlined “Locals Don’t Count.” It noted that once a government agency began to gather steam on a project, virtually nothing could stop it. As an example it pointed to the futile efforts of residents of the Buffalo River Valley and their attempt to prevent the Army Corps of Engineers from damming the Buffalo River.

The Regional Airport Authority would buy up several acres of land around the airport to prevent its use for purposes that would interfere with future airport operations and for future expansion. After construction, when things returned to normal, the land that was not directly associated with the regional airport, such as where the airport facilities had been built, the runways and their associated clear zones and the roads leading to and away from the new airport could still be used for agriculture. Where possible, existing agricultural activities such as hay fields or grape vineyards would be preserved and the properties leased back to area farmers to cultivate.

“If this is the location that is selected,” Sbanotto said, “I hope the community will get behind it and the people will do what they can to help. We don’t want it, but if that’s the way it’s going to be, we can’t stop it.”

## **Chapter Ten: The Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport**

It was recommended by Burns and McDonnell that the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport be master planned for an “ultimate 8,000 foot primary runway” with a full instrument landing system, and that such a runway be the first construction priority of the regional airport.

Frontier, while it didn’t demand one, strongly suggested that a crosswind runway would be of good service to them at the new airport. So it came to be that a 6,750 foot crosswind runway, with associated taxiways, but only a visual landing system, was the next item on the list.

Frontier also stated that while usually Boeing 737-200s and 727-100s would service the new airport, an occasional 727-200 could be expected as well. That meant the new runways would have to be stressed to handle 170,000 pounds. “This load is as demanding as any in the commercial fleet,” noted Burns and McDonnell.

Outside the terminal, the parking apron would be 300 by 1200 feet. “Sufficient for seven aircraft of mixed 737 and 727



configuration and two small aircraft positions,” Burns and McDonnell reported.

As for the terminal itself, it was to be of mainly exposed concrete construction, with two gates and the ability to be easily expanded. It would include a single ticket counter for Frontier (Scheduled Skyways intended to continue to operate out of Drake Field) with offices for Frontier and airport management, cargo storage and handling facilities, operations areas, baggage handling and claim areas, space for car rental agencies, a coffee shop and news stand, a conference room, as well as waiting rooms and restrooms. The total square footage of the facility would be 11,150 square feet.

The initial parking lot for the terminal was to be only 250 spaces. However, as traffic increased, the parking facilities were to be expanded to as many as 600 spaces.

The Arkansas Highway Department promised that if the regional airport were built they would improve Highway 68 (today 412) between Siloam Springs and Springdale and relocate Highway 71 between Fayetteville and Bentonville giving Springdale and Rogers a bypass. In addition, Highway 112 from Fayetteville to Bentonville along with Highway 264 between Lowell and Cave Springs would be improved to increase access to the facility.

A sewage treatment plant, which Tontitown’s mayor asked the Regional Airport Authority to consider connecting Tontitown to, was scheduled to be built. Water pressure for the airport, for fire fighting and the like, was assured of being adequate thanks to the airport’s own 50,000 gallon elevated water tank.

The FAA planned to build a control tower at the new airport and move much of their operations at Fayetteville to the new facility. These included the Flight Service Station, which Northwest Arkansas airmen had fought several battles with the FAA to keep open and located at Drake Field in the past, and the Airways Facilities office, the division that would maintain the instrument landing system at the new airport as well as all other FAA-operated and -maintained navigational aids in Northwest Arkansas.

In addition to the above there would be hangars, fueling facilities, repair and aircraft rental facilities; everything one found at a normal airport.

The cost for the whole project was estimated at being \$5 million. Federal and State monies would pick up half the tab, leaving Washington and Benton Counties to finance only \$2.5 million themselves.

According to Burns and McDonnell, the simplest and cheapest way to finance the \$2.5 million would be to sell Act 49 bonds (designed for use in attracting and providing for industries) and to service that debt with a 2 mil tax levy over 30 years. A 2 mil tax would mean only \$8 a year more on a piece of property valued at \$20,000.

Washington and Benton Counties would vote on a straight 2 mils. Springdale, because Act 49 Bonds were limited to no more than 5 mils and it already carried 4 mils of Act 49 bonds, would stage a separate vote that would ask for 1 mil of Act 49 bonds and a second mil of Act 9 bonds.

The vote was set for September 23, 1969.

### **Chapter Eleven: Area Aviation Developments**

“Drake Field, which has been of such value to this section through the years, will continue to serve until a regional airport can be planned and built,” said a Northwest Arkansas Times editorial on National Aviation Day in August 1967, “and even then will be of considerable worth to general aviation. It should be as well equipped as possible to play its part in the aviation growth that is under way all over the country.”

With the coming of the regional airport Drake field and other area airports would not be abandoned. A few years before, when FAA philosophy had been regional airports replacing almost all of an area’s smaller airports with a single larger one, they might have. But now the FAA found there was use for those smaller airports. They could be used as places to divert general aviation and business traffic towards; keeping it away from regional airports and the flow of commercial airliners.

In mid-1967, before the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority was formed, a group of local businessmen, Wesley Gordon, Hal Douglas and Charles Schanlau of the Chamber of Commerce, Joe McFarran a Fayetteville city director and Bill Morton

of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Steering Committee, meet in Dallas with the FAA to see what more could be done for Drake Field. The two main items on their list was an instrument landing system and a control tower. *(Should be Charles Scharlau who was an Arkansas Western Gas executive. - Jake)*

The ILS proved to be impossible. However, the group learned that to qualify for a tower an airport had to log 24,000 flight operations in a year. The Fayetteville delegation was glad to report to the FAA that in 1966 Drake had logged 27,500 operations, 2,500 more than was required.

As a result of that Dallas meeting, Drake was placed on a list of airports qualified to receive towers. However, it would not be until 1973, after much of the drive for a regional airport had died down, that a three story tower was erected beside the Flight Service Building on the west side of the airport.

Springdale pressed on with plans to lengthen and widen their runway making the strip 4,600 by 90 feet. It was noted that when the improvements made it would be able to handle up to 90% of all private and business aircraft then flying.

Another step taken by Springdale to assure their airport's future was their linking it to what they called an "airport-industrial complex." A second industrial park was established next to the airport, the income generated by the sale of lots, Federal and State grants and bond money, would cover the above airport improvements. Businesses locating in the new industrial park would be assured of instant air access by being located next door to the airport.

In July, 1968, by a 2 to 1 vote, Rogers voters approved a \$130,000 bond issue for a series of airport improvements. Earlier, in March, the Rogers city council had voted \$70,000 dollars of city funds to lengthen the airport's runway to 4,400 feet, build hangars and add on to the existing parking apron. It was noted that Rogers had already spent over \$50,000 on their airport.

So it was, that even while the drive to build a regional airport was getting underway, the three main airports in the area were working on improvements that, even if the regional airport was built, would leave them in a better position to handle their local air traffic.

## **Chapter Twelve: Regional Airport Proponents**

"We have a duty to lay our cards out on the table," said Airport Authority chairman Cass Hough when he discussed presenting the upcoming bond issue to the public. "It is only fair to the people in the bi-county area to give them the information so they will be voting from knowledge....We will be in a much stronger position if the people know what we are doing."

Support for the regional airport began with area newspapers. The weakest vote seemed to come from the Lincoln Leader, which with "measured enthusiasm" urged its readers to support the project. Other opinions were more along the lines taken by the Springdale News. "It is evident that we need a regional airport to meet the future and keep pace with progress," they editorialized.

In a September, 1969, editorial, the Northwest Arkansas Times commented: "Such worthy community goals as auditoriums, improved traffic and highway transportation systems, more and better jobs, and a continuing high level of public education depend to a considerable degree upon acquiring such vital ingredients for a prosperous economy as adequate air transport facilities."

In July, 1969, People for the Airport was formed to relieve the Regional Airport Authority of the burden of selling the airport to the people. Clark McClinton and Sam Walton served as co-chairmen of People. Dr. Stanley Applegate, of Springdale, was treasurer. Area chairmen were Cecil Smith, Siloam Springs; Charles Sanders, Springdale; Ron Anderson and Jim Walters, Bentonville; Don Trumbo, Fayetteville; and T.V. Hilt, Rogers.

Among People's first acts was to retain the Leavitt Agency, a Little Rock ad agency, to help in its promotion efforts. "Our interest in situations such as this is for a better Arkansas," responded William D. Leavitt when asked why a Little Rock firm would be taking such an account in Northwest Arkansas.

Over the months that followed, members of People spoke to virtually every civic group in Northwest Arkansas. Their talks centered not so much on the regional airport, but on the region's transportation system. "The reality of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport is at hand," read one such presentation. "We believe we have a most ideal site for serving all of Northwest Arkansas and while the present access routes are the best available, we look forward to improvements throughout the region which will provide

better access.”

Following talks by People’s representatives, civic groups such as the Lincoln Kiwanis Club would vote as being on record in support of the regional airport. In Benton county was the same. Following a talk by McClinton, the Rogers Business and Professional Women’s Club voted as being in support. Also in Benton county, the Republican Committee and Democratic Committee both endorsed the project labeling it a true “non-partisan” issue.

In Washington County, the Washington County Bar Association, League of Women’s Voters and the Republican Central Committee all fought to be among the first to support the airport.

But People was not the only group in support of the regional airport, it was simply the “official” group of the Regional Airport Authority and the best organized. Other groups existed in Northwest Arkansas, with many having ties to People. One such group in Fayetteville was Retired Citizens for the Airport Committee. Ernest Landcaster, later mayor of Fayetteville and a strong proponent of aviation in Northwest Arkansas, headed a group called the Business-Shopping Center Subcommittee of People for the Airport. (*Ernie Lancaster is the correct spelling. The road just north of the runway is named for him. - Jake*)

Across both counties, the local Chambers of Commerce organized a group called “Northwest Arkansas Citizens for Air Future Group.”

Those in support of the regional airport were well organized. In the days before the election they had posters up over both counties and full page ads in the local newspapers. To look at the effort from their side, one could only assume that the regional airport was a done deal.

### **Chapter Thirteen : Regional Airport Opponents**

“Make the proponents of this bill tell you the facts--not the sugar-coated facts,” wrote L.L. Hollaway, of Siloam Springs, in a letter to the editor in the Northwest Arkansas Times. Letter writing became the main way the scattered opponents of the regional airport could get their message across. It was also the only sign of opposition found to the airport in Washington county.

On jet noise, Hollaway noted that it could cause “damaged buildings, interrupted sleep, tv static, jet smog, and the possibilities of a jet plane crashing in your backyard everytime one whines overhead.”

One has to remember that this was 1969. The first 747 had just been rolled out and passenger jet plane crashes, when they occurred, were big front page news. “If a jet pilot has engine trouble,” continued Hollaway’s attack, “or a bomb threat and heads for the nearest jet airport, do you want him over your area.

“Farmers, do you want chicken pile-ups, nervous livestock? Do you want the lead heads popping off the nails in tin roofs from the vibrations? That has happened in jet areas before....

“Act now,” Hollaway closed, “because you can’t stop it once they get it built.”

Washington Country had one group fully opposed to the regional airport; the residents of Tontitown. At an Airport Authority meeting, Spokesman Jerry Hinshaw presented the Authority with a petition bearing the signatures of 231 Tontitown residents asking that the Authority “reconsider and abandon” Tontitown as the site of the regional airport.

Later Hinshaw stated that his presentation of the petition did not mean that Tontitown residents would develop a “militant” attitude towards the project.

Organized opposition didn’t really exist in Benton county, but there were people opposed to the project who distributed colored handbills across the county. In a September editorial, the Springdale News noted that the “only words to the contrary are printed on some cheap handbills.” It went on to blast the handbill’s author for what it called “misinformation” and the fact that the bills were little more than “hate Washington County” literature.

Letters to the editor were popular in Benton County as well and the themes of those letters were the same. C.R. Rocklin’s letter to the Rogers Daily News asked if people wanted to vote yes “for a proposed airport over in Washington County for the sole use

of Frontier Air Lines.”

Rocklin’s letter went on to state that it would cost \$5 million just to build the airport and that then it would operate a deficient that each entity in the Regional Airport Authority would be called upon to pay.

People for the Airport denied that the airport would operate at a deficient neglecting to note that in January, 1969 Burns and McDonnell estimated that the airport would operate at a \$35,000 a year deficit for the first few years of its operation. Based on the existing populations, Washington County would have to pay about 22% of any shortfall in revenues; Fayetteville, 28.5%; Springdale, 16.7%; Benton County, 18.6%; Bentonville, 3.3%; Rogers, 7.1%; and Siloam Springs, 4.3%.

Many people had a problem with the thirty years that the bonds were scheduled to run. In his letter to editor, L.L. Hollaway pointed this out by noting that everyone in Washington and Benton Counties would be paying twenty-seven cents more for each \$10.00 of taxes they now paid until 1999 when the bonds would be retired.

In analyzing the opposition to the regional airport, the Springdale News noted it had four separate phases. First, they said the FAA would not fund the regional airport. Second, that it would cost more for the regional airport than the planners said it would. Third, that jets would kill chickens and have other effects on local agriculture. Forth, they issued the rallying call “Keep the farms for your children!”

As the Northwest Arkansas Times noted, “There has been some coloring of the facts.”

#### **Chapter Fourteen: Selling the Regional Airport**

“I believe we owe it to the people to present all the facts. I’ve done a complete 180 degree turn,” said Airport Authority member Bill Morton. “At first I didn’t see how a regional airport could work. Now I’m convinced.”

In almost everyone’s mind, before the September election, the regional airport already existed. The campaign to sell the regional airport carried a lot of baggage. Ten homes would be destroyed, almost thirty acres of prime agricultural land would be lost forever, people would be displaced, large jets and all their attendant factors would become a staple in the skies over Northwest Arkansas and Tontitown would most likely be changed forever.

So to avoid getting bogged down in that, the people supporting the airport made an effort to repeat over and over what the regional airport would mean for Northwest Arkansas. “I think we will have accomplished our purpose if the members of the public fully understand the need for the airport and what it means to them,” Bill Morton said.

“If we don’t have an airport to handle jet traffic,” Cass Hough warned, “we’re out of business.” He went on to say, “We run the risk of Fort Smith becoming the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport.”

Wes Gordon, manager of the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce, said, “Real industrial development did not begin in the area until we had regular air service....The voters need to know that a vote against the regional airport is a vote for continued air service degeneration.”

“We cannot hope to maintain our position of leadership if we don’t at least meet minimum requirements for today’s air traffic,” said Washington County judge Vol Lester.

“There isn’t any question that this region not only needs, but must have another airport,” Burns and McDonnell’s E.J. Runyan said.

“Air travel has become so basic to business and the professional that lack of appropriate facilities to serve and encourage it would have a depressing effect upon the continued economic growth of the region,” Sam Walton told one group.

People were weighing in with their opinions on the state level as well. “You get the airport and we’ll get the roads for you,” commented Truman Baker, chairman of the Arkansas Highway Commission, to a group of Northwest Arkansas businessmen asking for improvements to Highways 71 and 68.

Other state officials expressing support for the airport were Governor Winthrop Rockefeller, Herbert H. McAdams, chairman of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission and Eddie Holland, executive director of the Arkansas Department of Aeronautics. Suddenly the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport was of “considerable importance” to state development.

The final act of selling, and one which surely everyone noticed, came in the days before the election when regular Wal-Mart ads began to appear in all the newspapers with the “Support the Airport” logo and a message calling on Wal-Mart shoppers to: “Support the airport for a progressive, growing and prosperous Northwest Arkansas.”

“We don’t want a simple majority of the voters to approve this important issue,” said McClinton. “We want all the people of Benton and Washington Counties to know the facts and we hope they support the proposal as much as we do.”

### **Chapter Fifteen: The First Vote**

“We hadn’t thought about losing,” said Clark McClinton, after the September 23, 1969, election. The voters of Washington and Benton Counties had cast their votes, not for or against a regional airport, but for the funding mechanism for that airport. A “no” vote by either county would doom the project.

For a special election the turnout was amazing. Fifty percent of the eligible voters had voted in Benton County and thirty-four percent had voted in Washington County.

By a 2 to 1 margin the regional airport bond passed in Washington County with 8,027 voting for and 3,576 voting against. In Tontitown the vote had been 87 yes and 92 no. The vote was mixed in the rural precincts with the cities of Fayetteville and Springdale giving most of the yes votes cast.

But the shocking news came from Benton County. The yes vote was 4,286. The no vote, 4,733. By 447 votes the airport bond issue had been defeated.

People for the Airport noted that the opposition to the airport in Benton County was “organized” and “highly vocal.” Such opposition was hard to overcome. The damage they had done showed by comparing how the two counties had voted on the issue. The vote in Washington County “shows how progressive the people of Washington County are,” stated Clark McClinton, after the election. As for those in Benton County, they are “to be commended for coming within 447 votes with that kind of opposition.”

Out in west Washington County, where only few boxes had passed on the issue, the defeat of the airport meant it was time to turn back to local issues. “Now that the airport issue is a dead duck, it ought to be obvious that we can turn our eyes towards other obviously needed objectives,” said the Lincoln Leader. It’s suggestion was improvements in Highway 62 between Lincoln and Fayetteville.

But the airport wasn’t dead yet. “The mechanics of the election prevented a true expression of opinion by the majority of the voters,” said Cass Hough, noting that when one looked at the total number of votes cast, the airport issue won by 2,500 votes.

Shortly after the September election, Benton County airport supporters and the Regional Airport Authority appealed to Benton County Judge Sherman Kinyon to call for a new election as “expeditiously as possible” in Benton County on the issue.

The question came up that if Benton County was to be allowed to vote on the issue again, why couldn’t Washington County hold another vote as well. The opinion of Hugh Kincaid, counsel for the Authority, was that Washington County’s vote would be valid for a “reasonable length of time.” How long “reasonable” was, came up for discussion, but no limit on how long a period it entailed was reached. Although six months was a term mentioned more than once.

The question was finally settled when an opinion was issued by Assistant Attorney General Terry D. Pinson that said it was legal for Benton County to hold another vote while Washington County’s vote stood as it had been cast.

Benton County’s second vote was set for November 18.

### **Chapter Sixteen: Benton County Votes Again**

“We voters are now being given a “second chance” to sell ourselves into the slavery of bigger and more oppressive taxes in

order to support a regional airport,” wrote Harold Schultz in a letter to the editor in the Northwest Arkansas Times. That letter, along with others, set the tone for what came to be a short and nasty fight for the hearts, minds and taxes of Benton County voters as the November 18 vote on the Regional Airport bonds drew closer.

“I would like to congratulate the voters of Benton County for their good judgement in defeating the airport bond issue in the September election,” wrote Loy Smith of Farmington, “and hope they will use the same good judgement in the next election... . If we want to do something worthwhile why not raise the county road tax a few mills and repair these deplorable county roads.”

People for the Airport was still in existence, but it did not play a major role in Benton County before the second election. The feeling in Benton County was that People was remote and lacked a local base. For the second election most of the pro-airport campaigning was conducted by the Vote Yes Committee headed up by Tom McNeil. The opposition formed around a group in Rogers and western Benton County called the “Benton County Taxpayers Association.”

Those opposed to the airport came to be called “aginers.” Earl Riley of Springdale objected to that term. “We of Benton County who have been repeatedly called “aginers” because we do not like being taxed into oblivion for the benefit of a few, do not like being slurred by that name. We are NOT against being taxed for things that will benefit ALL of us, such as schools, roads and bridges. But we ARE against this plan for a big airport, which will be of no benefit whatsoever to the vast majority of us voters. Probably not one in five hundred of us would ever use this airport; all the rest of use would get out of it would be a lot of sonic booms and vastly increased air pollution.”

Early in November, airport supporters brought out their big gun. Frank Broyles, University of Arkansas Head Football Coach came out with an open letter to Razorback football fans and spoke before civic groups in Benton County endorsing the regional airport. “I don’t know whether, as Razorback fans,” the letter said in part, “you’ve stopped to realize the tremendous part air travel plays in our athletic program.” The letter went on to imply that the University of Arkansas needed a dependable, all-weather airport in order to continue to successfully recruit top high school athletes.

“We are confident that the overwhelming majority of Benton County voters are bright, serious citizens,” editorialized the Springdale News on the day before the election, “who shoulder their responsibilities like red-blooded Americans and discount the ravings of the radical element.”

It went on to note that “Benton County voters are not only voting for the welfare of their own people, but for the welfare of the entire northwestern part of the state.”

There was a 60% turnout for the special election on the airport bond issues. When the dust settled the final vote was 6,645 against and 4,851 for. The issue had been defeated by almost 1,800 votes. Only 8 precincts in the entire county had supported the airport. In the rural areas, the vote had been an overwhelming “no.”

Cass Hough termed the results “disappointing.” Joe Robinson, who had recently replaced Jim Hurley on the Regional Airport Authority, noted, “In my opinion, direct voter participation on the project in Benton County is dead.” The Springdale News called the vote “a step backward.”

But the Airport wasn’t dead according to Joe Robinson, “I would say the project is far from dead....Even before nightfall, our people, who are used to planning and shouldering the burden of projects such as this, will be formulating ideas.

### **Chapter Seventeen: Washington County Regional Airport Steering Committee**

“We’ve got to start from scratch with any other plans,” said Hugh Kincaid, legal consultant to the Regional Airport Authority, at its December “lame duck” meeting. He suggested that the Authority might turn to a private corporation to build the airport. However, he noted, using a mixture of private and public monies “is a possibility to be studied in detail... especially with revenue bonds.”

No one on the Authority knew what lay in the future. But they did know that Benton County voters had taken that county’s public funds out of the process. Yet there was still a use for Cass Hough and the Benton County members. “We need you,” Joe Robinson told them, “...since we’re going to have to raise some private funds.”

But nothing came of the Regional Airport Authority's efforts to raise private funds to build the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport. Thus it fell to the Chamber of Commerce to once again take the ball.

Early in February 1970, Washington County Chamber of Commerce officials made a formal request to the FAA for funds to study a site around Mount Comfort for a new regional airport.

The new airport would be as basic as possible. It would have a single 150' X 10,000' runway with high intensity lights for its landing system, an instrument landing system would be added later. According to an engineering study by the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission, if aligned along a northeast and southwest axis, its single runway would be sufficient for most wind conditions.

But the Chamber of Commerce's effort was put aside three months later. At the May County Equalization Board meeting, Dr. Stanley Applegate pressed the assembled county officials to once again take up the regional airport question. This time Washington County alone would back the project taking advantage of 75% Federal funding that was available thanks to the latest Federal airport bill.

"We should be in there to get our fair share of the money at an early date when funds become available in July," Applegate told the Board.

Cass Hough, who was in attendance, pronounced the existing Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority dead when he stated that he felt the Authority could no longer act on a project that involved only Washington County.

That opened the door for Hugh Kincaid. He quickly suggested that county judge Vol Lester form a steering committee of the Washington County members of the old Authority (people who already knew what needed to be done) for the project.

Lester liked the idea. "It's not impossible for Washington County to go it alone," he said. "Let's get the ball rolling. If there's money available, now's the time to see how much we can get."

In short order Vol Lester appointed Dr. Joe McFerran, Bill Morton, Dr. John Kane, Joe Robinson, Courtney Crouch and Hugh Kincaid to the new Washington County Regional Airport Steering Committee. Their job was to see what could be done about securing Federal funding for Washington County's Regional Airport.

Regional Airport fever was building in the county again. In September the Fayetteville Board noted that Drake Field would have to do as the area's Air Carrier Airport for about five more years until a replacement would be in place. In the meantime, they applied to the FAA for over \$100,000 to make major repairs to the runways and taxiways and to expand the parking apron. The FAA stated it would be the last funds Drake Field would ever receive for air carrier operations.

Only a few people knew how fast, or how far, the steering committee was taking the regional airport project. Thus there was some shock when over the Christmas holidays Vol Lester announced that on January 26, 1971, there would be a special election in which the voters of Washington County would consider the same two mills they had voted on in September to fund the regional airport.

### **Chapter Eighteen: Selling the Regional Airport, Again Proponents**

To sell the Washington County Regional Airport to the voters, Vol Lester appointed a Special Steering Committee made up of Clark McClinton, Ray Ellis, Hal Douglas and Carl Whillock (who was elected chairman) of Fayetteville, Keith Skelton of Springdale and Loyd Luginbeul of Prairie Grove. He announced that after the election, if the issue passed, he would appoint a Washington County Regional Airport Authority to administer the new airport.

Once again the State Highway Department promised to build the necessary roads should the regional airport be built. A speaker's bureau was established to carry the message of the regional airport to any group wishing to hear it. Carl Whillock's statement set the tone for those talks. "The expenditure of \$1.5 million can easily be matched with increased economic development, bringing new jobs in all sectors of the economy."

In the papers, the Steering Committee began running small informational ads explaining the need for the new airport, how it

would be funded and what it would mean to the citizens of Washington County. As the election neared, the ads grew larger until finally on election day they were full page ads. One listed the names of over 700 “progressive merchants, farmers, professional men, housewives, workers and citizens who wholeheartedly support the airport.”

In a first for this area, radio stations KBRS, KSPR, KKEG and KNWA and television station KGTO-TV all carried a live public forum on the regional airport on January 21.

Some promoters of the airport were not so above board as the Special Committee. One ad paid for by Farrell Conner was headlined: IT CAN HAPPEN HERE!! and cited an airplane crash at Huntington, West Virginia that killed several of the local university’s football team. “Just as in Washington County, replacing the inadequate airport in Huntington, W. Va., had been in the talking stage for months, BUT the people didn’t believe they needed another airport...that the existing airport was sufficient.

“It took that tragic air crash to prove them wrong

“Did you know that such a tragedy could happen right here at Drake Field, which cannot be equipped with proper guidance systems because of the hilly terrain!

“You might not be aboard, but some of your loved ones could be, or some of your friends, or maybe both.

“FOR NO OTHER REASON YOU CANNOT CONSCIENTIOUSLY VOTE AGAINST THIS NEW AIRPORT WHEN LIVES ARE AT STAKE. THINK IT OVER”

The battle carried over into letters to the editor as well. “Drake Field has been a good investment. . . . But we have outgrown Drake Field,” wrote Ray Ellis, who was also the manager of Drake Field.

“I am fully convinced that we must draw the line on government spending somewhere, but I feel like this would be the wrong place,” wrote Tom Lavender. Farther down in his letter, he noted, “if we do not get this airport, in a few years we will be out of an airport or have to spend a lot more for one.”

Gus Ostmeier took some who made outlandish claims to task. “The purpose of a new airport is not to furnish Frank Broyles and the Razorbacks and a few leading citizens who can afford jet trips, with more convenient transportation, as some persons profess to think.” Its purpose was to add to the economy of the area and make it a better place to live, he said.

Finally, echoing Conner, the publisher of the Springdale News, T.C. Sanders, wrote, “Drake Field has served us well, but its day of remaining service as a commercial airport are numbered....I, for one, consider this community to be extremely fortunate to have gone this long without a major tragedy at bowl-like Drake Field.”

“Will we keep pace with transportation developments and maintain ties with the outside world?” asked the editorial writer for the Springdale News. “Or will we close off Washington County to air transportation and be satisfied with erratic and substandard contact with air carriers?”

### **Chapter Nineteen: Selling the Regional Airport, Again Opponents**

“Already we are hearing pessimistic prognoses concerning the Regional Airport vote,” said an early January Northwest Arkansas Times editorial. Although both sides of the issue had only a month in which to mount their campaigns, the opponents of the airport were not about to be outdone by the proponents.

An Ad by the Committee for Sensible Spending gave voice to what many were saying. “The airport is played up as of small moment to tax payers. Two mills are nothing, we are told. Well, two termites are nothing; they and all that follow are deadly.

“This last planning was conceived in secrecy, and during the Christmas holidays at that. Somehow we feel that we should not go along, even if we were able. We should not have to play Santa to flying clubs, runway profiteers, bond dealers and professional promoters.”

The Times noted that “Unsigned pamphlets containing messages opposing the bond issue were distributed in business areas



Saturday. They set out other needs which the unidentified writers said deserved priorities over the airport.”

One such group was the Concerned People of the Tontitown Airport Site. In a quarter-page ad they said:  
“OUR SKY IS QUIET, CLEAR AND BLUE.  
WHAT IS AN AIRPORT GOING TO DO?  
Before we pay for a new airport think about:  
Better School facilities and teacher’s salaries  
New County Government buildings  
Better present roads  
Voting Machines  
Public parks and swimming facilities  
Ambulance Service  
-Things MOST people have a USE for!  
AN AIRPORT WILL BRING:  
NOISE AND AIR POLLUTION  
OUTSIDE INTERESTS  
PAVE GOOD FARMLAND”

In another ad they said: “DEATH OF OUR SWEET LAND. Tontitown people have just so many votes, but when productive land is at stake, everybody’s very life is ultimately in the balance.”

Vernon Singleton’s letter to the editor showed what was on many people’s minds. “Taxes, taxes, taxes,” he wrote. “We will be progressive slaves if we don’t go to the polls and stop this bunch before it’s too late.”

“I hope some people who voted for a Washington County Airport in the last election, have stopped and done some serious thinking about the matter since that time,” Charles Morrow wrote. “If we must vote on new taxes, then let it be for county roads.”

In town they had the same complaints that people out in the country did. “Why should we build it? Why doesn’t the city board put more money into the streets that everybody uses?” asked one unidentified letter writer. “We don’t need the airport, but guess we may get it, just like the industrial park, which was voted out two times.”

“We chicken farmers would like to scrap many of our buildings and build new ones,” wrote Freida E. Morris. “But because of low chicken prices and higher and higher taxes, we will just have to improve what we already have and make do. I believe the present airport could do likewise.”

The best anti-airport ad came from the Committee for Sensible Spending. It Began: “AIRPORT FOR PLAYBOYS: “Hundreds of people in this county cannot get out when it rains because of no bridges. When they can get out, they give their cars and themselves a beating on the rural roads that city people seldom experience. Yet the rural people are asked to saddle themselves for 16 years or more with an expensive airport that is largely for the sake of the playboys.

“If the good Lord’s willing (and the creeks do not rise) we will have to go to the polls again. . . here in the dead of winter, to tell the promoters again what Benton Countians had to tell them twice, that we are not willing to go along with those who would use our hard earned money that is becoming so scarce because of inflation and added taxes, for the sake of runway profiteers, the bond dealers, the flying clubs, and the playboys who want to land. “Let’s get on a horse and ford those creeks Tuesday.”

## **Chapter Twenty: The Second Vote**

“To keep the area as alive and progressive as it has been during the decade of the 1960s, the Times recommends a vote in favor of the airport,” said the Northwest Arkansas Times. The Lincoln Leader, which had been lukewarm in its support of the airport before, found it “the best bargain we are likely to get.”

The people didn’t see it that way. With a healthy voter turnout, the final vote was 6,445 against and 5,470 for. While generally urban wards supported the issue, the rural vote was large and overwhelmingly against the issue. So much so that they carried the day.

“I am deeply disappointed with the defeat of the Washington County Airport proposal,” said Carl Whillock. “Hopefully, in

the next two or three years, the people of Washington County will reconsider this airport problem and will come up with a solution that will satisfy most of the people.” “It has a place in our economy,” said Vol Lester. “We’ll just let it lay dormant until we lose our air service and it soaks in on people what has happened.”

The regional airport idea didn’t go away. In 1973 a committee of Fayetteville and Springdale officials working through their Chambers of Commerce and the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission formed the Fayetteville-Springdale Airport Study Committee to look into the creation of a Northwest Arkansas regional airport.

A \$20,000 Airport Master Planning Grant was obtained and in 1974 the study process was started once again. McClelland Consulting Engineers and McGoodwin, Williams and Yates, Inc. of Fayetteville performed much of the work on the study reporting quarterly on their progress.

In June 1978, the master plan study was presented to Fayetteville, Springdale and the Regional Planning Commission. It concluded that it was not feasible to upgrade Drake Field to handle Boeing 737 and Douglas DC-9 aircraft on a regular basis or to make it suitable for all-weather operations. It listed four sites as “priority sites” where a new airport could be built. They were: Southeast of Farmington, Northeast of Highfill (in Benton County), Southwest of Tontitown, and West of Tontitown (the site selected as best for the regional airport).

It was estimated that the new airport would cost around \$16,564,000. If Fayetteville and Springdale were to go it alone that would mean a 3 and 3/4 mills tax levy would needed to service the bonds that would be sold to finance their part of building the new airport. If Washington County participated, the millage would drop to 2.48. Should Benton County and Washington County both wish to take part, the millage would be 1.35.

Fayetteville and Springdale’s options were:

- 1) A “no action” option. The report added, “If this option is chosen, we believe the studies clearly show that it will be only a matter of time before the question of the construction of a regional airport will arise again.”
- 2) File an application with the FAA for the full development of the site chosen. That would lead to the completion of an Environmental Impact Statement by the FAA after the successful outcome of a local bond election.
- 3) File an application with the FAA for Federal assistance in the completion of an Environmental Impact Statement with local citizen participation. If the outcome of the Statement is favorable then other steps towards the completion of the airport could be taken.

As one person associated with the project told this reporter; “Nothing ever came of it.”

### **Conclusion**

The Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport was never built. Aviation in Northwest Arkansas continued to grow with other airports in the area developing services of their own, but Drake Field remained as the area’s only air carrier airport.

Without a regional airport our industries and commerce did not wither and die as some people had predicted it would. In many ways that is as much a statement of the abilities of our businessmen as it is to the power of our having a large market that commands attention.

In 1972, Scheduled Skyways, based at Drake Field, began an expansion that would make it one of the largest commuter airlines in the United States. In 1985, it merged with Air Midwest. Commuter/feeder airlines had been around for sometime, but nobody foresaw the explosion of service they would be about. With the deregulation of the airline industry, Drake Field began to see a parade of new commuter airlines moving through its facilities. That parade began with Royal American Airlines in late 1980, and was followed by Metroflight/American Eagle Airlines (which replaced Frontier Airlines when it pulled out) in 1982. Sunbelt Airlines, Atlantic Southeast Airlines, Republic Express/Northwest AirlinK, U.S. Air Express and finally Trans-World Express completed the process. It was to these commuter airlines that Drake Field owed its continuing existence.

In 1973, responding to the nudge given them in 1967, the FAA placed a three-story control tower at Drake Field. A few years later, it was replaced with a nine-story one on the east side of the field. After the late-1970s regional airport was behind it, Fayetteville built the current terminal at Drake Field in 1980. It became an act on Fayetteville’s part to show that it considered the regional airport question as settled. As far as Fayetteville was concerned, Drake Field was the area’s regional airport.

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