

Plane crash claims six Barbershoppers in 1969

Remembering The Hi-Landers

It was 43 years ago that the Society suffered a tragic loss. Six popular Society members died in a plane crash in Colorado on their way to a show.



The passengers included The **Hi-Landers** Quartet – then-current (1968) Central States District Quartet Champions - **Karl Penner** (T), **Wayne Hood** (L), **Hugh Hohnstein** (br), **Russ Thompson** (Bs). Along for the ride were two district officials, **Daryl Stafford** (District Vice President) and **Lawrence Detwiler** (Denver chapter president).

The Accident

It was Saturday, March 22, 1969. Karl Penner, a former Air Force pilot and a six-year veteran pilot for **Frontier Airlines**, was at the controls of a rented twin-engine Cessna 310i. They took off around 2pm and flew IFR* to Alamosa and to Durango. Controllers lost contact about 2:40.

An intensive ground and aerial search began. The search included 21 planes including a large T-29 from Peterson Field in Colorado Springs. The **Rocky Mountain Rescue Group** search teams also included fellow

*VFR = visual flight rules / IFR = instrument flight rules

Lost in the Accident

Lawrence Detwiler (Denver chapter president) age 38
Fuller Brush Company - Salesman

Hugh Hohnstein (Bari) age 48
Department of Rehabilitation,
State of Colorado

R. Wayne Hood (Lead) age 39
Dow Chemical Co,
Instrument Repairman

Karl H. Penner (Tenor) age 37
Frontier Airlines - Pilot

Daryl L. Stafford (District VP) age 50
Fitzsimons Hospital
Repair and Maintenance Estimator

Russell E. Thompson (Bass) age 37
Metropolitan State College
Building Coordinator

Frontier pilots and even some barbershoppers. The search was temporally suspended at noon on Sunday due to heavy snow and high winds.

The wreckage was finally found a week later, Friday March 28th up at the 13,000 foot level above the timberline of the southwest side of Spanish Peak in southern Colorado around Walsenberg. The plane drove straight into a mountain just to the south of La Veta pass. It was un-survivable. It was determined they missed clearing the peak by only 20 feet. Weather and visibility was a factor.

Karl logged many hours in the air flying to several quartet shows each year.



The crash site 20 feet from the summit

He had flown this route many times during his career.

The official FAA report determined the cause was “*improper IFR operation*” or pilot error. However several aviators who studied the accident questioned that finding and suspected it was actually a faulty instrument. Friend and retired Frontier pilot, **Ron Gallop** of Kansas City has been investigating this



Ron Gallop with a Cessna 310i the same type of plane Karl was flying

accident and has made a life-long obsession. He refuses to believe that it was Karl's error; “*He was one of the best instrumental pilots I've known.*”

The area of the crash is so remote and inaccessible, the plane (what little there was left) was never recovered.

Much of the wreckage is still there 43-years later.



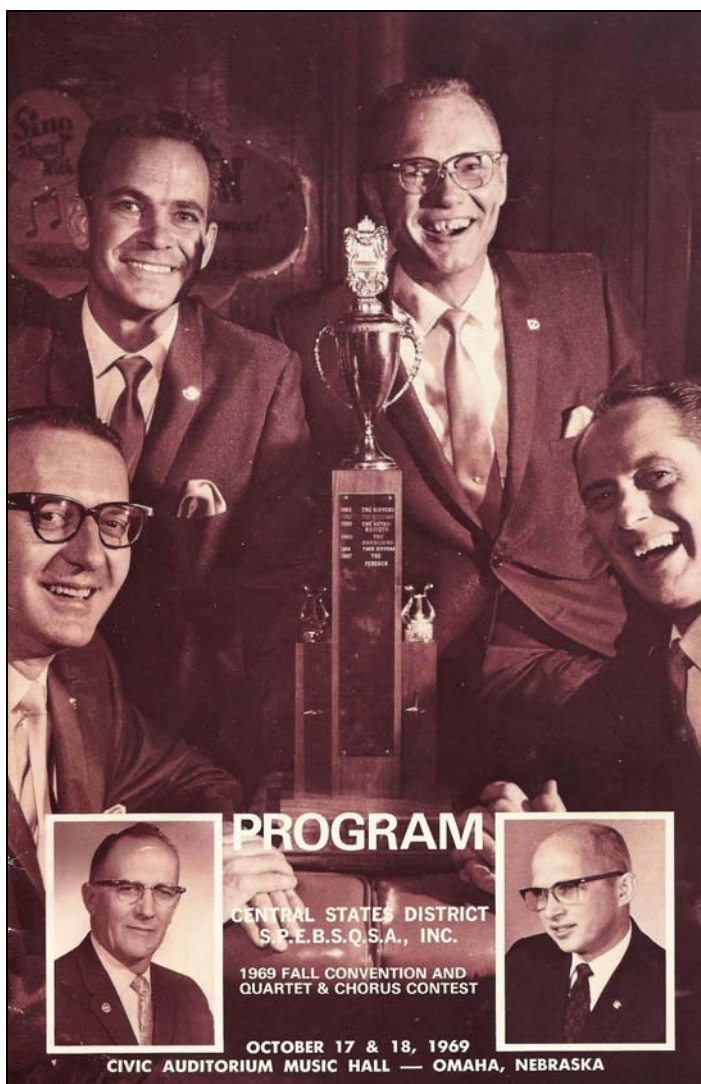
Tributes

Private family services were held on April 2nd and a joint memorial service was held later that day. It was attended by many Central States district barbershoppers including International President **Bob Gall**, Executive Director **Barrie Best** and CSD President **Merrill Aitchison**.

Barbershoppers **Al** and **Shirley Potts** were very close personal friends of the Hi-Landers. In fact, **Al** was to have been onboard the flight if Larry had not been able to make the trip.

Shirley recalls “*Al was one of the men who helped in the ground search. He came back with pneumonia. That day it felt like we lost six close family members.*” (Ed - We are sad to report that **Al Potts** passed away April 9th at the age of 80).

The quartet was heading for Durango to perform for their charter show as representatives of the district. The quartet was well known for performing for many events and gave generously of their time. Their repertoire included songs that featured individual members and were favorites of their fans with signature songs, such as *Sunrise, Sunset* (Russ), *Scotch and Soda* (Wayne) and *When Your Old Wedding Ring was New* (Karl).



They were only the second Rocky Mountain area quartet to win the Central States District contests (The Rocky Mountain District wouldn't be formed for another decade).

It was a major loss for the Society. Such an accident hasn't happened before or since.



The memorial program stated: *Remembered for their friendship, inspiration, and dedication to Keep America Singing.*

I Remember the Hi-Landers

by Dan Bowser – Merry Mugs / Kansas City

In competitions the Hi-Landers were always several steps ahead of my four-some, the **Merry Mugs**, but the closeness of our friendship wasn't affected by the gap in contest scores. They were just **great** guys to be around, and they'd do **anything** to make others happy.

Illustration: The Merry Mugs had a date on the Cheyenne, WY show. We flew from Kansas City to Denver, had a short layover there and in walks **Karl Penner**, but not in his Frontier pilot uniform. When queried Karl said, "*Your flight has been cancelled due to weather. I'm here to drive you to Cheyenne*" which he did, spent the night there and made arrangements for us to fly home the next day.

When the Highlanders became district champs and the Mugs came in 2nd, our quartet created a "*trophy*" for them out of highly polished copper plumbing, twisted in **Rube Goldberg** fashion complete with faucet, and with an appropriate gag nameplate announcing the Highlanders as winners of the "*Brassy Pipes*" award. They loved the gag so much they had three duplicates made so they'd each have one.

We are so thankful to our Society for the creation of friendships that last forever and surpass such untimely losses.

