

INTERVIEW WITH KEITH KAHLE

November 18, 1980

(This interview was discovered in a box of Central Airlines memorabilia sent to Jake Lamkins on April 17, 2024 by Carolyn Boller in Denver. It appears to be a rough draft transcribed from an audio tape and the author/interviewer is not identified. The 38 page manuscript was scanned with Microsoft Office Document Imaging to convert it to a digital file. Then it was edited and annotated (in parentheses) by Jake Lamkins into the present format.)

The Dallas-Ft Worth Terminal Building and I'm interviewing Keith Kahle. It's November 18, 1980. Mr. Kahle was the founder and first president of Central Airlines and was associated with that airline from its very paper beginnings in 1942 until 1962 and he has been affiliated with Frontier as a stockholder and interested aviation enthusiast ever since.

(Keith was President until January 1964 and terminated at Central Airlines on December 7, 1964 per his lawsuit posted at <https://casetext.com/case/central-airlines-inc-v-kahle>)

Q.

Keith, you're now associated with whom?

A. With Bought Corporation (BOUGHT) Corporation, which is a subsidiary of Bought.

Q. And are you still in the people moving areas of it?

A. Well, our main function is a project funded by the Congress, research and development, to explore the application of advanced technologies to fracture ice in the real world on rail or a guide way - not only fracture it but assemble it and dispose of it through some kind of a combination yet to be determined, of laser beams, ultrasonic sound and microwave and the prime contractor of that is Notre Dame University and Bought Corporation is a subcontractor, this is funded by the Congress of the United States, it's a five year program and we're in the second year of \$5,000,000.

Q. What is your title with that enterprise.

A. I hate the word consultant, but it's a consultant to the senior vice president.

Q. Do you spend quite a bit of time in Washington, DC in connection with this?

A. At certain times of the year, I do, and I have other functions out there but they aren't related to anything we're talking about here.

Q. All right. Keith, I'd like to get started on your beginnings with aviation. From what I've gathered in going through files and material that came from the aviation museum down in Oklahoma City, that you made major contributions to in the way of your scrapbooks over the years. It said that you graduated from Iowa State University in engineering in 1932. Was your home Iowa, initially?

A. No, my home was in Oklahoma City. Course we lived at Norman and Drumright and Oklahoma City and in Bethany but the base command was Okie and at that time when I went to Iowa State we were living at Oklahoma City.

Q. Your major was engineering, and yet when you got out of University you seemed to gravitate to aviation and to writing about aviation. What got you into journalism?

A. Well, my dad wanted me to go to Iowa State and become a great engineer, bless his heart, and I had no inclination to be in engineering, in fact it took me five years to complete a four year engineering course, and - but I wanted to be in aviation and if I couldn't do that, why, I wanted to be a writer, a newspaperman. Turned out why I was never an engineer, although I use a little bit of it now. But I'm no engineer.

Q. One of the first things of record I've been able to find on your beginnings with aviation, was the forming in 1938 of an operation, a paper carrier called Trans Southern Airlines.

A. That's right.

Q. And it was a plan to fly from Amarillo, Texas to Memphis over points in Oklahoma and Arkansas and a Gerry Sass, S-A-S-S, was president.

A. Yeah, a real fine man.

Q. And you and a fellow named Bill Lewis-

A. Yeah, he was a very well known attorney and he was very active in the Air Reserve and just a real top hand. In that effort, why, we got beat.

Q. Well, Sass sold out the year following the formation of that company to a F. C. Hall, H-A-L-L, who was an oil man in Oklahoma City -

A. Yes, he was Wiley Post's backer.

Q. He backed Wiley Post on the world flights. And I think his daughter was named Winnie Mae- -

A. That's right.

Q. And married a fellow named Leslie Fain, who was also affiliated with that company.

A. Yeah, yes, uhuh.

Q. At that time there was a lot of the oil money that was interested in the expansion of aviation as Hall was in the Wiley Post efforts. What kept that Trans Southern application from becoming a reality?

A. Well, we went to war and we just got our ass beat.

Q. Who beat you? The operation wasn't flown by anyone.

A. No, we couldn't get a certificate and - -

Q. Braniff got part of it out of Amarillo I understand - to Oklahoma City.

A. Yeah, and I think Delta or Southern, got some of it over on the eastern end, but the lesson there to me was that you never go to Washington in this business with only merit on your side. Merit, alone, won't win, and politics alone won't win. But you combine the two and you have a 40-60 chance of winning up there and I kinda think that holds true today.

Q. Well, the CAB had just gotten started in 1938, you were one of the first applicants following the formation of the CAB.

A. Yeah.

Q. Was it your idea, this route?

A. Oh, yeah, sure.

Q. You did the ground work.

A. Oh, yeah. We had a good exhibit. We had a real good exhibit.

Q. Well, the hearings were in 1938. When did you start working on this plan? A year or two earlier?

A. Yeah, I don't remember exactly, I mean, Gerry Sass was a good friend of mine and we started working on it when I was the aviation editor of the old Oklahoma City News, up there, a good paper. Someplace in there.

Q. You were writing about general aviation in the main?

A. Yes, uhuh, yeah, the whole thing.

Q. Were you operating your Kahle Aircraft Service?

A. No, no, I hadn't started my flying school then.

Q. You hadn't gotten into that yet.

A. No.

Q. Okay, so that one didn't come to pass. Then a few years later you started up a southwest feeder airline, also Oklahoma City based, with a Thomas Hardin, as president. And you had a plan to serve 60 points with regular service and then an ambitious additional 240 points with a mail pickup using a grab from the air with the mail strung between two poles.

A. Yes, it was the same--the mail grab-up was one that Dick DuPont was operating in the east successfully- and-

Q. That was Allegheny's first beginnings

A. That's right, yes. And I became highly enamored with Dick's - with that pickup gadget they had on an extension of line and I organized Southwest Airlines and interested financially was this I. W. Burnham, a brokerage house in New York and then this Tom Hardin was General Tom Hardin, in my view, the infamous general who was General of the Hump Run during World War II and he came to town, to Oklahoma City, had an office in the Ramsey Tower and for some reason we didn't hit it off. I had worked a number of the cities involved and I feel like I had a - some good communication with them, and with Senator Elmer Thomas and a few people and to make a long story short, why, one night he attempted to just move everything out of the office, everything, just move - there at Oklahoma City, and the night watchman of the Ramsey Tower, called me at home and woke me up and he told me what was going on and I couldn't believe it, but I think that was on a Saturday night, I'm not sure, so anyway, why, I go down and sure enough, he's moving out and I called I think it was Bob Shelton, who was the District Attorney up there, I think I called him and Stanley Rogers the Sheriff, or somebody, but anyway we stopped the great Tom Hardin at the airport and then the war came along.

Q. What could he have hoped to have done with this material he was taking out of the office?

A. I think he was - forget now where in the world he was going to move it to-

Q. He still had this plan to start this air service as Southwest?

A. Yes, yes, without me. And I forget now as to where they were going to move that to, but anyway, that game plan ended, Oklahoma didn't work and frankly, we busted his ass on it.

Q. Did World War II break that up?

A. Yes,

Q. They put everything on the back burner, didn't they?

A. Yeah, uhuh, it faded away and dissipated.

Q. So there was a moratorium on any new carriers or routes at that time.

A. Well, I don't remember, I don't remember if there was any moratorium but airplanes and engines and spare parts and gasoline were in short supply.

Q. The next item I had was that in 1944, the spring of 1944, you incorporated Central Airlines as a name and filed for ten routes in June and you did inaugurate a non-scheduled service between Oklahoma City, Lawton, Duncan in June of 1944,

A. - extensive line -

Q. Using a five place Stinson Lion and you were flying charters as well as this non-sched intrastate.

A. Yeah.

Q. And you were getting all of \$9.30 on a one-way fare for that thing

A. I've forgotten the fare, yeah. We had an awful time keeping that airplane in the air on account of spare parts.

Q. Because of the war?

A. Yean, uhuh, and that was basically financed by Guy Marchant, a very fine -

Q. He spells that M-A-R-C-H-A-N-T?

A. Yeah, and Guy was in the oil field, oil tank construction company, National Tank Company, I think it was called, Tulsa, Oklahoma and he and one other gent organized that company, very successful and Guy was involved in that and his son, Bill, was the pilot.

Q. You were running a flying school at that time in Okiahoma City?

A. That's right, yeah.

Q. Were you a pilot yourself, or were you at that time?

A. No.

Q. Had you learned to fly?

A. Oh, I guess I had 30 to 40 hours but I never did get a license.

Q. You had an airplane that you made the most of this matter of stuttering, called it the K-K-Katie or something like that? You had the name on the side of!

A. Yeah, on the nose of all the airplanes on the flight-crew was the ones -

Q. But you didn't pilot that yourself too much?

A. No, no, no. I didn't have time, I was hustling students. There was a bar of music and notes of a song, K-K-K-Katie, and it got a lot of comment.

Q. I imagine. This column you were writing for the two newspapers during the War, were you interested in the war efforts going on in the Oklahoma area or was it mostly general flying, general aviation that you were interested in.

A. General aviation. You see, I used every angle I could think of to be accepted in the Air Force or as a Naval aviator and none of them would take me, I can remember it now, on account of my speech. We almost had something worked out down at New Orleans, with Lieutenant Commander Danny Turner who was the former aviation editor of the Daily Oklahoman, then he went to Orleans and he was in that branch, he almost got me through, until some son of a bitch, who down on that one line, the application, any physical defects, so I had to put in there at that time that I stuttered, but I almost became a Naval aviator, except they wouldn't have me. So anyway, I never did make that.

Q. Shortly after that, the beginning of that non-scheduled schedule you were running between Oklahoma City and Lawton-Duncan, in '42, you started on your four years of efforts of putting together an application for Central Airlines to serve a multitude of points in Oklahoma, southern Kansas and northern Texas. You worked on that four years, putting all that paper together, you had three volumes of exhibits, weighed close to 30 pounds, a couple thousand pages of testimony, and fact finding.

A. That's right.

Q. How did you put together an exhibit of 2,000 pages? Did you travel around the area you proposed serving to pick up information?

A. Oh, I just devoted every spare minute that I could over that period of time because, it sounds, it doesn't sound corny, but because I was completely saturated with the, and still am to this hour, that these smaller communities from a business and social standpoint were entitled to the benefits of an airplane.

Q. Were they receptive to your plan?

A. Yeah, oh, yeah. And then I would - of course that effort needed some money and just briefly, I approached Bob Kerr, who was...

Q. He was governor at that time?

A. No, this was before he was governor and I remember talk--he was in- had Kerr McGee Oil Company and very successful and we, Bob and I got along great and I never will forget it, in front of the Dallas Exchange building down there on, guess it's on Rail Street or -- anyway, I asked him one summer if he would be interested and he said he would if he didn't run for governor and he ran for governor and shortly after that, a very fine gentleman up there by the name of Judge Murrion, federal judge, Murrion, I had a talk with him at his invitation, he had heard about me and we had a long talk at his office one day and I told him what I wanted to do and he ended up, not then but over a period of several weeks, he introduced me to this Guy Marchant and Guy had great patience, because I was on a very small salary I forget now, very small salary, just could barely get by.

Q. Kind of a retainer fee?

A. No, no, a salary and I started building this exhibit. And God, the air gets pretty short, if you're financing some guy over there that wants to put the stuff together for an airline regarding economic data, and you're a rough - tough people, oil field workers, that builds tanks and you're making money out of that, you see somebody spending time on paper, this became rather a rough time, but anyway, he financed it and we go through a hearing, the Oklahoma-Texas case and they took at Ft Worth and I never will forget - walked into the lobby of the hotel on a Sunday, the hearing started on a Monday and Tom Wrenn was the examiner

Q. That's W-R-E-N-N?

A. Yeah, he was later a chief examiner of the CAB whose boy Tex is up here now and he asked me, I never will forget it, why in the hell do you want to be in the airline business and I said I want to serve the public. And he looked right at me and said, that's a good answer. There were 42 as I recall, in that case, and to make a long story short, Earl McConn, who won the south of Ft Worth - Dallas, and the north of Dallas, but that, I forget when that decision came out and ? but when that was issue the only airline in the country that was in black ink was Mr. C.R and Mr. Rickenbacker of Eastern and it was just impossible to raise any money - we had this certificate, we had this certificate and Andy Anderson from up in Des Moines, had Midwest, I think he called it Midwest Airlines, after a couple years we both got a letter from the CAB, either get your airline going or toss in the certificate and to make a long story short, the two friends of mine that were with me in my flight school, F. Curt Johnson (*Believe this is Kirk Johnson*) in Ft Worth and Dean Gill of Oklahoma City, they said in substance, not in substance but - if you can get Mr. Marchant and I've forgotten the details but to agree to sell out for roughly 50% of what he's got in it, and that's one, and number two if you'll start with a Beech Bonanza, we'll put you in the air. And I spent all one night talking with Guy, who was not able financially to put a million dollars in something like this and he was very, very cooperative, I never will forget that night and so the deal was made and then I had a - we notified the Board of that, the CAB, then I had to get the rules, the FAA rules changed, to start to fly a US certificated scheduled airline with a single engine airplane.

Q. You were ahead of Midwest which was trying to operate up there?

A. Yes.

Q. Also with single engine airplanes.

A. Yes, Andy, God, we used to talk once a week at length-at home.

Q. He was trying to operate in the Dakotas and Nebraska, Kansas

A. Yeah, and I've forgotten the details of that, but I know that I went to Washington and in 55 days, which is a non-stop record, I got those rules changed so that we could fly a single engine airplane on a VFR situation as a US certificated airline and carry passengers, property and mail.

Q. Keith, you mentioned that Guy Marchant wasn't financially able to start the airline when you got your certificate November of 46.

A. You've got to keep in mind the economic situation...

Q. But he was a millionaire--

A. Yes, but he had, Guy had some difficulties, financially and then also it took one hell of a man to go into the airline business when only two airlines were in the black. I mean, you know -

Q. Why didn't you ever go public with a stock sale, all of your deals were kind of close held stock deals, just a half dozen people would hold the stock

A. Yes, well, not until we got going could I find any body that wanted to sell or buy some stock.

Q. How about Oklahoma? like your earlier sponsor, when you were getting started back in the '30s, Hall was a very wealthy man - Phillips Petroleum up there at Bartlesville would have had an interest, Continental Oil over at Ponca City would have had an interest, why didn't they get behind this aviation stuff, they were behind aviation in other areas?

A. Well, I can assure you they had a chance. But I was unable to interest them in it.

Q. I see.

A. We did do this, though, we did have some kind of a package of common stock and I think an option to buy some more stock or something that we sold, whatever the law was you could only invite, I don't remember what it was, but anyway we sold this stock, we invited a handpick of the people, Republicans and Democrats, and leaders, and we selected these people in even to hear the story at Ada and Enid, and in Borger, and frankly I've forgotten the details but in each of these cities, from that group, would have a man on the Board of Directors and at Ada it was the Buick dealer, and I was trying to think of his name the other day and up at Enid it was I think Roy Pratt and then from Borger a very fine gentleman by the name of Fritz Thompson and these people served on the Board for years.

Q. About the time that the CAB came to its decision, in 1946, there was a railroad strike that affected the Oklahoma area and you got a contract to fly the mail, the first time you got a mail contract to fly to places like Enid and Woodward and Guyman and Kingfisher and you got all of \$166 to carry 500 pounds of mail between those points.

A. Not Kingfisher.

Q. Not Kingfisher?

A. No.

Q. Okay. You were using a twin engine airplane at that time. Was that a Beech 18 to carry the mail-

A. No, you're talking about - before we got in the air under our certificate

Q That's correct.

A. Oh, a twin Cessna, then.

Q. Twin Cessna.

A. Yeah, yeah, I'd forgotten about that, yeah.

Q. Flew that just for a little while during the strike.

A. Yeah, uhuh.

Q. When the Marchants sold out their interests to Fran Kirk Johnson-

A. Fran Kirk Johnson, yeah,

Q. He was normally from Ft Worth-

A. Yeah, uhuh and Dean Gill.

Q. What was Gill?

A. Oil man, too, and Dean and Fran in their younger days played a lot of polo together and Dean hunted in Oklahoma City and he took it up with Kirk Johnson.

Q. You got your certificate from the CAB out of the Texas Oklahoma case in November of '46 and you got a three year certificate and here it is '49, the summer of '49 and you still weren't flying anything. Wasn't there pressure coming from the CAB to get -

A. Oh, this is the thing I'm saying, then we got the letter from the CAB saying get your airline in the air or stop flying or give the certificate back

Q. I see.

A. And that's when Dean Gill and Fran Johnson wanted to talk with Guy Marchant and I was running my flying school at that time.

Q. Yeah.

A. Oh, gosh, yeah, been all over, not all over, but we'd made many a call over the state to get it financed - over at Muskogee, we were down at Muskogee there was a gent down there and in Lawton, we even talked to Mr. Earl Halliburton about it a couple times and we never could get it to going, I mean we never could get the money.

Q. Well, Marchants, the father-son team, sold out in June of '49, to the group down in Texas, Ft Worth, Texas, Johnson heading up the group-

A. And Dean Gill, this just wasn't Johnson, this was Johnson and Dean Gill, together

Q. I see, they were both in it pretty strong together.

A. Oh, yeah, they took it over.

Q. Well, this was just during the summer and you had to get CAB authority to fly a single engine aircraft against your proposal of your certificate of twin engine aircraft. What was the response of the CAB when you went back there with a four place Beech Bonanza concept, did they laugh at you? Were they very receptive to it, or did you really have to fight that one through in the summer? You had only two months to get the job done-

A. I'm not dodging it, I just don't remember. I think Earl ? Roth was - what ever his title was then, I think he was receptive. As I recall Earl was one of the chief staffs at that time and he was receptive.

Q. That's R-O-T-H, Roth?

A. Yeah, he's with United Airlines, or maybe he's retired. by this time, and I don't remember frankly, any big hassle, I just -

Q. They just wanted to see you get started.

A. Yeah, uhuh, I don't think anybody was making any fun of us. And Andy I think up in Iowa, I think he was getting one about the same time, and Bob Kerr was as I recall he was Senator at that time and he assisted, so did Elmer Thomas and -

Q. Josh Lee was in on it?

A. I don't think he was on the Board at that time.

Q. I see. He was from Oklahoma, wasn't he?

A. Oh, yeah, I've known Josh, I knew Josh when he was speaking in the Chatauqua circuit when I was a young kid at Norman, Oklahoma...Josh and my Dad were acquainted.

Q. Why did the general office get moved from Oklahoma City, which was the pivot point for the system down to the far end at Ft Worth?

A. I couldn't get financing at Oklahoma City so we moved it where we could get financing.

Q. But Johnson wouldnt finance it if it was going to be an Oklahoma City based airline? He moved everything in a month, he moved down there.

A. Yeah, I think he wanted down there. It was no big deal. Of course the very able Stanley Draper of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, he was helpful, very active, Stanley was, and Jack Hall, so many people were in it. And they were unhappy, but they never failed to support us, at the CAB.

Q. Okay, then you moved down there and on September 15, 1949, you started your first scheduled operation out of Meacham Field at Ft Worth, it was a small operation, at the time you had about 80 employees and about a third of them were pilots and - how did you happen to decide on the single engine Beech as against other aircraft?

A. That was the only thing I could get financed.

Q. I see, that's the only thing that was available.

A. Well, no, that was the only thing I could get financed. We knew that they at the time, and so did Fran and Dean, that this would not work and would not serve the public, and they knew that, but the game plan was to get started. And involved in this, in the financing, was Mr. Harding, the Chairman of the Board of the Ft Worth National Bank at Ft Worth and -

Q. Do you remember Harding's first name? You may recall it later.

A. And his son Bob Harding flew in the war, had a very outstanding combat record so Bob came in as vice president of operations and the bank furnished the money and of course Fran and Dean signed the note and I think I signed one or two of the early notes, although I was, if anything had happened they knew I couldn't have paid it, I think we borrowed about a million dollars to start with, something like that.

Q. Well, a Beechcraft Bonanza, which is a four-place airplane, one pilot and three passengers, as I understand it, had a 600 pound payload which would be -

A. I've forgotten.

Q. Just four passengers, if you got, or the pilot and three passengers, you didn't have any room for anything else.

A. You're right. Yeah, that was the only way we could get started on it.

Q. How did you happen to pick the name Central over any possible other names, you had Southern worked into other names that you used previously.

A. Well, that's odd. When Guy Marchant was making up his mind as to whether he wanted to go through this

situation, why, the war was on and his attorney in Oklahoma City and my friend and his friend, an attorney was named Luther Bohannon and he was attached in the Air Force, a Major, or maybe it was Lt Colonel and he was stationed at Colorado Springs in Intelligence. And he wanted and Guy wanted Bo (*Not sure who this is - not mentioned elsewhere in the interview. It might be a typo and refer to Bob Harding.*) to give us his opinion on this, so Guy Marchant, Guy and I drove from Oklahoma City up to Colorado Springs and about Lamar we ran into a hell of a snowstorm and we, I said Colorado Springs, I meant Denver But anyway, we had a half the night we had a meeting in the Brown Palace Hotel up there and Bo thought this had a future and we could make some money and we all had a couple drinks and somebody brought up what shall we name it and Guy turned to Bo and said Bo, what do you think and he said, well, it's the center part of the United States, why don't we just call it Central Airlines, so we all shook hands and that was it.

Q. Huh, it was that easy-

A. And Bo now is a Federal Judge in Oklahoma City. - very outstanding judge.

Q. When you started your operation in that September 15th date, 1949, you only had one station and that was at Dallas where you had your own man on the ground, in all the other places you either had-

A. Fixed base operators

Q. Fixed base operators or Mid-Continent or Continental or TWA doing the work for you and the fixed base operators which I understand it, were getting about \$150 a month plus 10% commission on whatever was sold.

A. I've forgotten that, right, yeah.

Q. How long did that kind of an operation work?

A. Did you say how long or how -

Q. Yeah, a year, did you run it that way?

A. I don't remember. Generally, from an operation standpoint all of these guys could understand what you mean about safety and warming up a piston plane and putting the blocks under it and if we had any airplane sickness, these guys either were A & Es or they had A & Es. In regard to the paper work, they were pretty sloppy, they just weren't dishonest or lazy, they just were sloppy and in regard to marketing, they weren't worth a damn. I mean, major marketing, then and now, and I don't mean that in any criticism at all because those guys were absolutely wonderful in regard to handling the passenger at his airport. And they knew everybody in town. What was the name, Ada Roll?, I think of him, he was just a guy to love, I mean he's just a hell of a nice guy, wife and all that, you know, and from the operations standpoint and from the passenger standpoint at the airport, but you couldn't get them to make a phone call or sales pitch and so we had to move on.

Q. Did you have teletypes linking your stations at that time, initially?

A. No

Q. What did you depend on, phone calls?

A. Yeah, we couldn't afford teletypes, yeah, that came -

Q. Your inaugural service out of Meacham Field just got as far as Love Field and it was low ceilings, weather?

A. Yeah. We landed at Love Field non-stop from Meacham Field.

Q. What were you flying, two or three aircraft on that effort?

A. No, I think we had 11 airplanes and I think we had every one in the air.

Q. They were all flying?

A. Yeah.

Q. And they all got grounded at Love Field?

A. Oh, yeah, George Adaway was on it and Josh Lee was on the Board at that time and we had the Assistant Post Master General and the mayors and - I can assure you we had the right people. Yeah.

Q. What did you do, just hang around Love Field terminal?

A. Well, we went into the terminal and it was a big room and we just had a party and someplace I've got some pictures of that and the dignitaries -

END OF SIDE 1.

Flip side of an interview that we started with Keith Kahle, the founder and first president of Central Airlines, we were talking Keith on the other side as we finished, that you were stuck at Love Field on the inauguration of Central's service with single engine four place Beech Bonanza aircraft and that you had the whole fleet of Beechcraft, 11 of them, all flying at the same time with VIPS on board, all of whom were grounded with you there at Love Field. What happened to the plans of the Adas and Enids for-

A. Well, we had weather pretty much over all of Oklahoma. I think that we weathered in the next day, but the following day I think we went ahead with our normal flights, We lost some of our VIPs.

Q. You couldn't fly an instrument or night operation at that time- visual flight rules.

A. That's right, that's right.

Q. You didn't have teletypes at the stations initially, you depended on the radio, or on the telephone-

A. That's right, and radio.

Q. You had ground to air radio transmission with the stations-

A. Yeah,

Q. So you did have radio installed-

A. Oh, yeah, uhuh.

Q. Reservations, did you have a reservations system?

A. Yeah, and that was by phone.

Q. And your reservations were where, Meacham Field?

A. Yeah, uhuh.

Q. Then on the next day, the 16th of September, you continued with your inaugural services, elsewhere?

A. The next day, I think, I don't remember when it was.

Q. You continued on-

A. Oh, yeah, sure, oh, yeah.

Q. Now, you've always been a very keen guy on generating as much free publicity as you could for Central Airlines. Of course, you have a newspaper background and appreciate what the newspapers and radio (at that time there was no television,) could do for you. Did you get good cooperation from the media on your news releases?

A. Oh, yeah.

Q. You'd run them out a lot of releases-?

A. Oh, yeah, we didn't have any money to buy any advertising.

Q. Did you write those releases yourself, mainly?

A. Well, when I was starting out I did, because I didn't have anybody else

Q. Nobody else checked out on it.

A. I forget when we first hired our first PR guy.

Q. It was soon obvious that with a 600 pound payload you weren't going to carry much. You either carried two or three passengers or you carried mail, but you couldn't carry a full load of each. When did you start, seriously start considering the switchover from the single engine to the DC-3?

A. I don't remember the exact date but I imagine the end of the first month. As I mentioned earlier, Fran and Dean and the bank knew that the Beech was simply an interim airplane and at the end of six months it was just obvious that we couldn't take care of our passengers and they resented, in fact Phillips Petroleum Company wouldn't allow their people to fly on us.

Q. Were they receptive then to putting more money into this to get decent service?

A. Oh, yeah.

Q. Before that they were adamant to that they wanted a single engine-

A. The word adamant isn't right - it was cautious. You've got to keep in mind a lot of carriers weren't ready.

Q. I see. Okay. You started your first DC-3 service a year later in November, 1950.

A. Whenever it was-

Q. And you had it pretty well system wide with 21 passenger DC-3s a year later in '51. In '50 of course the Korean War started. The area that you were serving there in Oklahoma, Texas and other points had a lot of military bases, Air Force Bases. You immediately started capitalizing on moving military in connection with the Korean War. Also about this time in '51 or '52, you ended up with a small fleet of C-46s, that you used to move CAM movements.

A. That's right.

Q. Civilian Air-Military. And this was separate, it was over here in San Antonio, is that correct?

A. Yes, uhuh, and we moved, we didn't go over the water, in any of those, I mean over the Pacific or Atlantic. They'd keep running pretty heavy between bases.

Q. These were all charter operations.

A. Yean, from the military.

Q. And what did you do, set up a little company separate from your operation to there at Meacham Field? To operate out of San Antonio?

A. I think it was all under corporate wise, county wise, I think it was all under as I recall, all under Central but operation wise it was an entirely different -

Q. Your people, mechanics, what have you, weren't checked out on C-46s, they were 47s, what did you do, have = was it Slick that did your maintenance for you over there at San Antonio?

A. I think Earl did some of it and I think we had our instrument work done by was it Brad down at Houston? The only work that our guys did was line maintenance, Earl did the biggest part of it, Earl Slick.

Q. I see. When you started the DC-3 operation, you put fellows on board, pursers you called them, yet when you had the C-46 operation in 1952, you used stewardesses over there. Why the difference?

A. Because the GIs would behave better on board with a stewardess than an attendant.

Q. Why didn't you use stewardesses on the rest of the DC -3 system at that time, instead of pursers? Were they used to unload freight, or something?

A. Well, we had a good reason, I can't remember what it was.

Q. They'd help unload cargo, wouldn't they, baggage- but

A. Yeah, but there was something else, I don't remember.

Q. Okay. What were some of your initial problems with the DC-3 operation. You could now fly night and IFR operations, couldn't you?

A. Yeah.

Q. So you did have radio and you had teletypes

A. Had teletypes and reservations -

Q. In much of Frontier's early beginnings, on a lot of our system we didn't have established CAA at that time, airways, so we put in our own homing devices, H-markers in order to navigate.

A. We had those at, I think, had one out around Woodward or I think it was Woodward, in that area, and one over central Oklahoma, some place.

Q. Now, the rest of the areas you used commercial radio stations to home in on them, is that correct?

A. Yeah, uhuh.

Q. What would they - just tune in some AM station and listen to music until they got over it?

A. Yeah, uhuh, and we turned that into some kind of a publicity situation too, and also, all of our station people were licensed weather observers and we would furnish the weather, systemwise, to go over the radio station. In fact, out at Amarillo, I can't remember the youngster's name, but later they became the weather channel on the station out there and then on TV, I can't remember his name, but we got a lot of favorable publicity because - and later, in Amarillo, they'd mention furnished by Central Airlines.

Q. When you were first getting organized, you placed a great deal of emphasis upon the morale of the employees, what was it you started with, you called it the '49ers, you started in '49.

A. That's right.

Q. And you started with 83 and there were still many with you over the years.

A. Oh, yeah, oh yes, even to this day, from time to time.

Q. Then you always referred - you also cited somebody who did well, whether he was a mechanic or a pilot or a station agent, or a stewardess, whatever, as a member of your ball team, that you were a long ball hitter or something like that, used baseball terminology. Did this catch on with your employees?

A. Yeah, yeah.

Q. And you were great for handing out plaques that they could frame and it that would have their name on them that credited them with some effort.

A. Oh, yeah. Oh, I hear from these people even to this day. We really had, I think it's a good word, we really had a ball.

Q. This close-knittedness

A. In fact, just today when I was walking down the hail, one of the Frontier guys looked at me and said Hi, Keith, and we just hugged each other.

Q. Yeah, like the fellow that stuck his head in the door just a minute ago,

A. Yeah, uhuh.

Q. At Christmas time I understand you used to give out little gifts to the people, sometimes you'd give them cheese, a box of cheese or a ham or something like that, so you had this on the system and the guys still talk about the box of cheese or ham that you gave them. You weren't paying too well, nobody was being paid too well, so you had to have a good strong morale factor going within the company. Around the system, were the civic leaders, the state leaders, the large corporations like Phillips and Continental, were they cooperative in the problems you had in trying to generate traffic? How did you get Phillips or Continental to use your service when they had their own fleets of aircraft- I mean- -

A. Well, that wasn't easy. In the real early days, why, I went to Mr. ? and he was a tough son of a gun. But I talked to him in the Little Rock Museum one time, one time up at Bartlesville, I forget what I was even doing up there and all of a sudden the sun was shining on his eye and I'll never forget his face, but all of a sudden I remember he said in substance we'll use you. I've forgotten these details,

Q. Did you lay it on the line with these people, you'd better use us or we're going to fold?

A. Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q. How about Halliburton, over there at Duncan, did they use you?

A. They did as long as Earl was active in the company and they would use us, our air freight, on the bits, which were small but very heavy, and these would go all over the world. They used that a great deal, I don't know how they're moving those things, now. The traffic was spasmodic.

Q. How about Phillips between Bartlesville and Borger, Borger being a company town.

A. Oh, hell yes, they flew with us back and forth -

Q. They would use you, they wouldn't use their own fleet?

A. Oh no, oh no, that was ham and eggs, oh yeah - we gave them service and if we had a schedule change we would talk it over with them, oh, yeah.

Q. Now, you were very strong on political support, you made the most of your governors, made the most of your mayors, made the most of your Congressional representatives. You, yourself participated a great deal in the activities of hearings back in Washington, but you always ended up with a tremendous number of witnesses - when Frontier was competing with Central in some cases, you always overwhelmed us with the witnesses you ended up with, you'd have hundreds of them, and testimony from all of them. To get their-

A. They did that at their own expense, too, their own time.

Q. Yeah, you couldn't pay their expenses.

A. Well, we couldn't afford it, anyway.

Q. No. Did you help them write testimony in order to get them into the act?

A. Oh, yeah, maybe we might suggest -

Q. Okay. You used members of your Board of Directors, you had a lot of Directors, and at one time you were selling a small amount of stock in each community to get local interest stimulated.

A. Yeah, I told you about Ada and Enid and Borger.

Q. But you'd end up with Board members and you'd use them to help push for you.

A. Oh, yeah, every Board member we had made a contribution, even Jimmy Stewart.

Q. Yeah, I was just going to bring that up - that Jimmy Stewart was a friend of Johnson's and also there was a name - race track driver - ?

A. You're thinking of Joe DiBona

Q. Yes

A. Who was a World War II fighter pilot and he entered several of the coast to coast air races and Jimmy Stewart sponsored him and it wasn't the Bendix, it was the other race, whatever it was, and Joe won a couple of those.

Q. Well, Stewart helped you out once when he was filming a thing called Strategic Air Command, they worked this Central DC-3 into the plot.

A. That's right, right here at Carson (*AFB*). Oh, Jim was just a class guy, God, he was just marvelous. He would come to a Board meeting and he would contribute, he would contribute his suggestions and observations and I always had the feeling that everything that I sent him and I tried to keep our Board of Directors advised as well as the bankers, Murray Geiger, down at the Ft Worth National Bank, Chairman of the Board, I would see him once a month regularly and just give him the good and bad, and the Board members, but Jim, I always had the feeling that Jim would come to town and from his conversation, that he read everything I sent him and in fact, I had a note from him, he's been sick you know, and I wrote him at the hospital and to his home and I had a note from him about two weeks ago.

Q. I'll be darned. There was a letter in your collection of things up there in at Oklahoma City at the Oklahoma Aviation Historical Museum up there, that Jimmy Stewart had signed that had been personalized and sent to travel agents around on your system, thanking them for the traffic that they had generated for Central.

A. I'd forgotten that, yeah.

Q. And he signed it personally, each letter.

A. Oh, he would go on all the flights and oh, God, we'd go on our flight and the airport would fill up, you know, oh yeah, sure.

Q. You carried a lot of air freight as well as passengers?

A. Well, it depends on -

Q. Well, oil, didn't they use it, moving parts?

A. Yes, Halliburton would use it a great deal and - out of Wichita into Liberal when we went across there into that gas field at Liberal.

Q. A lot of drilling, there.

A. Yeah, and -

Q. Did the military use it, like at Lawton?

A. Not much, you're talking about air freight.

Q. Uhuh.

A. Not much, oh, once in a while we'd get a box that was under guard and two or three guys would load it and then get on the airplane, but air freight wasn't any big deal with us.

Q. You were working with the other local service carriers, trying to get a permanent certificate, these three year

certificates would run out pretty fast and you were always going back

A. Yeah, that was a massive effort.

Q. And you were trying to get a longer certificate and finally the Board, I think it was in 1955, says okay, we'll give you guys all permanent certificates and it made financing a little easier, didn't it?

A. Oh, yeah, my God, yes.

Q. Also you had the guaranteed loan deal from the CAB-

A. Well, that came along later, considerably later.

Q. Yeah, and then also later, you started carrying mail, surface mail, you tried it as an experiment around Christmas time,

A. Yeah

Q. And locals did so well that the Post Office decided to continue this.

A. Yeah, Senator Frank Carlson, of Kansas, a Republican, he was a leader of that in Congress, he was most responsive to that suggestion and God, every Christmas, I'd have to call the Senator and ask him if he would shake up some body, because we had space and I forget the rate, it wasn't much income, but from a public service standpoint, I mean public service standpoint, people were interested in getting their Christmas mail, and every Christmas, why, that should have - Cecil Hodges was the gent here, Superintendent of whatever it was, and we used to laugh about it quite a bit, but a good friend of mine, not an enemy, but I needed him to - Del ? the post master up at Ada and Johnny give the bastards this mail and I had to have Senator Carlson to suggest he do that.

Q. Now, the local service airlines finally realized they had to make a concerted effort collectively and organized this Association of Local Transport Airlines, ALTA, as they called it. Were you in on the beginnings of that?

A. ALTA? Oh, yeah, ALTA was formed one Sunday afternoon at the Olympic Hotel in Seattle -

Q. Nick Bez?

A. Nick Bez, myself

Q. Ed Converse?

A. Ed was supposed to be there, but he hadn't, on account of weather. It was Nick's idea and -

Q. He headed up West Coast at that time?

A, Yeah, that's right and anyway, we talked with Ed and I think I remember that this, my memories of that, the differences, is quite the difference, from Ed, Ed Converse, but there was Nick and I in the room and I remember that we -

Q. Was MacMyhre in on that beginning?

A. No, no, Nick and I were in the room and we wanted to, Nick wanted to have Earl McConn in real bad-

Q. Texas International?

A. Yeah, uhuh, and he had talked with Ed Converse and Ed was 100% for it and was going to be that week- -

Q. Converse had Bonanza at that time?

A. Yeah, uhuh, and Nick felt that he could get John Conley of Pacific and I felt that I could get Earl McConn and -

Q. Did Pioneer participate in any of this - at that time?

A. No, this was after Bob Six had bought Pioneer.

Q. I see.

A. And well, we strategized that Earl McConn could get Frank Hall and if we could get Frank Hall - well Tom Davis

Q. Hall's with Southern?

A. Yeah, uhuh,, and I felt that I could get Laddy Hamilton with Ozark and Glen Hicks with Lake Central -

Q. How about Mohawk. and Allegheny-

A. I have forgotten on that but -

Q. There was Peach.

A. Yeah, Bob Peach, well, wait a minute, I think Ed Converse felt he could get either Les Barnes or Bob Peach, I've forgotten, but that's when it started and then at that same afternoon, why, we decided, or he decided and I went along on - some guy by the name of Joe Adams to head up the organization in Washington.

Q. Wasn't Don Nyrop, who is president of Northwest Airlines, today, wasn't he your first legal advisor there in Washington, Don Nyrop? He had been with the Board -

A. I know-

Q. He'd been favorable to local service airlines initially-

A. Yeah, now, wait a minute, in that meeting though, Nick called Joe Adams.

Q. I thought Nyrop was ahead of Adams.

A. He might have been - well, he had to be, because Joe has been, because when he came on board, he's been there ever since in some capacity, but I remember we called Joe that day - I'm vague on the details.

Q. He may have been general manager and Nyrop may have been your legal counsel.

A. I've forgotten.

Q. Yeah, but was it hard getting them together initially, or were they all receptive to the idea? Conn was a holdout, wasn't he, Earl Conn?

A. Yeah, but I finally got him, and Nick called him, too. I think I went to Houston to see him one time or two times and I think Nick saw him some up at Washington or at a meeting. He didn't come right in, but when he did come in, he was an aggressive member. It was a good organization.

(The thirteen local service carriers in 1957 when ALTA was formed were Allegheny - AL, Bonanza - BZ, Central - CN, Frontier - FL, Lake Central - LC, Mohawk - MO, North Central - NC, Ozark - OZ, Pacific - PC, Piedmont - PI, Southern - SO, Trans Texas - TT and West Coast - WC)

Q. You were strongly identified in this area with the Democratic party. When the Democrats were out of office in Washington, did this affect the fortunes of Central to any great degree? In route case proceedings, because the nature of the CAB Staff changed as far as political makeup was concerned. It became a three-two Republican Board, then.

A. Oh, we - over all before the CAB, we won more than we lost.

Q. You didn't feel any political pressure there from Republicans - that they favored Republican applicants?

A. Well, Hal Carr always did pretty good.

Q. Yeah.

A. Oh, that's another aspect, I - you damned sure wanted your Senators and Congressmen to know what you were

doing and what you intended.

Q. Sure. Well, they relied on you pretty well, didn't they, that what you told them was - you did the research for them on your contacts and sometimes helped them on aviation matters other than those pertaining to Central?

A. Well, you mean Senators and Congressmen?

Q. Uhuh. They needed somebody to do the ground work for them.

A. Well, Andy Sheffel, the fine Republican from Kansas, frankly, would call me from time to time on matters, announcements sent to me related to Central and Mike Monroney would - -

Q. Guess that's you. Do you want to stop for a minute?

A. No, No.

Q. All right.

A. So, in regard to Sheffel, one time we had an ALTA meeting in the Hawaiian Islands and he - what was he, minority leader, appropriations committee or something and I was able to get him to go there and this was when my Betty was here and I never will forget flying in a DC-4 from San Francisco to Honolulu at night and I guess we sat up all night visiting and that started, frankly, quite a friendship, which lasted until his death.

Q. Now, Fred Boston, initially of Enid, I think he was and he was on your Board for a long time- -

A. Oh, yeah, uhuh.

Q. I think right up till the sale to Frontier - he was interested in the Washington contacts and public affairs sort of thing- you and he worked together as a team?

A. Oh, yeah, sure, yeah.

Q. And he was also strong in the Democratic party, was he not?

A. Yes, in Oklahoma, yeah.

Q. Kind of a pay manager for various-

A. Yeah, he was a supporter of my growth.

Q. Kansas, of course, was basically Republican, in this case, and Oklahoma and Texas being Democratic. When you were trying to forge your way into Oklahoma, north and east and west of Wichita, did you have any competition from other carriers in that Kansas territory, the area that normally was --

A. Yeah, we had competition from Frontier.

Q. Well, Continental had been in most of those points that you finally got into -

A. Yeah

Q. And we tried to get into the, but you initiated the case, I think it was the Liberal case - wasn't it?

A. I think that's right.

Q. Yeah, Liberal and Guymon were factors -

A. Yeah, and Frontier, you had - was there a guy by the name of Scott Whitney-

Q. Scott Whitney is our training -

A. Yeah, well he, I think this was the case.

Q. Yeah, he was in that one, I was too, I helped -

A.

Q. Yeah,

A. Yeah, uhuh.

Q. Yeah, Scott, that was one of his first big cases, when he went to Frontier in the late '50s.

A. Yeah.

Q. And you won all of that, we didn't get anything out of that case, but it was one that you had initiated and you had a retiring federal judge in Guymon that Dymond was favorable to -

A. Yeah, Ross Risley?

Q. Yeah, and it was almost something for the home folks that you got into Guymon.

A. Yeah, that's right.

Q. In your expansion plans into other states, like Arkansas, and on up to Kansas City and what have you- -

A. Arkansas was hard to get to.

Q. It was hard to get to?

A. Yeah.

Q. Why, it was a Democratic state, didn't you have Ross, Fulbright, was he out there in Fayetteville?

A. Arkansas, the fine people over there really, are - this is awkwardly stated and sounds very crude, and too self-serving, but Arkansas then and I imagine they're still the same, before they would support something, you got to be accepted. And when Earl McConn got shall we say southern Arkansas and we got northern Arkansas, as it turned out and as a staff member later told me, that this was discussed and you got the best part of Arkansas and you can hindsight it tonight, they got - Fort Smith and Fayetteville and Harrison are still there and there's -

Q. Yeah, they're good points, Ft Smith and Fayetteville, particularly.

P. Yeah, heck on that.

Q. Yeah, right here.

A. Jesus, 33,000 passengers,

Q. Just out of one point here. In Missouri, you were competing against Ozark for those intermediate points. Was Senator Synnington very helpful to you?

A. Oh, God, he hated our guts.

Q. Hated your guts?

A. Yeah, but in Arkansas they had a very fine state Senator over there by the name of Ellis Fagen ? and then there was the very fine contractor by the name of Jack Dickens ? Ellis has passed on, and Jack, I still stay in touch with him, he's one of the biggest contractors I think in Arkansas and is now very sick, we still stay in touch. But I was fortunate in that these two gents, shall we say, accepted me, and helped me with the city's support and Bob Chris, now retired, the airport manager at Ft Smith finally - and I'm not saying this to honk my own horn, this is just the way it was - Bob and Ed, he's retired and I talked with him about a month ago, he helped us and of course ? the airport manager at Hot Springs and he's the mayor - -

Q. It helped you how, politically?

A. At the hearings, I wanted these people to go to Washington at their own expense and say why they needed

service and why we want Central and not Texas International, and not Frontier and not Ozark. We want Central.

Q. How did you work this in Missouri to get into Ft Leonard Wood and Joplin and St Louis, how did you get in those places?

A. Well, we got to St Louis over Ozark's ass by - with Arkansas urging that they needed to go there and - because once Arkansas gets behind something, they don't get discouraged. That's my view.

Q. Was there a trade-off with the Missouri delegation then, that they would support.

A. No, huhu, no, no. Of course Senator John McClellan was chairman of the appropriation committee and he sent his administrative assistant, got to the hearing to testify and in regard to Harrison and Fayetteville, their Senator was, or their Congressman was Judge ? He came over himself and testified, he didn't send anybody and Senator Fulbright. He was, I think, out of the country, during the hearing, but his, what's his name, his aide, came here and testified.

Q. How about the governor at that time, was that Forbus (*Faubus*)

A. What?

Q. Was Forbus governor of Arkansas?

A. Oh, yeah, he was on an inaugural flight and I can't remember whether he testified on -

Q. But he was supportive of your -

A. Oh, yeah, uhuh, and we got to St Louis because Arkansas needed service and it isn't any crap, they needed service to St Louis.

Q. I see.

A. And the Little Rock people were - who was that banker?

Q. They probably were served by Braniff or American there.

A. Oh, hell yes, Judge Beard, he didn't want anything to do with us. Yeah, uhuh, yeah.

Q. You were proving successful but each time you would always end up with a lot of intermediate points. You had a lot of new routes added but you always had restrictions on your routes. You never seemed to be able to get a non-stop authority between major points, it was always via some intermediate point.

A. And hindsighting this, we were obligated to those smaller points.

Q. I see, and you never could get overfly authority.

A. No, no - we were able to get out of - long before this, out of Holdenville Oklahoma and Okmulgee and Shawnee and - on 'account of DC-3s, the airports simply couldn't take them at that time.

Q. Since the merger with Frontier Airlines, 21 of the points that were part of the Central operation when we merged, have gone by the wayside under de-regulation, mainly, we've been dropping points across Kansas, and in Oklahoma and in Texas now, and in Lyman, Colorado. What is this feeling about this loss, those points you fought so very hard to get, those 21 points which we've walked away from, Liberal, Kansas, Amarillo coming up next, what are your feelings, anything nostalgic about our not serving those points any more?

A. Well, I tell you, I am - I feel awful close to these folks.

Q. We handed off a whole bunch a few years ago to Air Midwest -

A. Yeah, I know - I just feel like even today they're not getting what they deserve. I guess -

Q. Does anybody in Liberal call you and say what about it, Keith? You got us-

A. Oh, yeah, oh, yeah, oh God - I get calls, oh, yeah.

Q. Because Amarillo was one of the first points you went into when you were beginning service in '49 -

A. Oh, yeah - But to answer your question, I guess I'm a - I just love some of those cities, corny, but I do.

Q. Yeah.

-END OF TAPE-

(Transcribed and edited from the hard copy with Microsoft Office Document Imaging on Apr 20, 2024. Hard copy, consisting of 38 typewritten pages, came in box of documents sent by Carolyn Boller on Apr 17, 2024. -Jake Lamkins)