

HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE
BOWLING GREEN-WARREN COUNTY AIRPORT¹

by
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Since I have had a vital part in the Airport Program² from the beginning, I feel I am qualified to review its history. I shall confine my remarks to the facts relating to the airport movement. As you well know all successful movements have a leader, who not only starts the movement, but in most cases will be the directing and driving force behind the movement. However, no successful movement is a one-man project, and our airport is no exception. Many fine people have supported the various phases of our airport program as you will note in this review. Conversely, there were other fine people who have opposed the airport program, saying it was a waste of money and only benefited a few. History has proven nothing could have been further from the truth.

The airport program or movement had its beginning in 1932 by one person who began to talk the need for an airport. I can truthfully tell you it was quite discouraging at first. Gradually a few people got the vision. The Lions Club, of which I am a charter member, was the first organization to take an interest in the need for an airport. Several other members of the Lions Club developed an interest, so the few of us continued to talk the need of an airport at every opportunity and I personally appeared before the city council on several occasions from 1932 to 1934 urging their support. Then our first real opportunity developed in 1934 when we found out that the Civil Works Administration (CWA) would spend money on airports on leased land. A committee was set up to locate the best site. This committee set out immediately to find the best site and spent several days in doing so. After careful study the Searcy property was selected as the best site. So after two years of preliminary work and effort we obtained our first landing field in 1934. This first landing field consisted of 100 acres of land leased by the city from the C. F. Searcy family for five years at \$1,000.00 per year rental. Then the CWA spent the sum of \$16,000.00 on grading, seeding, fencing, and draining. Soon flying activity began to grow. Some of aviation's pioneers began to use our field and a few local people learned to fly. My youngest brother was one of them. Then on May 5, 1936 through a very unfortunate accident the first local pilot was killed on the airfield. That pilot was my youngest brother. This accident might have discouraged others, but I could see the great need in the future years for a well equipped airport, so I continued my efforts. I was determined to get this airport. Various barnstormers used the landing field between 1936 and 1938. Then in 1939 Mr. Larue Coy and his family moved to Bowling Green and became our first fixed base operator and opened a flying school and taught many young men and women to fly. Some of those including myself, were Dillard Williams, Velma Jones, now Mrs. Dillard Williams, Hubert Houchens, Tommy Withers, Carl Knear, Byron Likens and others. Mr. Coy erected the first small office building on the field.

¹ In the Fall of 1969 the author was invited by the Bowling Green-Warren County Historical Society to speak on the history of the airport. He did so. Subsequently, he was requested to provide documentation of said history by WKU librarian Margie Helm. After completing an initial draft, Dr. Causey made a second address to the Lions Club on May 26, 1970. Except for minor grammatical corrections, this document is a verbatim transcript of the second address given by the author. It conforms to an audio recording made on the occasion of Dr. Causey's second speech. The earlier document, on file in the Kentucky Library at WKU, is less accurate than this one.

² Capitalization conventions in this transcript follow closely those in the original document – in keeping with the emphasis preferred by the author, Dr. Causey.

The city's five year lease on this property expired at the end of 1939, and in spite of concerted efforts to get them to renew the lease, they refused to do so. Rather than lose what we had gained a small group of us organized a local Aero Club, affiliated with the National Aeronautics Association, to stimulate aviation interest and continue the lease on the airport land. By personal donations and some business donations the few of us held onto this airport lease during 1940 and 1941.

Then, in December 1941, our country was drawn into World War II and in 1942 the Federal government announced the urgent need for a system of national defense airports in various parts of the country. We contacted our representatives in Washington for details and to find out if Bowling Green could qualify. We were told that Bowling Green could qualify if we met the National Defense Criteria which required that this Federal Grant would only be spent on land owned in fee-simple and clear of any debt by the city or by the city and county jointly. We had to solve the big problem of raising the necessary money to buy the required land. A few civic minded citizens held several meetings at the Helm Hotel and came up with a plan to form the Bowling Green Warren County Airport Corporation, to raise the money and buy the land and deed it to the City and County. This corporation was legally organized with the following incorporators: Mr. H. S. Carmichael, Dr. L. K. Causey, Duncan Milliken Jr., A. Scott Hines, Charles R. Bell, John A. Logan, J. P. Masters, William H. Natcher, Ennis Harris, and Mrs. D. T. Cawood. Officers chosen and who were never changed were: Mr. Carmichael, President; Mr. Charles R. Bell, Vice-President; Dr. L. K. Causey, Secretary and Mr. J. P. Masters, Treasurer. Members of the corporation took time from their businesses to go out and get demand notes by enough responsible business and professional men and women and business firms to put up as collateral for the money needed to purchase the necessary land. This time we needed lots of support from not only individuals but full cooperation from the City and County governing bodies and I am happy to say we obtained that support. In the short time of a few weeks we obtained demand notes ranging from \$5,000.00 down to \$25.00, with most of them being in the \$500.00 range, totaling approximately \$75,000.00. We divided these notes between the three local banks and borrowed the sum of \$55,000.00 to purchase a total of 286 acres from three farms – namely C. F. Searcy, C. A. Smith and Boyd Downey. This land was bought and paid for and deeded jointly to the City and County. Plans and specifications for the airport with two 4,000 foot runways, lighting, paving, draining, fencing and taxi ways were drawn up by the Federal Aviation Administration engineers and bids were taken. The Brooks Construction Company of Fort Wayne, Indiana got the contract and construction got underway in the fall of 1942 and was completed in a few months. Federal funds of around \$600,000.00 were spent on our airport, and we were on our way to having one of the best airports in Kentucky. The City and County governments gave the airport corporation its moral agreement to pay off the loan of \$55,000.00 by including payments, plus interest in each year's fiscal budgets and I am proud to say that all of this debt was paid off by 1950 and all of those demand notes were returned to the signers, so no one was out a single penny for their support. Furthermore, our City and County officials have supported our airport program ever since.

In March of 1943 Western [Kentucky State College]³ was designated as a training center for flights students, so Owensboro Aviation Company headed by Mr. Walter Hoagland leased privileges from the City and County to conduct a flight school and agreed to build at its own expense a large hangar and office building costing around \$27,500.00. This primary flight school was conducted over two years and trained around 450 students to fly. Also in 1943 the Army Air Force moved onto the airport to conduct a Military Transition Training Program and conducted this program for over a year. So you can see we had lots of flying activity on the airport, and more local interest was created. Also in 1943 the Federal Aviation Administration moved their 24-hour weather station to the City-County airport and later included a Flight Service Station for flight safety. The Federal Aviation Administration's Flight Service Station and weather station are still on the airport. 1943 was a most active year at the airport and in addition to the other activities, a Civil Air Patrol Squadron was organized. Many local men and women enrolled and trained, with two or more meetings each week and the squadron had one plane stationed here. At the close of World War II in 1945 the military flight training program was closed and two of the flight instructors, namely Mr. Charles Bridges and Mr. Byron Likens leased the Hoagland hangar and office building from the City and County and started a fixed base flight operation, so aviation activity continued without letup. The City and County purchased the Hoagland building for \$15,000.00 which was an extremely good buy.

The local chamber of commerce had given its support to the airport program, and at the suggestion of the local Aero Club and its supporters, set up a FLIGHT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM, for senior high school students to encourage enrollment and study in aeronautics classes in public schools. Applicants were limited to seniors in city and county schools and The U.S. Army Aviation IQ Tests were used to determine the winners. Parents of those qualifying students signed permission certificates. All winners received ten hours of dual flight instruction from licensed flight instructors, Charles Bridges and Byron Likens, as well as several hours of ground instructions to qualify each successful student the opportunity to solo. Organizations and business firms donating the flight scholarships the first year [1945] were: BOWLING GREEN LIONS CLUB; BOWLING GREEN AERO CLUB; NORMAN'S STORE; BLUE CAB COMPANY; BOWLING GREEN FLYING SERVICE; BOWLING GREEN-WARREN COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE; BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S CLUB; RADIO STATION WLBJ; MOTOR & ELECTRIC SUPPLY COMPANY; BROWN ICE CREAM & MILK COMPANY; WARREN COUNTY AMERICAN LEGION POST #23; HELM & PARK CITY HOTELS; AND ROYAL ORDER OF MOOSE. The winners of the FIRST YEAR'S PROGRAM were: Jack Ewing Steen, James Amos Moss, Joseph Hardin Cowles, Kenneth Carlisle Lovan, William C. O'Conner, David Arthur Angle, James David Bryant, Richard Thomas Gordon, Jr., Robert Lewis Causey, Robert Dean Simmons, Curtis Milburn Carter, and W. F. Ennis III. Most of these twelve completed their flight training and received their pilot's licenses, and some of them are active pilots today. The following year the flight scholarship program was continued, and the second twelve winners were: Sam C. Cooke, Jr., Floyd Jefferson, Mary Alice Owen, Bob McKenzie, Cooper Smith, Jr., Henry Burch, Prentice Gott, J. S. McMullan, Jr., Ray Taylor, Jr., Jimmy Causey, Carroll M. Upton, and Wandalene Owen. This Flight Scholarship Program was designed to interest young people in aviation, and

³ Text within square brackets has been added to the oral record for clarification of the context. This may benefit readers who may not be thoroughly familiar with the local vernacular.

those two years got it off to a good start, and this interest continued without the scholarship program.

In 1945 a few interested aviation enthusiasts over the state met in Louisville to draw up a proposed State Statute to create Air Boards throughout Kentucky for 1st to 6th class cities to operate and develop airports for City and County governing bodies. I had the pleasure of being one of those men. This legislation was drawn and adopted by the 1946 legislature. This was a great step forward in airport management and development. These Aviation Laws were revised again in the 1950 session of the Legislature. Our local City-County Air Board was authorized in 1946 and gradually took over the responsibility of operating and developing our fine airport.

In 1946 we got our first intra-state airline, namely BLUE GRASS AIR LINES, INC., with headquarters here in Bowling Green. They did fairly well for about eighteen months but, due to finances, this operation was discontinued. However, on August 1, 1948, EASTERN AIRLINES, INC., inaugurated regular interstate airline services and our airport took on new meaning and importance. Other aviation activity increased and many local people were learning to fly and some were purchasing airplanes for personal and business uses, so in 1949 the Air Board, with Federal and State Aid, constructed the first concrete parking ramp on the airport.

In 1952 we had a disastrous fire that partially destroyed our hangar and office building which housed Eastern Airlines and Bridges Aircraft Sales and Service, so we obtained more land and constructed with Federal and State Aid the present terminal building. In 1953 the Lions Club constructed the Airport Entrance Gate and presented it to the City-County through the Air Board.

During the middle 50's Eastern Airlines switched to larger aircraft, so in 1958-59 with Federal and State Aid we extended our main north south runway 1,250 more feet and we re-paved the old runways and taxi-ways and installed more modern runway lighting and more parking ramps. A MASTER PLAN for future development of the Airport was developed with the aid of engineers from the Federal Aviation Administration, looking to the future needs of development to keep pace with our industrial growth. To protect the investment of public funds, the City-County Air Board began purchasing land in fee and in property rights in the runway clear zones for safety and navigational and future expansion reasons. This foresight has protected the large investment of public funds in our airport.

In 1959 many of us realized the absolute necessity of protecting the tremendous investment of public funds and all State airports, so a few of us met here in Bowling Green and later again in Louisville and with the professional help of Mr. Bob Pearce and the Commissioner of Aeronautics we drafted the Kentucky Airport Zoning Law and it was adopted by the Kentucky Legislature in 1960. I had the pleasure of serving on that State Airport Zoning Commission for over seven years. The Kentucky Airport Zoning Statute has been very effective in protecting the investment in publicly owned airports throughout Kentucky.

In 1968 most first-class mail began flying out of our airport each night at 9:00 PM. Eventually all first-class mail will go out via aircraft to ensure faster delivery.

In 1966 the [KY] Highway Department widened [US Highway] 231 to four lanes and they tore down the LIONS CLUB ENTRANCE GATE, but I am happy to state that a new and more attractive entrance gate was erected in the summer of 1969 by the Lions Club and they hope to get it lighted. Our airport must keep pace with our growth and needs, so additional construction of extended runways, taxi ways, control tower and ILS landing system will come soon. With State aid, our Air Board carried out in the fall of 1969 and spring of 1970 the further extension of our main north south runway another 1,250 ft. making this runway 6,500 ft.. This will give us a JET AIRPORT, that will accommodate the 1970 generation of jet aircraft.

It should be interesting to see how aviation has grown from 1939 to 1969. According to Federal Aviation Administration records, the total number of all airports in the United States in 1939 was 2,260. The total number at the end of 1969 was 10,126. Quite a growth!

To sum up -- let me state that our present well equipped airport facilities now comprising over 400 acres is a far cry from the landing field of 100 acres that we had in 1934. It will be interesting to know that, according to figures developed by the KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF AERONAUTICS, our present airport would cost approximately \$5,000,000 to replace at today's prices. Through careful planning and good management our well developed airport is DEBT FREE. Very few cities can make that statement.

What does this airport mean to our economic and industrial growth? The answer can be given in many ways, but as you know our greatest industrial growth has taken place since 1950, and the records show that our airport has played a very important part. It will continue to play a most important part in the future.

⁴The Warren Fiscal Court and the Bowling Green City Commission voted in April 1970 to name the land at City County airport "Causey Field" to acknowledge in a permanent way the 37 years of public service Dr. L. K. Causey gave to all stages of development of our fine airport. So the new name of the City-County airport will be:

BOWLING GREEN-WARREN COUNTY AIRPORT – CAUSEY FIELD

⁴ The author added this factual epilogue to the end of his original document in place of his grateful acknowledgment of the joint city-county resolution to rename the airport which was given orally in the preamble to his speech.