

Lancaster County Historical Society

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Oral History Project OH-071 - Jones – Transcript

Interviewee: Jesse Jones
Interviewer: Gerald Bruce
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Gerald: This is an interview with Jesse Jones, a man who considers himself a native of Lancaster. He calls Lancaster his home, though he wasn't born here. He came to Lancaster in 1927 and has been involved in aviation since that time. This is Gerald Bruce at the Lancaster County Library and today is April 20, 1976. Mr Jones, how did aviation get started in Lancaster? What was the first introduction that Lancaster had to flying?

Mr Jesse Jones: Well, as I have learned, Lancaster's first introduction to the airplane was in 1918, when a flight of warplanes commanded by the famous Eddie Stinson, landed and flew from the Franklin and Marshall College. They were here on a war bond drive and during their stay many local citizens were taken for a ride, especially their first ride. Well, enthusiasm ran pretty high among the business people and they were all sure that aviation was here to stay, and that air travel would soon be very popular.

During that time there formed an aero club, which was chartered in 1919. This aero club turned out to be the second oldest club in the United States, preceded only by Philadelphia. During the following four or five years after that, disaster struck many attempts to establish the local aviation activity---such as a Mr. Beemer, who started flying from the old Gun Club on the Oregon Pike. This operation ended by the fatal crash of Mr Beemer. Later, Roy Musselman of New Holland was flying into the Lancaster County area, and he also met with a fatal crash. And later, on the third attempt to establish aviation, Harry Jones of Willow Street was doing an aerobatic maneuver when a wing collapsed and he also was killed. Then in the spring of 1926, I barnstormed the Lancaster area with a flying circus. I liked Lancaster and the people and the beautiful countryside so later that summer we abandoned the flying circus and I moved into Lancaster.

Gerald: Before you go any further with this thought about moving into Lancaster, could you tell us more about barnstorming and what you did when you had your flying circus?

Mr Jesse Jones: Well, It was a polite way to get people to ride in your airplane. We had a group of airplanes, some of them were owned by individual pilots, or they could be owned by one individual, which I had three. And we would advertise to a city ahead of time, pick out a field, especially along a popular highway, and we would immediately come to the town. When we arrived at the town all three airplanes would go over the town, and do a bunch of acrobatics, which would be illegal today. This would attract attention and then we'd fly out toward the field we're going to land on, and then we would set up for passenger carrying. Of course, the main objective of this barnstorming was to be able to carry passengers.

Gerald: Well, what happened, then after you arrived in Lancaster and decided to make this your home?

Mr Jesse Jones: Well, I brought two airplanes along and settled for a grass field airport along the Manheim Pike, which was owned by Elmer Esbenshade. We spent that summer on the grass field. In 1927, a group of pilots and businessmen got together and we incorporated a small company named the Lancaster Airways. We operated very successfully until the 1929 stock market crash. But in the meantime, one of the greatest stimulants to flying in that period was the Lindbergh flight, which made everybody sure that aviation was here to stay. Then about 1932 the corporation was dissolved and Esbenshade retained the field and later he leased it to private operators during the balance of its existence. The Aero Club became inactive for several years. However, the original secretary of the original aero club preserved the charter. Then about 1928, we began to hold aero club meetings and new officers were appointed and has been a very active club ever since.

About 1935 The Lancaster Municipal Airport was completed which was built by WPA labor. I was appointed manager, which title I held until 1942, when I resigned and went with the Kopper's Company with the aeronautic propeller. About 1939, the government formed the Civil Pilot Training Program to which only college students were eligible. Professor Fred Klimb of Franklin and Marshall was coordinator between the bookwork and the flying lessons. Later this program turned into a navy training activity and both the municipal airport and the Old Manheim Airport had similar programs. The Manheim Airport was closed about 1946 and turned into an industrial park. A small airport was then opened on Route 30 about a mile east of Mountville by one of the local pilots named Roy Geltz. This field was closed after about fifteen years of operation.

Another phase of the Lancaster aviation development came through the efforts of Harry and Martin Sensenig. These brothers started in business by making propellers for snow and ice sleds. Later they had their propellers certified for use on light airplanes. At present the business has grown to be one of the largest manufacturers of aircraft propellers in the United States.

The municipal airport has many improvements such as the lengthening and reinforcement of the runways, Federal Aviation control towers have been established, a full instrument navigation and landing system has been installed. We have seven additional large hangars erected and, most important, a new passenger terminal building has been completed as of about a year from this date. At present there are thirty commuter flights in and out of Lancaster Airport daily.

Gerald: Well, thank you Mr Jones, for coming and sharing with us the history of Lancaster aviation.