

Comments on Re-naming the Owatonna Airport

By Glenn J. Degner – 1/31/88

When I received a letter last October from Mayor George Kehoe advising me that the Owatonna City Council was considering re-naming the Owatonna Airport in my honor I was flabbergasted.

Now that the date of the ceremony has arrived, I am reminded of the comments made by Roscoe Turner at an Indiana meeting of the state's airport operators association, on being honored for his contribution to aviation. At the offset he said that the three most difficult things to do in the world were: 1) Climb over a high, four stranded barbed-wire fence when the posts are leaning sharply in your direction; 2) Kiss a girl if she is leaning sharply the other way; and 3) To adequately acknowledge and express appreciation for a public honor being accorded.

To those of you who can recall the "barn-storming" days of aviation, you may recall that he was one of the greatest stunt pilots of the period, ranking with Minnesota's great "Sped Holman. It was reported that one of his stunts was to fly with a tiger as co-pilot. Among his other flying accomplishments was to win the then classic National Air Races at Dayton, Ohio, with his "Geebee Special", which is on display between the trusses of a hangar on the Indianapolis Airport. Another of his accomplishments was the establishment of Roscoe Turn Airlines following the end of World War II, subsequently merged with Lake Central Airlines.

I was also reminded of a comment Reuben Kaplan made to me when I was a cub reporter on the staff of the Owatonna Journal-Chronicle in 1925. At that time the City was beginning to lay the foundation for an industrial center which emerged from a then

modest rural trading center. Hugh Soper, Editor, assigned me the job of reporting on the companies which had been established by then which would put the city on the map. These included: Josten's, the King Company, Federated Insurance, Owatonna Canning Company, Owatonna Manufacturing Company and Owatonna Tool Company, among others.

Mr. Kaplan's plant was located in the alley behind Cedar Street just north of Rose. At the time he had about a dozen employees working in the building, which was originally his father's machine shop. I found him working with his men. His hands were greasy and beads of perspiration covered his face.

I told him that I was assigned to write a news account on his manufacturing operation, which was then primarily devoted to the production of gear-pullers that he had invented. He looked at me with his penetrating eyes and said: "Hell! There is no story here. We're just trying to make a living!"

My immediate reaction to the official announcement of the re-naming of the Owatonna Airport in my honor was that it was not deserved. The development of the operation at the airport was a "team effort" and I was merely a member. More importantly, it was backed by the support of the community, business, and political leaders. At the start the team was made up of Tom Walsh, Joe Dulak, and my first wife, Billie. The development of the idea of an airport operation began when Tom, Joe, and myself were members of the same flight training squadron at Pensacola, Florida. Tom was an expert fighter pilot instructor. Joe was a capable airplane maintenance mechanic and I was a safety officer. We all shared the belief that aviation would become a major factor in business and transportation after the war was over. Aside from its proven record

as a vehicle of destruction; cargo and passenger airplanes became the primary means of transportation.

Looking to the future, the manufacturers of light aircraft were then widely advertising the “family car of the air” in flight publications. We all liked aviation. Why not carry on after the war was over? Billie had some misgivings, being a lawyer by profession, but she went along with the idea. In fact, when I transferred to the Pacific, she took flight instruction and became a pilot, herself. Bob Crocker, who was also an instructor in the same squadron, was not released from active duty at the end of the war, but joined us late in 1946, after we had the operation setup. He was called back to active duty as a Marine pilot in the Korean War. He was shot down on a low-level strafing mission, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, post-humously. Before returning again to active duty, he became one of the finest aerial sprayer pilots. He, along with Russell Iverson, an ex-air force pilot from Waseca, initially carried on the spraying operation; which became a most important part of our operation. Other sprayer pilots who joined the operation later were Alvin Carstensen, Ralph Angel, Russell Paschke, Gary Underland, Joe Rollins and Tom Buscovik.

Those who performed strictly on the airport operations, including aircraft maintenance and repair, charter, sales and instruction were Bill DeBlonk, Jerry Jackson, and Kenneth Brandwold. Those who handled travel reservations and ticketing included: Marion Druckenbrod, Donna Fostveit, Jan Utoft, and Terry Ferise, along with Billie and La Verne. So you see, we did have a team and a good one. All of the members deserve as much credit as yours truly.

I would like to brag a bit about one aspect of our flight training: the students who made a mark after finishing at the Owatonna Airport. These included Alvin Carstensen and James Cole, who became airline captains with many years of service. Also, I wish to mention Terry Pfeil, who won the first scholarship in flight training we offered to Owatonna High School students who showed promise and ability in aviation. After completing his training he setup an aerial spraying operation at Waseka for us. Also, deserving special recognition is Gary Underland, who continues to operate from the airport, specializing in ancient aircraft re-building for Buzz Kaplan, who has achieved national and international recognition.

As for community support, Owatonna was fortunate at the offset to have as the first airport commission Ave Kaplan, as chairman, along with Marvin Bock, both pilots, and A.O. Lindenkugel, a prominent business man; all of whom took their appointments very seriously. They in turn had the backing of the Owatonna City Council, headed by Fred Austin, Sr., known widely as “Sharkey”. The Commission and Council were fortunate in having the active support at the State level by John Hartle, Speaker of the House, and Senator Harold Nelson, with all activities fully covered by press and radio frequently.

Finally, what is essential to the success of a business operation is, of course, customers. Many residents learned to fly, travel services were widely used both by charter, airlines and steamship. Farmers used the spraying service extensively.

So in accepting this great honor with the deepest appreciation, as well as reluctance, I hope I have made clear that “team-work” made it possible.