University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

UI Centennial Project

Interviewee: Dr. Leslie A. Bryan

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Interviewer: Now, basically, what I'd like to ask is about the evolution of the Institute of Aviation, some of its founding problems, and you've said you weren't here at the time, but I am sure you've been made familiar with these.

Leslie Bryan: Yes.

I: So could you comment on what were some of the difficulties faced initially?

LB: Yeah, I think the real genesis of the development of the Institute of Aviation grew out of the fact that in the late '30s and early '40s, there was a civilian training program in which the federal government provided flight training for college students. The University of Illinois was among the about a thousand institutions of higher learning concerned with this sort of program. Dean Enger, who was coordinator of that program and Dean of Engineering discovered that they had a balance in the account which was for the civilian pilot training program. And he was…didn't know what to do with it, and so after giving it some thought, he suggested to the President Willard that they take the eight thousand dollars and buy themselves a fifty or sixty acres and have a university airport. And so if they never had another civilian pilot training program or anything of the sort that the university would be in a position to immediately start in on their own land and in their own airport to consummate that sort of program.

Well, the President Willard bought the general idea, and he took the idea to the board of trustees. And the board of trustees immediately decided that what they needed was not a fifty-acre, sixty-acre airport, but they needed a real man-sized airport, so to speak, and make a community airport out of it as well as a university airport. So the board of trustees authorized Park Livingston and then the president of the board of trustees to proceed. To make a long story short, he did proceed and, with Dr. Willard and senators from Illinois, convinced the federal government that it'd be a good idea to put a satellite field [in Chanute?] field for military purposes. This idea was transmitted to the Civil Aeronautics Administration who had the responsibility to build army airfields at that time. They agreed that that it was a good idea and with the support of the legislators from the state and with the support of the state who put up the land to buy the land, which turned out to be originally 750 acres, they proceeded to buy the land with state appropriated funds, and the Civil Aeronautics Administration came in and constructed the airport under contract. They turned the airport over after it has been…after the runways were constructed for the dedication in October 1945. They then desired to know what best use could

be made of the airport, and the President Willard did a very wise thing, I think; he appointed a committee for representing industry, airline, government, labor, and with the chairman aeronautical engineer by the name of Doctor [unintelligible]; he was the vice president of University of California…to advise the university whether as to what they should…what use they should make of the airport.

This committee was very farsighted and excellent committee. And they came up with a plan for the development of an Institute of Aeronautics as they called it at the time, subsequently changed to Institute of Aviation, and submitted to the board of trustees and by the recommendation of the President Willard, and it was accepted, and then the question came to how it should be implemented and between the time of dedication and time I was hired, the airport just waited for action. I got on the job in May I think it was of 1946. And I have been on the job ever since, and we were able to start moving because we had a blueprint which said the trustees adopted and we had some help and staff to implement it and we started that summer with our first flight training program which consists largely of ex Air Force aviators, bombardiers, navigators who wanted to learn to fly or wanted to become instructors and we made our first class, the instructor class, and then the following fall we were able to put these fellas to work next fall to start our flight training program.

I: A question I wanted to ask is in terms of the actual broadcast that would be included in the radio program would be the question of how this field managed to evolve from being just a center for Air Force training for the war, you know specific focus on war, to this whole idea of an Institute of Aviation long-term planning. Could you just sketch briefly how this—now you mentioned some of it, but I wanted a few stated cohesively how this development from one specific interest to a broad program?

LB: The Institute of Aviation evolved out of a recommendation made by [a blue ribbon?] panel of industrialists and aeronautical leaders to the university, accepted by the board of trustees. [Unintelligible] said that an airport should have several primary functions, and the institute should correlate these functions. The functions were to provide aviation for [unintelligible], planning, take-off space for local people, including airlines if they wanted to come in. We should provide a flight training program for students in all departments of the university. We should provide a technician's development program on a two-year basis for aviation mechanics, for professional pilots, and for aviation electronic technicians. And we also should do as much as we could toward making the airport a community asset from a standpoint of encouraging airlines to come in, which, the first one got in here in 1951, I believe, when [Ozark?] started its first operation. The development of the airport essentially has been under the Institute of Aviation because all that the government actually put in since they bought the close of the war were the runways, and when I came here in ’46, we had a surplus hangar, which has been picked up from the airports and erected on the airport. And we had one second-hand Air Force airplane trainer, and this has evolved now into a fleet of about over 50 aircraft which the university owns and operates for research and training and transportation purposes. And the one building is developed into about twenty now, which house the activities of the institute and the training programs and the laboratory facilities and the maintenance facilities or the equipment for the aircraft and for the personnel.

I: Well, now, some more informal questions in addition to this, I wondered, now you've mentioned the number of buildings. Now, what kind of research has been done in these buildings? Can you name some specific projects that have gone fairly well that would be general interest?

LB: Yes, the general attitude of the institute has been that we were a group, which would aid anybody who had aviation research problems that they'd like to do. And most of our research out there has been what you might call cooperative research. Although there are some projects that we've done alone, but we work on a general idea that, by and large, agriculture has qualified a ground [unintelligible] if it is a question of a turf problem, and law school has qualified legal experts and [connections to?] zoning if it is a zoning problem. Therefore, we try to get the research channeled best be done without exploding our own staff, and sometimes more often than not, we publish the results of research which other departments have done, but we try to aid cooperatively. A good example is our sanitary disposal system out there. The university and College of Engineering has [*sic*] a sanitary department, sanitary engineering. We built our sanitary disposal unit out there with extra guides and gadgets and so forth. This could be used as a research project, an example for the sanitary engineering. We have two buildings out there which are used by the aeronautical engineering people for research which they do, and it changes from time to time; some of it has been high altitude fuel research and things of that sort, and one time we had a considerable number of aviation psychologists people located at the airport who were doing research as to how fast you can read an estimate, which estimate can be read easier than another, can you fly a picture rather than seeing a landscape in front of you—things of that sort, which have a particular interest to aviation psychologists. The work of electrical engineering was started out there in antenna research on the airport by giving them a little space to operate. It finally got so big that they had to move off our airport to buy a section of land to conduct research, which was started cooperatively by giving them a little space to operate in at the airport.

I: Well, that is one thing you certainly have, it's space, Doctor!

LB: We are still in need of space in spite of the fact that we now have nearly a thousand acres out there. This is...and we are in the process of buying more land, another hundred and twenty or thirty acres to increase the length of one of the runways and provide [unintelligible] zones, so on and so forth. So we're probably pretty well through with the need for additional land, but…

I: Well the places get bigger and bigger!

LB: Every once in a while, you need land for something, which you didn't foresee twenty years ago.

I: You mentioned that initially this airport was conceived as sort of a branch or a cooperative airport with Chanute. Now is this a tradition continued as cooperation between the two airports, as one is civilian, one is military?

LB: I think the general answer to that is that the cooperative relationship is still very close, but there isn't much tangible evidence of it. The two or three things you might notice of a cooperative nature is the great many of the new airmen coming in from basic training Lackland or other places for training at Chanute will land in the University of Illinois Airport one reason or another since they're coming in by usually commercial charter and they'll be picked up by Chanute buses and taken to Chanute where they conduct…finish out the training. Another example which you might see is an Air Force airplane or two on the field; these might be from Chanute as happened frequently a year or so ago in which we had a number of their planes based here while they were extending their runways up there and repaving so on and so forth. This was a temporary thing. Another airplane or two you might see occasionally out there are either [unintelligible] markings on it or federal aviation airplanes who are in here to test facilities and so forth, or our national air guard aircraft which use the airport on occasion as a satellite field for their maneuvers. Or there might be a Civil Air Patrol airplanes, which is an auxiliary of the Air Force who from time to time run search and rescue missions or simulated missions from the airport.

I: Now in regarding the founding of the airport, the initial idea of the airport, I've heard conflicting opinions about whether—this is not exactly the right word, but whether this was President Willard's brainchild or whether this was an impetus from a group of citizens. Some people have said Willard was just receptive to the idea; others have said it was Willard's idea, and he asked other people in the board of trustees if they'd consider it.

LB: I think probably the answer is a combination of those circumstances. Dr. Willard was asked to make a speech at one of the aviation clinics, which during the middle-'40s were held each year at Oklahoma City on the fact of aviation upon, in the university education. During that study, preparing that speech, I am sure he got a new picture of what aviation was probably gonna amount to. He was essentially an engineer which gave him an interest in the construction of airports. I think he got a new picture of things and new idea of possibilities of aviation from preparing that speech. I think, as I indicated also that there was some impetus from Dean Enger who suggested the idea of a smaller airport to be prepared in case we had another civilian pilot training program. I think also newspapers locally and communication media, as well as other citizens, decided that it would be a good idea to combine a civic airport with an educational airport, and it might well come together. So I think that the impetus came from various sources, and it'd probably be unfair to say that it was any one person's idea. It is certainly true that when the trustees got a hold of it, the President of the board of trustees Park Livingston was the most enthusiastic about the idea together with Willard and some other trustees as well as some local citizens and national legislatures from Illinois all jumped in and got the job done together with

and assist from then Governor Green who was a World War I pilot and who saw to it that the legislature of the state passed enough money to buy the land, so we were in a position to say we've got the land. Now, Mr. Civil Aeronautics Administration acting for the Army Air Corps, could come in and build the runways. Actually, the runways were never used for military purposes. The war terminated and Chanute Field began to contract rather than expand, so the possible cooperation which could've been very close between Chanute and the university never completely materialized insofar as a lot of combined activity was concerned.

I: Now this is more of a personal viewpoint question, but you must have been fairly closely acquainted with President Willard during his term of office, and I wondered if you could comment first on his interest in the aspect of flying here at the university's personal [attitudes?] and second, what kind of view of the man you had. I am not going to use this for broadcast, obviously.

LB: Dr. Willard was a very interesting person, and when he became sold on the idea that a horizontal agency within the university would be very helpful in the post-war university, he left no stone unturned to get the airport going and developed and in operation. He never lost that interest. Within I think three weeks before his death, I called him and asked him if he didn't want to come to the airport and see some of the things he hadn't seen, which has been constructed recently, one of which was the control tower, which he'd never seen. He did come; he accepted the invitation. I drove over and took him out, and he spent the major part of an afternoon out there seeing things as he hadn't seen before with great interest, and I am sure it was very sincere interest.

He was most helpful to me as starting from the scratch, and while I didn't work directly for him I guess except for a month, he cleared my appointment with President Stoddard who succeeded him about the time I came and both President Stoddard and President Willard were most cooperative, and all the rest of the presidents—President Morey was controller and I worked of course closely with him as controller, and he continued his interests after he became president. And Dr. Henry in the [unintelligible] twelve years that he's been the president, has been most cooperative, as have the controllers, including President Morey, as controller and president controller, Mr. [unintelligible].

I: This is to backtrack again, your previous experience before you came to the University of Illinois, have you been in the field of aviation?

LB: Yes, I grew up in the field of aviation. I was born in the southern part of New York state, where the early Curtiss experiments were conducted. Curtiss was a contemporary and rival in some respects of the Wright brothers, and he taught many of the early service people to fly in Hammondsport, New York, which is only six miles from my home. The Thomas brothers, who were pioneers who built the Thomas-Morse [unintelligible] during World War I were likewise based, their early experimentation in Bath, New York. And in the early days, you only flew

around sunrise or sunset when the air was still and so forth, so as a high school kid I could, with a bicycle, I could take in and saw many of the early pioneers fly and so I achieved an interest in that way, and I came out of World War I with an interest in the Army Air Corps leaving the service as a commander of a group of mechanics after service in France. And then in 1925, I wrote a small book on the economics of air transportation. Subsequently, I started one of the early courses in economics of air transportation at Syracuse University where I was a faculty member. I subsequently conducted the largest army flight school for the production of pilots in the United States in the early part of World War II. I subsequently became director of aeronautics for the state of New York and organized the department there, and set up that operation, and in the meantime, I have been an officer in the Air Force, retired colonel in the Air Force, and present time so all these things from an economic standpoint and from a legal standpoint I am a law graduate. It interested me, and putting them all together, it is not surprising that for the last 25 years I have been doing what I have been doing.

I: Do all of your duties give you any chance to get in any private flying?

LB: Well, I still keep my license. I don’t do much flying myself anymore, except when I am going somewhere on business, sometimes I do by university aircraft.

I: Well I think those are the basic questions I had [unintelligible].