

## **KEITH KAHLE**

### **Biographical Sketch**

Keith Hayes Kahle was born September 25, 1909 to Dr. and Mrs. Charles Edgar Kahle in Sisterville, West Virginia. Keith's family moved to Oklahoma City where his father worked as a doctor. In 1914 the family moved to the oil boom town of Drumwright, Oklahoma. In 1924 Keith's mother passed away after a long illness, and his father moved the family to Norman, Oklahoma. While attending junior high school in Norman, Keith developed what would become his lifelong support of the Oklahoma University Football Team. In 1925 Dr. Kahle remarried and moved his family back to Oklahoma City. In 1927 Keith Kahle entered the School of Engineering at Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa, from which he graduated in 1932.

After graduation Keith went to work in the Oklahoma oil fields. In 1932, with his friend Bill Bleakley, he participated in The Cord Cup Air Race, where they finished in seventh place. Keith wrote dispatches for the Oklahoma City News covering his adventures during the race. Also at this time Keith stopped working in the oil field and started publishing his own aviation newsletter called The Taxi Strip, as well as writing for the Oklahoma City News as an aviation correspondent. He was actively involved in Oklahoma Air Tours, an attempt to spur airport construction and interest in aviation in Oklahoma. While on the tour, the plane Keith was riding in crashed. Keith used this experience to write a widely publicized article on what it was like to survive a plane crash.

Deciding to organize and run his own airline, Keith Kahle, along with Oklahoma City pilot Jerry Sass and attorney W.C. Lewis created Trans Southern Airlines, Inc. Trans Southern Airlines, Inc. applied for a route running from Amarillo, Texas to Atlanta Georgia. The airline's proposal was denied by a Civil Aeronautics Board committee. After this setback Keith continued writing for the Oklahoma City News until it went bankrupt, then he started writing a Sunday aviation column for the Daily Oklahoman. Using what he learned about the politics of the aviation industry when trying to establish Trans Southern Airways, Inc. Keith Kahle decided to have another go at starting an airline.

With help from friends in the Federal Government Keith Kahle established Southwest Airlines, as a massive regional feeder airline serving routes from Chicago to Brownsville, with its headquarters in Oklahoma. However, some of his New York backers were concerned with Kahle's inexperience and they brought Thomas Hardin to run the airline. Keith became suspicious of Hardin, believing that Hardin was plotting to take all the research and planning Keith had done, and then force him out of Southwest Airlines. His suspicions were confirmed when one night a security guard called Kahle, saying that Hardin was cleaning out the company office, and loading the files and records into a van. Kahle managed to catch Hardin at the Oklahoma City Airport, and through his influence with Oklahoma politicians and judges, got a warrant that impounded the files and prevented them from being taken out of Oklahoma. This led to a court battle which would drag on for several more years, and the failure of Kahle's second attempt at an airline.

During World War II Keith was unable to get into active duty aviation, but he held the rank of Major in the Oklahoma Wing of the Civil Air Patrol. He also worked at

Tinker Field as the civilian head of the post newspaper. It was during this time that Keith Kahle developed the idea of starting a “feeder” airline, which would be a system of air routes from Oklahoma City to medium size and smaller cities, which feed passengers and cargo from these destinations back to Oklahoma City. Keith set about compiling the necessary funding and evidence he needed for the Civil Aeronautics Board to grant him a permit for the airline structure he wanted. In 1944, Keith gathered a group of men to help form this airline which included Judge Murrah, a Federal Judge from Oklahoma, Guy Marchant, an investor in the Oklahoma oil industry, and Luther Bohanon, Marchant’s lawyer. Marchant, Kahle and Bohanon held a meeting in Colorado where they decided to name their new venture Central Airlines.

Kahle spent two and a half years preparing his documents and evidence, and then submitted a bid for air routes in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, Missouri, and Colorado. He was competing with 42 other applicants including American Airlines and Braniff. The concept Keith proposed involved Central Airline’s operating DC-3’s out of a hub at Oklahoma City and connecting to other airlines departure routes in other cities. Also Kahle wished for his system to include a Central Airlines Employee as a “Fixed Base Operator” at all the smaller airports Central served. On November 14th, 1946 the Civil Aeronautics Board made its decision and granted Central Airlines the Feeder Airline routes north of a line drawn east/west through Dallas/Ft. Worth.

To prepare for the eventual start of Central Airlines’ operations Keith Kale had rented hangar space at The Oklahoma City Municipal Airport and opened Keith Kahle Aviation Incorporated. This was a flight school that operated two Cessna 120s. He also operated a one plane airline on a route from the Oklahoma City Municipal Airport to Lawton, Oklahoma. Kahle needed more backers to fund his plans, so he recruited two oil men, Dean Gill and F. Kirk Johnson, to finance part of Central Airlines. In 1948 the Civil Aeronautics Board contacted Keith and told him he would have to get his airline into operation, or he would need to relinquish his operations certificate. His main backer Marchant was reluctant to invest in Central Airlines, and offered to sell his interests to Gill and Johnson. Gill and Johnson persuaded M.E. Harding and the Fort Worth National Bank to loan the rest of the money. With the money in hand Central Airlines was ready to operate.

In September 1949, Central Airlines launched its inaugural flight with 11 Beechcraft Bonanzas. Kahle had to get a special waiver from the Civil Aeronautics Board, because it was against government policy to have a certificate scheduled airline operate single engine aircraft. Six months later Kahle brought six DC-3s from American Airlines, and Central Airlines began operating as its certificated demanded. Central Airlines gradually expanded adding routes to Kansas City and Little Rock in 1954, and new destinations in Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado in 1960. It also continued to update its fleet purchasing Convair 240’s from American Airlines and United Airlines. In 1958 Central moved its headquarters to Amon Carter Field in Fort Worth, Texas.

Johnson and his investors decided to sell Central Airlines, and negotiated a deal with a group headed by Carl Pohlad, a Minneapolis Banker, who bought the airline in 1962. Kahle’s relationship with the new owners remained amicable, but six months after Central Airlines was purchased Pohlad wanted to sell Central for a profit, then get out of the aviation industry. Because Keith had founded the airline, Pohlad offered him a chance to find another buyer. Kahle wound up selling to one of his own board members,

Jack Bradford of Midland, Texas. Bradford made several changes to Central including firing certain employees and equipping the Convair 240's with Rolls Royce Dart engines. About a year into Bradford's ownership relations with Kahle became strained, to the point that Bradford fired Kahle in 1963. Bradford had trouble controlling Central, going through two more presidents (L.E. Glasgow and Lamar Muse) in a short period of time. Finally he negotiated a deal merging Central Airlines into Frontier Airlines.

After he was fired Keith received a call from Clyde Skeen, a Senior Vice President at LTV. Keith was asked to look at a film on the V/STOL aircraft LTV was building dubbed the XC-142. It was a prototype tilt rotor aircraft that could fly like plane, or take off and land like a helicopter by rotating the wings and engines. Keith became a consultant for the project, and became one of the presenters and demonstrators for the prototype. When the XC-142 program ended Keith took a leave of absence from LTV and helped organize a national bank in Fort Worth. He also became active in politics, becoming close friends with Congressman Jim Wright of Texas. He also continued to support one of his earliest interests, Oklahoma University Football.

Keith Kahle returned to LTV full time and worked on several engineering projects including improving the AIRTRANS ground system in use at DFW, and devising method to break up ice using either lasers or ultrasonic frequencies. He also received two patents for football safety equipment. In 1982 Keith Kahle was inducted into the Oklahoma Aviation Hall of Fame.

In 1984, Keith became an advisor to Bob Bouzard, the president of Electorcom, finally retiring in 1992. Keith Kahle was married twice, first to Betty Alexander, who passed away from cancer after 15 years of marriage, and then Jean McLaughlin, whom he married in 1977. Keith Kahle passed away at the age of 88 on July 4th, 1997.

#### Sources

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