

'Growing Pains'

Boom At Airport Brings Problems Too

Drive out some day to Raeford Airport and watch for awhile. There's a great deal to see.

The single paved airstrip is busy — student pilots practicing landings and takeoffs, local residents with planes based at the airport flying in or out; a few transient aircraft landing while pilots and passengers depart for business in the area.

In the mornings and early evenings, sky divers practice, aiming at a target a few hundred feet to the side of the runway. Coming from all over the world, they train here to compete for national and world parachuting titles.

The scene is far different from that of five years ago, when the runway was a poorly maintained grass strip and a lone hangar was the only building at the airport.

The rapid growth has brought with it problems — growing pains.

"Raeford never had an airport before and then it expanded so fast, they didn't know what to do with it," said Gene Thacker, owner of the sports parachute school, that has been based at the airport since 1969.

The airport first developed in the early 1960's as a Chamber of Commerce project. Before then, a private strip owned by Tom Cameron was located in the Robbins Heights area, but Bill Moses, who was serving as Chamber president then said, "we thought it would be worthwhile to have public facilities. Raeford had not had adequate airport facilities up to then."

Tom Wilson, a Burlington employee living here then, is credited with much of the initial development. Others were Cameron, Moses and city councilman J.D. McMillian, who were to become the first city airport commission.

About 38 acres northeast of the city was purchased from J.A. Singleton Jr., Cameron and Marion Gatlin, as Moses recalls, and a federal grant was approved.

Donations were solicited to make up the local matching fund portion.

Here the city ran into one of the first airport problems. As former councilman Franklin Teal remembers, a portion of the FAA grant amounting to several thousand dollars was withheld, and the FAA accused the city of improperly listing donations. The problem was the result of listing as a donation the market price of some of the land acquired for the airport in excess of the purchase price, Teal explained.

No one is really sure how the city got into the airport business in the first place.

"The sponsors and the county commissioners put up the money," Moses recalls. "I think the town got dragged in by the back door because somebody had to be responsible for the operation."

Just Sat

But air traffic was light on the new strip.

"That thing just sat there," Moses said. "Cameron and (William) Poole had planes, but the airport had limited use by industry."

In 1966, the FAA warned the city that the grass strip was in danger of becoming unusable because of erosion.

In a letter to the city, the federal government recommended that public interest in the airport be encouraged.

"But mainly it just sat there until Thacker came along and approached the airport commission about utilizing it," Moses remembers.

It was the inactivity that interested Thacker.

"It was 1969. Three Army parachute clubs occasionally jumped here," Thacker recalled. "There was nothing else here but Cameron and Poole's hangar."

"That's what got me interested. There were people jumping here before me and one day I asked 'who owned this airport, anyway?' They said 'I don't know.' I said 'Well, somebody's got to own it, and maybe we'd better find out who.' So I flew in and hummed a ride into Raeford and started asking around. Someone sent me to Tom Cameron and he sent me to J.D. McMillian, who sent me to John Gaddy, the city manager."

For Thacker, nearing the completion of 20 years of Army service and looking for a place to establish a parachute business, the Raeford airport looked ideal. In late 1969, he leased a 170 by 280 foot area near the runway.

With the jump school in operation, interest in the airport grew rapidly. Thacker purchased land adjoining the airport and built a snack bar.

Buildup

The city built a small administration building, located within the area leased to Thacker. Gaddy said he is not sure which came first, Thacker's lease or the construction of the building but "at the time, that seemed like the best place in the world for the city to put a building." (It has been



THIS SIGN.....announces the city airport.

recommended since then that the building be moved.)

By 1971, the city had begun to put together a \$123,390 airport improvement project to pave the 3,400 foot runway and a 150 by 300 foot apron and install medium intensity runway lights, a 36-inch rotating beacon and a 12 foot lighted wind direction cone and visual slope approach slope indicator (VASI) system.

An FAA grant of \$77,500 was approved. About \$10,000 of that grant is being withheld until the city acquires three portions of land around the airport which the FAA says is necessary for approach clearance.

Donations were solicited as part of the city's matching funds. Listed as donors were: Raeford Turkey Farms, \$500; Burlington, \$6,000; Richard Bruce (Knit-Away), \$5,000; Bank of Raeford, \$2,500; Southern National Bank, \$500; Heilig-Meyers, \$1,000; Laurinburg and Southern Railroad, \$250.

The county added \$10,000 and the state made a \$20,000 grant. City funds amounted to \$26,345, derived from taxes on beer and wine sales, since until 1973 state law prohibited the use of ad valorem taxes for such things as airports, recreation or libraries.

The bids for paving and lighting were opened in July of 1972. Construction began later that year. "They got started late," Thacker recalls. "They had the clay on it and the strip was almost unusable when a freeze came and they had to quit. Construction didn't begin again until March."

Thacker said he had to close his flight instruction school for the period and, with difficulty, continued jumping.

"Very few people used the airport those months, because of the dirt and the mud," Thacker said.

The paving was completed in April, 1973.

The airport began to boom. Thacker expanded his parachuting business. Paul Rose opened a flight instruction school in June. And local aircraft ownership blossomed.

Suddenly Raeford had an airport. And problems.

With the increase of air traffic, the need for management increased. Because he was the only one based at the airport, Thacker had managed the strip informally for the city for several years. Later, he was designated the airport manager by city officials.

Until last year, the airport came under the eye of the Raeford Airport Commission, which was composed of Cameron, Moses, and McMillian, until his death, Benny McLeod, appointed to fill McMillian's post on the city council, also took his seat on the airport commission.

The group was merely an advisory body for the city council, with no authority to control the airport.

In February, 1974, the commission came before the city council with recommendations to have the FAA investigate all airport operations for compliance with regulations and to assist in drawing up local rules. The commission also recommended that the group be expanded to include two more members, both pilots appointed by the city council and a third to be chosen by the committee. All policy procedures should be submitted to the council before adoption, the commission recommended.

The action came in response to complaints, mostly from pilots, over the operation of the airport by

Thacker. Later that month, the city council voted to replace the airport commission with an expanded committee.

Battle lines were drawn, with followers being labeled as Thacker men or Rose friends. The city council had to expand the committee before appointments to the group could gain approval.

After several months, membership on the committee was resolved. Joe Rackley was named chairman and other members included William Poole, Larry Upchurch, Benny McLeod, Ed Brown, William Moses and Gene Thacker, as airport manager.

Allegations of unsafe operation continued. On April 28, 1974, William J. Raleigh of Raeford, wrote to the FAA charging that two planes loaded with sports parachutists taxied down the runway within 75 feet of each other, took off and flew 100-200 feet from each other at 1500 feet and banked, then landed about ten minutes later without entering the traffic pattern and without making any announcement of their procedures over the Unicom, a radio advisory channel.

Pilots complained about that jumpers created a safety hazard, however, both Rose and Thacker have said they can both operate in neither of the other's operation need pose problems for the other.

Charges

In a letter to the editor last week Mrs. Gene Carter charged that a jump plane spiraled from a higher altitude into the traffic pattern at the end of the runway, landing and cutting off the private plane in which she was a passenger.

Immediately after their plane landed, Mrs. Carter said a parachutist landed on the runway.

William Poole, pilot since 1950 and member of the airport committee, saw safety as the biggest problem.

"My biggest beef is that the airport is not serving the public and it's not safe," he said. "It is a general aviation airport built for that. It's not a drop zone."

"The biggest problem is on windy days," Poole went on. "They land all over the place, on the active runway, on cars."

"All he needs to do is move the target, then transport people," Poole said. "If he had them a mile away, it wouldn't interfere with traffic."

"I know the town board is sick of hearing about the airport," Poole went on. "But they really don't understand what goes on."

Thacker said the parachutists were no hazard to aircraft. According to



TIE DOWNS...on the apron at Raeford Airport.

FAA regulations, powered aircraft must defer to parachutes, he said. However, even when jumpers drift over the runway, they are in the air at that point at a much higher altitude than a landing or taking off airplane would be.

An instructor at the jump school said that occasionally a jumper would land by mistake near the runway but that jumpers always check for air traffic before leaving the aircraft, and notice is given to airmen that jumping is in progress.

About The Radio

Accounts of the difficulties at the airport differ. The Unicom controversy is indicative of the in-fighting that went on.

Rose began to operate the Unicom in the spring of 1974. On file at his attorney's office are copies of a letter he sent to Thacker dated May 10, 1974, notifying him that Rose intended to file for a Unicom license. In signed statements, Rose and his wife, Betty say they notified Gaddy in May that Rose was applying for a license.

Rose said Thacker told him soon after that to stop operating on the Unicom frequency, 122.8 and switch instead to 122.9.

He feels that the dispute over the radio frequency contributed to an accident in June, 1974. Rose said he had been told several days earlier by Thacker, as airport manager, to switch to 122.9, a frequency used by pilots to talk to other pilots in flight. Then a student pilot crashed into a tree in a Raeford yard. In a statement Rose said, was signed at the hospital by the injured student pilot, David Hayney said he called for help on the 122.9 frequency and used the distress signal, Mayday, but no one answered his call. Rose said after the accident, he notified the city manager that he was switching back to the more common ground to aircraft advisory channel, 122.8, Unicom.

According to the Oct. 17, 1974 minutes of the airport commission, the Unicom was discussed. "...said the Unicom frequency of 122.8 was being wrongly used. The committee suggested use of 122.9 for local use but this would present a problem to incoming VFR transients. It was pointed out that local airmen are really the problem and it was suggested that the airport monitor 122.8 and locally use 122.9 but no motion was officially made and no vote taken so the frequency still remains in question."

The issue continued and by November, the city had purchased its own radio. Gaddy maintained that Rose had not complied with FAA regulations to notify the owners of

the airport and that the city had never given permission for him to operate the advisory radio.

"My thinking was that we put this radio in the city's building and get Gene to lease his proposed area. Then the city would have control of the center area and, if we were going to have an employe out there to look after the airport, then he could run it. I felt that the city had a right to control who ran the radio."

"Anyway, the committee was recommending that the city apply for its own license and I said 'folks, we're going to buy us a radio and so we did."

"Then if everyone wanted to play with the radio, we'd put a remote to each lease."

However, the city's application to operate the Unicom was rejected on Dec. 26, 1974 by the FAA, who wrote that only one aeronautical advisory station is authorized at a landing site and that a valid station was then located at Raeford Municipal Airport in the name of Paul F. Rose.

Gaddy protested, in a letter dated Feb. 25, 1975, saying that the city, as owner, had never been notified of Rose's intent to operate a Unicom. Gaddy also sent letters that date to Rose and Thacker, advising them the city was applying for a license.

In the meantime, through his attorney, Phil Diehl, Rose had first offered to help train a city employe to operate the radio and had then changed his mind and had protested the attempt to remove the radio from his control.

Complaints about the radio have levelled off. Gaddy said he understood that Rose had had his radio repaired that as far as he knew, it was being operated satisfactorily. "I'm not opposed to Paul operating the radio, but still it is on leased property," Gaddy said. "It perturbs me that the city owns the airport and can't get a license to operate a radio."

Gaddy said he would recommend that the city council draw up some guidelines for operation and enter into an agreement to have the radio run for the city. He said he would recommend that Rose use the newer city equipment if suitable guidelines were agreed upon.

The city is gaining experience in the operation of a municipal airport, Gaddy said.

"I'll say this, I'm learning a whole lot about an airport. We're all learning and I think we've come a long way. Some aspects aren't critical as I thought, like the radio," Gaddy continued.

Last month, Thacker resigned as airport manager and Gaddy was

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A Tale Of Three Cities: How They Run Their Airports

Raeford's municipal airport is just one of many fields scattered across North Carolina. A Department of Transportation aeronautical chart lists 58 publically owned airports in the state.

Three other city airports were consulted about their operations. They are dissimilar to Raeford, in that two of the fields have only one business located on the field and the other has none. In two cases, the city pays for the management of the airport.

Sanford

Sanford presently has one paved, lighted, 3500 foot runway, but a half-million dollar expansion is being planned.

The runway has a taxiway access to the northeast but none to the southwest. It is equipped with low and intermediate intensity lights, a beacon and a Unicom radio at the standard frequency of 122.8.

The city constructed a central terminal building several years ago, which is leased, to the fixed base operator on the field, Central Carolina Aviation.

CCA provides flight instruction, maintenance, and rentals and has one maintenance hangar, 10 T-hangars and parking spaces for about 20 aircraft.

About 36 planes are based at the field.

The airport is governed by a commission, headed by Bruce Thomas, a Sanford service station owner. Airport manager is a retired Air Force colonel and CCA owner, John Ogburn.

In addition to receiving gasoline sales and tie-down fees, which he shares on a commission basis with the city, Ogburn is paid \$400 a month to manage their airport, perform maintenance on runways and buildings and similar functions, according to Thomas. Tie-down fees range from \$15 a month for a ramp space to \$20 a month for a hangar.

This is Sanford's second year with Ogburn as manager. According to

Thomas, the city received \$400 from gas sales and tie-downs during the first year, but last year, the return climbed to \$2,600.

Thomas said he had a hard time convincing the city government to spend money for a salary at the airport but that the arrangement has worked well for the city.

Thomas said an operator from Southern Pines had run the airport in Sanford for awhile but that the arrangement was not satisfactory.

"We had a mess here for several years," he said.

Thomas said he had several letters in his files from years back complaining about the Sanford airport, but since a manager had been hired, the only letters he has received are praising the operation.

The airport was originally built by stockholders. In 1963 it was sold to the city for \$100,000, and the purchase price was used to match a \$100,000 federal grant for paving and improvements.

Now the city is attempting to interest Lee County in part ownership to help finance the proposed expansion. Thomas said that federal and state grants would fund most of the project and the city and county would then each pay 6½ per cent.

The airport caters primarily to transient aircraft serving the several industries in Sanford. The expansion will include a longer runway to accommodate the larger industrial planes.

Asheboro

The Asheboro city airport is leased to a fixed based operator, Asheboro Aviation, which provides pilot training, major and minor maintenance and air taxi service.

The field is equipped with a 3,900 foot paved, lighted runway and has a beacon and Unicom.

Other than the basic lease, the city gets no revenue from the airport. Jerry Glenn, a spokesman for Asheboro Aviation, said: "The city benefits tremendously

from the business the airport brings into it. Businesses, like Burlington and Klopman mills, use the airport extensively."

According to the lease, the fixed base operator is required to keep the airport open at regular hours, man the Unicom and have fuel available.

A three-man airport commission governs the airport.

Edenton

The situation at Edenton differs considerably from that at the other airports. According to city manager Bill Gardner, Edenton was given an old Marine Corps facility equipped with a tower and three paved runways, including one 5,500 lighted runway.

A Unicom and radio beacon have been acquired through federal surplus.

In addition, an old World War II hangar for about 20 aircraft is located on the field and a large, paved apron borders the area.

The city has spent very little on its airport. Gardner estimates the cost to Edenton taxpayers as less than \$5,000 in the last ten years.

Instead, the property produces revenue, he said, because a number of industries are located at the airport.

"Some, we've sold land to and some lease from the city," he explained.

The field is governed by an airport commission answerable to both the town council and the county board of commissioners.

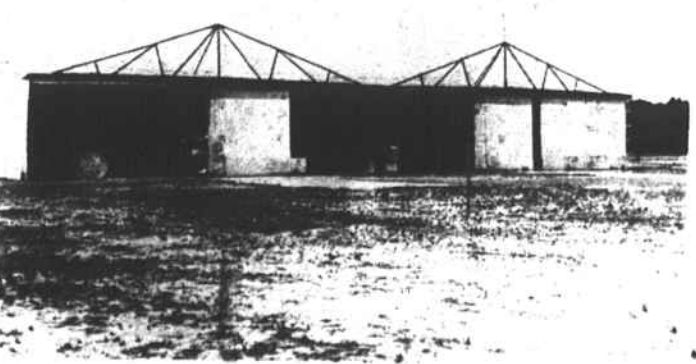
"The town owns the airport but we get the county to take an interest in it," Gardner said.

Unlike most other fields, there is no fixed base operator located there.

"We've had several, but they just never seemed to work out," Gardner said.

Instead, the city pays an employe to dispense gasoline, operate the radio and maintain the area. He is paid \$300 a month and receives the profits from gas sales and hangar rentals.

Federal grant for paving and lighting	\$77,500
City's portion	\$26,345
Donors	\$44,850
Total improvement costs	\$123,390
Proposed improvement project	\$141,000
Income	
Rose's lease	\$720 a year
Thacker's present lease	\$900 a year
Potential from six rented tie downs	\$720 a year



OLD HANGAR...owned by Tom Cameron and William Poole and the first building constructed at the airport, is now a snag in lease negotiations between the city and Gene Thacker. Removal of the hangar is being discussed.