

Interview With Ray Wilson
on July 6, 1978
by Ed Gerhardt

Q - Ray, you got started on the concept of a local service carrier, when?

A - The latter part of the 1930s. We got together with a couple of lawyers and Terri Drinkwater of Western Airlines. Air service in the Rocky Mountain region was almost nonexistent. The nearest airline was United in Cheyenne. We were advised by Drinkwater to make an application for a route throughout the Rocky Mountain region. There was a tub line between Pueblo and Cheyenne for years, Western Air Express, I think it was.

Q - There was the Inland Airlines?

A - Inland Airlines (Wyoming Air Service) was started by Dick Leferink out of Casper with a Casper to Denver service via Cheyenne. It operated for several years in the late 30s or early 40s. I remember that we considered flying this route as a starter while we were still operating our flying school in Chickasha, Oklahoma.

Q - Did they operate as far south as Pueblo at that time?

A - No, they came into Denver and Avery Black & Jess Hart started Varney Airlines - El Paso - Albuquerque, Denver. And Bob Six bought out later.

Q - There were two parts to Varney - one part went to United and the other to Continental?

A - Yes, to get east - west, you had to take United normally out of Denver to Cheyenne to transfer for transcontinental.

Q - You got your start in flying with the Army Air Corps? Didn't you graduate from Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas?

A - Yes, I graduated from the University of Illinois with a B.S. in Engineering in 1923. I had taken four years of R.O.T.C. and the University of Illinois was one of the first to start an aviation section. Upon graduation from the University I was given a reserve captaincy in the Illinois National Guard. There were three selected from the University of Illinois to take flight training at Brooks Field, San Antonio, Texas, from September 1 to December 31, 1923. My instructor was Captain Stanley Umpstead. He was chief test pilot at Wright Field. He is still active, a general now.

Q.- Some years ago I met "Sandy" McDonald in St. Louis and he said that he was in the same class with you in San Antonio. He said that as part of your graduating exercise you had to parachute out of a bomber, you had to climb out on the wings and drop off.

A - Yes, that was the graduation from the parachute course. At that time the Army Air Corps did not use parachutes. We did not use parachutes until the late 1920s in the Colorado National Guard. We did not like them because the seats already were made with cushions. So parachutes were very difficult to put on and uncomfortable and bulky to sit in. We were forced to take them out to get our flight clearance. After we got out to the aircraft we would call the sergeant and say, "Take it back, we don't want it!" We did this for months until they started bearing down on us to use them.

Q - What kind of aircraft were you flying at that time?

A - It was a Curtis J N C, we called it a "Jenny", with an 150 horsepower Hisso engine.

Q - Is that the same type of aircraft that is parked in the terminal at Stapleton Field?

A - There is one out there with the OX-5 engine in it. Our planes were called Canucks, from Canada. They had OX-5s, that was in the first World War.

Q - When you graduated from Brooks Field, did you go into active duty at that time?

A - We were on active duty for four months and when I came back to Denver I immediately joined the Colorado National Guard, the 120th Observation Squadron, then based at old Lowry Field at 38th and Dalhia Streets.

Q - Major Bonfils, who was with you in the beginning of Monarch Air Lines, was his rank of Major something that came out of this 120th Observation Squadron activity?

A - He wasn't connected with it until quite a bit later. I joined the squadron as a 2nd lieutenant as Flight Officer. We were flying "Jennys" with Hisso engines. That was in 1924.

Q - At that time were you also conducting your Ray Wilson Flying School?

A - No, this was in 1924. I was employed with the Colorado Gas & Electric Company, now the Public Service Company. There I was a junior engineer. I joined the company after I graduated from the university. It was a junior executive training course in which I worked in various departments gaining experience. This was my main job and my flying with the Observation Squadron was only one day a week. We put in quite a bit of extra flight time with the squadron, all of them "Jennys".

Charlie Boettcher, I think owned the field, but we had to have permission from him to get this field at no cost. It was approximately 160 acres with the north end up near the railroad and we had to surface it and sod it, all done with voluntary labor since the State of Colorado was not very sympathetic to any expenses for military stuff at that time.

Q - How long were you active in the 120th Observation Squadron?

A - Except for some leave of absence of a few months, a few different times, I served from 1924 until 1940 at which time I was Captain as Operations Officer.

Q - When did you start up Ray Wilson Flying School?

A - In 1935 we incorporated a flight school as Ray Wilson Inc. We were qualified as a government approved school in conjunction with the University of Colorado ground school as required by the FAA. I was the chief instructor. I had to instruct in all subjects taught at the school.

Q - Where was your flying school located?

A - It was the old Curtis Field, across Smith Road and the railroad from Old Lowry Field. Immediately after World War II, Don Vest had the field. He was a dealer in used aircraft. It was located at 56th Street and Colorado Blvd. We had, in conjunction with the flight school a fixed base operation with charters, high altitude aerial photography, flew for the Forest Service, and a FAA approved repair base. This we operated until mid-1940. After that we were accepted as Air Corps approved cadet flying school at Chickasha, Oklahoma. We went down to Oklahoma to prepare the school and had our first class in 1941, before World War II started for the United States. We had to construct the school at our own expense. Ours was a civilian operated school and they had to have so many employees who instructed military personnel who were cadets. We also had a contingent of military officers to take care of military matters with the cadets. We were only charged with the flight training and the ground school training and the military were there to see that we were putting out an acceptable product.

We built our school on raw ground, an old cotton field, ours was a primary school with graduates then going on to secondary school elsewhere. I sold my flying school in Denver to Harry Combs, Combs - Hayden, at that time. In the mid-1940s, Combs operated it.

Ray Wilson, Inc. operated flying schools throughout Colorado up until the mid - 1940s. We had 22 bases of C.P.T. training (Civilian Pilot Training) in conjunction with colleges for ground schools. Each unit had ten students and we had them located in various college units in - Denver, Boulder, Gunnison, Trinidad, Lamar, & Fort Morgan. So we were operating approximately 35 primary aircraft and six secondary aircraft (Wado UPF aircraft with a Continental engine). We also had an advance course in which we used Spartan Executive aircraft.

At Chickasha, Oklahoma we had to spend approximately \$250,000 to build hangers, runways and hire sufficient numbers of instructors and all of the ground school equipment.

Q - Major Bonfils goes by the initials "F.W.", what do they stand for?

A - Major Bonfils earned his rank in the Army Air Corps with combat service in World War I. His first name was Frederick Walker Bonfils.

Q - How did you and Bonfils happen to get together?

A - He was General Manager down at the DENVER POST and as a business man, had a limited amount of time for flying. He became interested in the 120th Observation Squadron of the Colorado National Guard. He later became interested in the plans for the cadet training program at Chickasha and put up his funds to help underwrite the building and operation of that school. It became known as the "W B" Flying School for Wilson-Bonfils. Half of the funding was supplied by Bonfils and the other half by myself. The sale of my flying school in Denver supplied my half of the funding. Bonfils was to handle the finances of the flying school while I handled the operations of the school. Bonfils stayed in Denver at this time since he did have a full time position with the Denver Post.

Q - After World War II you came back to Denver and with funds from your flying school began planning for what was to become Monarch Air Lines in 1946?

A - Well, the CAB had finally set down a hearing on our application for a scheduled airline. I had put in the application in 1939. With the war going on, the CAB was not active for five years. Ours was the first hearing for a new feeder airline. Braniff had also filled with the CAB for a route west out of Denver to Grand Junction - Durango - Monte Vista/Alamosa, - Pueblo -Colorado Springs. The return service was the reverse of this pattern which made for a lot of flying for a passenger flying into or returning from one of these communities. This was not a practical service.

When the hearing for the service came up before the CAB there were somewhere near a dozen applicants from around the area. The CAB had to weed out the applicants and find one who could do the job.

Q - Were you considering service to Wyoming at the time of your application?

A - Not until the CAB got into the route case, then we went for Salt Lake City and down into New Mexico to Farmington, Gallup and Albuquerque. Later we received authority to get into Phoenix.

Q - When did you receive your CAB approval for Monarch's routes?

A - It was approved in March 1946. We actually started operations November 26, 1946.

Q - What held up your operations from approval in March to actual operations in November 1946? Was it financial?

A - No, it was obtaining equipment. We had to get FAA approval on airports and other equipment before we could start service. Towns that we proposed serving had to have terminals and runways that were suitable for a DC-3 operation. And of course we had to have adequately trained personnel to run the stations. It took a helluva long time to get all of this organized and ready to go.

Q - How many people were with you to begin Monarch Air Lines?

A - Art Ashworth was the first qualified pilot that we had. For several months we paid the salaries of Burt Clark and Johnny Myers and got permission for them to fly as copilots with Continental Air Lines in order to get qualified people for Monarch.

Q - Where did you get your DC-3 aircraft?

A - They were World War II surplus C-47s. We paid between \$10,000 up to \$25,000 for them. One of them cost us \$90,000 and that damn near broke us. The average cost was around \$25,000 and then it took almost as much more to equip them for airline useage.

Q - Did many of your pilots come into Monarch from pilot training at your flight school in Chickasha?

A - Yes, many of them did. There were fellows like Willie Hurt, Johnny Myers, Burt Clark and others who come from Chickasha. None of our pilots came from other carriers initially.

Q - When you began Monarch Air Lines you had four aircraft - C-47s - you paid approximately \$25,000 each plus another \$25,000 modification costs to bring them up to commercial airline standards, this meant that you needed approximately \$250,000 to get started?

A - Yes, here is a screwy thing, at the time that we were up against the wall with \$15,000 to \$20,000 a month expense and income less than that so we were going into debt by \$15,000 a month. At the time that we would be losing control of the company, financially, when Hal Darr got into the picture, mid-March 1947, we could have sold the four airplanes for a million dollars. The airlines were begging for them. With minimum financing coming piecemeal, we got a loan from Darr.

Q - How did you come across Darr? He was heading up Scott Radio in Chicago:

A - He was a junk dealer, really. He bought the radio company, salvaged it and took the money to the bank. He was thinking of going into the construction business, but he couldn't find any partner to go in with him. But we were in such distress, financially, that we didn't have much choice.

Q - Was Darr in the flying school business in World War II down in the Southeastern states?

A - Yes, but I didn't really know him in that capacity. I was desperately searching around for financing. One of my contacts with a flight school in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, suggested Hal Darr as a possible source of funds. Now I don't want any ill feelings about this.

Q - Darr was something of a fiesty fellow and when he came into the company he did a lot of firing of personnel. One fellow who left at this time was Jack Lewis, who had been with Monarch in the beginnings of the outfit, did Darr fire Lewis?

A - Darr fired him. Jack had a wonderful record. He was with me in Chickasha and served four years heading the ground school. He was an excellent person, a fine reputation and a damn good friend of mine. He was doing a damn good job but Darr got mad at him because Jack wrote a letter to one of the union leaders when the pilots were getting organized. The union official asked when it would be convenient to start negotiations. Jack wrote back that it would not be convenient to hold such a meeting. He read it to me and I agreed with it. The union man was irked by Jack's response so he went direct to Darr. Darr thought that Jack's letter was awful.

Did you fire Jack Lewis at Darr's request?

No, I simply refused to fire Jack so Darr fired him. Jack was retired earlier from the Navy. When he left Monarch he and his wife Dorothy settled down in California.

Q - There was another fellow who was with you in the beginning of Monarch, a sales manager named Lawrence, W.B. Lawrence.

A - Yes, he had been with a construction outfit. He probably was brought in by Jack Lewis. He stayed only a little while and then left because of a problem in his family. His first name was William.

Q - Arthur Henry was Monarch's legal advisor?

A - Yes, Arthur Henry was the best lawyer that I ever had.

Q - Donna Myers was corporate secretary?

A - Yes.

Q - And "Mac" Myhre was auditor?

A - We called him bookkeeper. There were no high sounding titles much in those days.

Q - Was Myhre with you in Chickasha?

A - Yes, he took care of accounts as a bookkeeper. He was with us in Ray Wilson, Inc. and we carried him on the payroll after we sold the school until we started the airline.

Q - Jerry Kitchen joined you in early 1947. He had had a background with Continental Air Lines in tourist sales?

A - Yes, Jerry did quite a bit of public relations stuff. This is where he exerted his best efforts for us. Earl Kimmel was a salesman who became head of the sales department. Darr fired him too. It happened down in Gallup, New Mexico. Mrs. Darr was down there for the Indian ceremonials with her friends and she wanted to take all of them with her on a particular Monarch flight. Our station agent just turned her down. Darr was damn mad and thought, at first, that it was my fault. When Kimmel left Monarch he went with Richenbaugh Cadillac as a very successful salesman. He had a great personality and could get along with anybody except Mrs. Darr.

Q - Your first service was between Denver and Durango with one round trip a day. You left Denver around 8:30 a.m., got to Durango around noon and then you turned around for the return service to get back to Denver around 4:30 p.m.

A - Yes.

Q - You also had a route proposal from Denver to Grand Junction via Boulder, Kremmling, Craig and Rifle. This service was never started?

A - No, we had troubles enough with our other route to Durango so we did not get this northern route started.

Q - You had another route segment between Denver and Grand Junction via Leadville, Salida, Gunnison and Montrose. You eventually served Gunnison and Montrose but not Leadville and Salida. Why?

A - We did not have aircraft equipment suitable for it. Neither the CAB nor the FAA pressed us to start the service to Salida and Leadville. And Gunnison was marginal because of high altitude and short runway.

Q - When did you start putting together the idea for a merger with Challenger Air Lines and the acquisition of Arizona Airways?

A - We took over Arizona in 1949 and then Darr made arrangements to purchase Challenger Air Lines. *(Error - it was just the reverse. The Challenger merger was in 1949 and Arizona in 1950. It may be a transcription error in the original.)* Arrangements were made with Don Duff of Challenger with controlling stock being held by Claude Neon Corporation of New York City. Duff was a "wheeler-dealer" and a different type for the west.

Q - H.O. "Rocky" Nelson had been president of Arizona Airways. His airline was not operating at the time of the acquisition planning. Did "Rocky" run out of money before he could get his airline started with his newly acquired CAB certificate?

A - He seemingly never had adequate financing. He had three C-47 type aircraft which we flew back to Denver for overhaul and modification. I only met "Rocky" once that I recall. I did have a nice opinion of him.

Q - Here in Denver did the 17th Street bankers support you as the Valley National Bank in Phoenix support Arizona Airways?

A - We had an application for a loan of half a million dollars with the 1st National Bank in Denver, along with a Salt Lake City and a Phoenix bank. Darr got into this end of the financing in 1947. We did get that loan and this helped us to get started. Darr had a \$10,000 deposit with a Salt Lake City outfit but Darr never did fill me in on the particulars of his financial dealings as they affected the airline.

Q - We got started as Frontier Airlines on June 1, 1950 with the merger of Monarch/Challenger and the purchase of Arizona Airways. Shortly thereafter the Korean War got fired up. As a result of the Korean War, Darr got interested in starting a new flight school at Marana, Arizona, about 30 miles north of Tucson. In my talking to Darr down in Arizona, where I was Regional Sales Manager, based in Phoenix, he related to me a conversation which he had had with the chairman of the CAB. Darr was advised that the newly formed Frontier Airlines was not likely to work out as profitable operation. It was felt by the CAB that our north / south operation in seven large, underpopulated states would never make much use of our services. Darr was advised by this CAB member to milk the operation to get back his investment before the CAB folded the carrier. Do you recall any such likelihood of this happening?

A - No, Darr had not advised me of such a conversation with a CAB member. About this time Darr got turned off on me. He had forgotten to send the \$15,000 check for making the monthly payroll when it was coming due. It was the fault of me as the Executive Vice President to make that payroll. Myhre came to me and asked "What should we do?" Well, if we missed that payroll we would be out of business. I felt that Darr was out of town and had forgotten to make provisions for sending the \$15,000 check. So I advised Myhre, "Unless you have another, better idea, I would say, pay the people!"

I was trusting that Darr would come through and make the money available. I think that Darr held that against me from then on. This is only my own thinking, I have no evidence that this was true. I only know that Darr and his friend, Emil Levine started to give me the silent treatment when they came to town (Denver). This was tough on me to be getting this silent treatment.

Q - In the beginning months of Challenger and Monarch getting sufficient cash to stay solvent was always a problem. At one time Challenger could not scrape together enough cash to make a monthly payroll and offered employees stock in lieu of a paycheck. Did Monarch ever have to take such action?

A - No. This might have been a solution at the time when Darr had not deposited the mail pay check but Monarch never went this route.

Q - In 1953 Don Duff, as Vice President of Sales and Tariffs, was having trouble in getting his plans for management across with Darr. One Saturday, Duff called me at home (in Phoenix) and asked that I come out to the airport to talk with him. While we sat in my car at the airport Duff advised me that he had been fired by Darr and his spirits were really down. Did you find Darr as difficult to work with?

A - Darr was extremely difficult to work for. He made decisions arbitrarily. This is what he would do. If there was something he wanted to check into or get an edge on someone such as an official of the company on whom he wanted to enforce his will, Darr would go down to the mechanics and try to get "dirt" on anyone who was over them. He was constantly undermining management. There was no vestige of ability to command in an organization with a situation like that. So here was Duff and I fighting our problems the same way. I liked Don personally and I know that he had problems with Darr just as I did. I myself couldn't see any future going ahead with Frontier with Darr being the way that he was.

Q - "Mac" Myhre was picked by Darr about that time in 1953-54 to become president of Frontier. Was Myhre something of a compromise candidate for the job? Darr was stepping down as acting president and was beginning to divest himself in some of his business holdings around the country.

A - I suspect this. Darr had a "hot line" with Myhre at this time along with Emil Levine in Chicago. Myhre was not required to use his own judgement. Darr and Levine did all of the decision making back in Chicago. Levine was an attorney and a close personal friend of Darr. Art Henry was cut off as Frontier's legal advisor at this time and Levine became legal advisor and a member of the Board of Directors of Frontier. Levine would never work openly with you and you never could be sure what he was thinking about.

Q - When Darr eventually sold out his interest, it was to a Chicago outfit. Was that the Canteen Corporation of Chicago?

A - Well, Darr and Levine got a bunch of Chicago businessmen interested in coming out to Denver and looking around. They eventually bought the stock for an undetermined amount but I am sure that Darr got more money out of the deal than anybody else. Eventually when "Bud" Maytag bought Frontier from Levine I believe that he bought it for \$900,000. Then Maytag let the company run down in equipment and inventory. He needed the money to buy National Airlines. Ted Baker wanted to get out because of health. What "Bud" gave him for it Maytag got it back in about three months with the rise in the price of National's stock.

Q - I understand that you mortgaged your home to get enough money for the beginnings of Monarch Air Lines?

A - I didn't mortgage my home but I did lose a lot of money on the airline. At one time I went down to Tucson to see if Darr would buy my stock. He just laughed at me and said "You want your cake and eat it too." I felt that I could not deal with him above board.

Q - When did you leave Frontier Airlines?

A - Christmas Eve 1954. (*His letter of resignation says it was Dec 1, 1954.*) At that time "Mac" Myhre gave me the news. It is odd, since I had done a lot of favors for "Mac" that he would do this to me. Any animosity that I have I attribute to Darr. Myhre, I think, was totally loyal to Darr. When Darr took over controlling interest in Monarch that was when Myhre swung over in his loyalties.

Q - Was there a real conflict of personalities and interests between you and Don Duff, V.P. of Sales & Tariffs, as was often discussed in the early 1950s?

A - Don and I tried to calm these rumors when we first learned of them. Darr once chided me on this subject and I told him that I had nothing against Duff. "We are both trying to run an airline. Duff is doing a pretty good job on traffic and I've got the operations to handle." I told Darr.

I think that it was at the lower echelon that this conflict went on between individuals without either Duff or me knowing too much about it. It could have been misplaced loyalty of some sort by ex-Monarch and ex-Challenger personnel.

Q - From the ex-Monarch group the pilots and mechanics were very close to you. Duff did not have that kind of loyalty from the few pilots and mechanics who came from Challenger. Duff didn't think too well of pilots. He once told them that they were only glorified truck drivers.

A - I am sure that had an effect. Don used to come to me and cry on my shoulder and say (about Darr) "I can't get along with him, I try and I try and I try!" I really thought that I was getting along with less static with Darr than was Duff. The only time that I got mad

and told Darr off was when he accused me of some of this fostering of bad feelings between me and Duff. I got up and went out of the room for a little while and then came back to tell the S of a B that I didn't have any part in the stuff that was going around. And after I blew up Darr was a little uneasy and he got up and went out of the room. Then the next day he called me up and wanted me to take him up to Aspen (Colorado). I said to him "No thanks, I don't want to go." So Duff took him. Darr was so difficult to work with.

Q - Did you work very closely with George Snyder, president of Challenger in Salt Lake City?

A - It was all very casual. I never felt that I knew him at all.

Q - Did you know "Rocky" Nelson, president of Arizona Airways?

A - I had a good opinion of "Rocky" but I didn't know him very well.

Q - "Rocky" Nelson felt very badly about losing control of his Arizona Airways. With the formation of Frontier Airlines "Rocky" became Regional Vice President of the company and he was based in Phoenix: At that time I shared an office with "Rocky" and I asked him why he never went to Denver that he might get better acquainted with the other officers of the company. "Rocky" said that he didn't want to go to Denver since he preferred not having anything to do with Denver or those individuals who were in Denver.

A - I can understand that. I never saw "Rocky" after the merger which created Frontier. But I still had a good opinion of him.

Q - Who set up the deal with Arizona Airways for the acquisition by Monarch?

A - Darr made the deal, I don't know the details. *(This verifies another statement in which Ray said he had nothing to do with the three way merger that created Frontier.)*

Q - Before the merger which formed Frontier, Monarch and Challenger put out a joint timetable to save costs. Do you remember that?

A - There was a real rhubarb on that one. Major Bonfils didn't like the fact that this timetable was titled, "Challenger/Monarch" instead of "Monarch/Challenger". He didn't like it. Hell, it didn't matter to me. All that I wanted was a joint operation. This was such a petty thing. *(This was the Jul 1, 1948 timetable and the only joint timetable of the two I have found.)*

(End of conversation, Plan further meetings to add to background)

Signature

Ed Gerhardt

July 25, 1978

Ray Wilson flew west on May 11, 1979 at age 78. I have corrected typos and spelling of the original text. The remarks in parentheses are also mine.

-Jake Lamkins

(11/10/17)