



Connecting Generations

Reflections

The Quarterly Journal of the Northwest Airlines History Center



March 2025

Volume 23, number 1

In this issue:

Museum restoration completes - Grand Re-Opening March 7th!

Development updates: City of Eden Prairie meeting + expansion of archive space

Holman award comes home

Meet Gene Peterson, our new Finance Director

Our mission:

We explore and celebrate the generational impact of commercial aviation by bringing together resources, experiences, and community.

Our values:

Welcome - We embody the encouraging and positive environment that has always been part of our story.

Preserve - Both the history and future of the industry

Educate - Learning comes in all forms, at all ages, in many methods. We encourage curiosity, exploration, discovery, and dreaming.

Connect - Just as air travel brings people together, we create spaces for those connections to happen.

Inspire - Flight shows us anything is possible.



Jetstream 31s featured a "speed pod" mounted under the fuselage which could carry additional baggage yet still give adequate ground clearance. British Aerospace advertisement photo.

Express connections made to order

A purpose-built regional carrier that adapted and thrives still today — by Neil Ralston

Representing a new breed of commuter carrier, Express Airlines never intended to carry passengers under its own name. Instead, it represented a new "airline-in-a-box" concept to start up a code-sharing commuter operation to feed a major airline partner hub. Express Airlines was a subsidiary of Phoenix Airline Services, founded by Michael Brady in Atlanta, Georgia.



Aviation Week photo, Sept. 1985

Brady started his career with Eastern Airlines in 1972, and a decade later became the President/CEO of the rapidly expanding Southeastern Commuter Airlines.

After Southeastern was acquired by growing competitor Atlantic Southeast Airlines (ASA, allied with Delta), Brady went to work for Metroflight Airlines in Texas where he was responsible for



organizational development of a new subsidiary, Eastern Metro Express. From November 1983 to January 1985, Brady served as President/CEO of Eastern Metro Express, hubbed at Atlanta and Houston, which proved to be an early and successful pioneer in the 1980s code-sharing revolution and where he gained industry contacts and negotiating skills. — PHOENIX RISING to page 8

Preflight Checklist

The Northwest Airlines History Center, Inc.

We are an independent, not-for-profit 501(c)(3) corporation registered in the State of Minnesota. Volunteer-staffed and volunteer-managed. We have no organizational or financial tie to Delta Air Lines.

Founder: Henry V. "Pete" Patzke (1925-2012)

Management:

- Directors: Jeff Schwalen, Mike Vetter, Scott Norris, Kimm Viebrock, Tim Haskin, Jayne Stenstad, Ronn Lehmann, Gene Peterson
- Directors Emeritus: Jerry Nielsen and Wayne Snyder
- Collections Manager: Bruce Kitt
- Interim Museum Manager: Tim Haskin

Museum Address: *(do not send mail here)*

Crowne Plaza AIRE Hotel

3 Appletree Square, Bloomington MN 55425

[see website for updated phone #](#)

Archives and Administration: *(our mailing address; open for research by appointment only)*

10100 Flying Cloud Drive, Ste A-306, Eden Prairie MN 55347

(952) 698-4478

Online:

Web www.northwestairlineshistory.org
Facebook: [NorthwestAirlinesHistoryCenter](https://www.facebook.com/NorthwestAirlinesHistoryCenter)
LinkedIn: [Northwest Airlines History Center](https://www.linkedin.com/company/northwest-airlines-history-center)
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Threads: [Northwest_Airlines_History](https://www.threads.net/@northwestairlines_history)
YouTube: [Northwest Airlines History Center](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)
Email: info@northwestairlineshistory.org

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Advertising in REFLECTIONS is accepted to help us defray expenses and tell more stories to more people! Ad placement does not imply endorsement by the NWAHC, and ads need to be respectful and relevant to readers.

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Visiting the Museum

The NWAHC Museum is located inside the Crowne Plaza AIRE Hotel in Bloomington, MN, just south of MSP International Airport.

Current schedule:

For March, Fridays 11 am - 5 pm. Consult our website for further developments!

Admission and parking are FREE. (Special events may incur a charge.)

From the airport: Use METRO Blue Line light rail from either Terminal 1 or Terminal 2 southbound and exit at the American Boulevard station. The Crowne Plaza AIRE is immediately east from the station. Or, call for the free hotel shuttle from either terminal.

From the Mall of America: Take METRO Blue Line light rail outbound; American Boulevard is the third stop.

In the Twin Cities Metro area: Head toward MSP International Airport. From Interstate 494, exit on 34th Ave. S. and go south one block to American Blvd. Turn left (east) on American and then immediately right into (and under) the hotel. The parking ramp is on the left - follow the signs for free hotel parking on the uppermost level (do not use spaces not reserved for the hotel) and cross into the hotel's second floor. You may need to buzz the door for entrance, as a safety protocol.

The museum is located on the third floor, above the pool area, and across from the Fitness Center. Patrons needing elevator access must coordinate with the hotel's front desk due to security reasons.

For photo directions on navigating the hotel, please scan this QR code on your phone:



Memberships

Annual membership dues are the main source of funding for the NWAHC; we encourage you to join!

- \$35 level - receives REFLECTIONS digital edition early access via email
- \$40 level - receives REFLECTIONS print edition by USPS; US mailing addresses only

Boarding Announcements



From Chairman Mike Vetter

Welcome to the reopening of the NWA History Museum! After months of cleaning, planning and reaching out to our volunteers, we made good progress and are excited to open the doors once again to the public to tell the story of Northwest Airlines, its affiliates and its

impact on aviation and the Twin Cities. Admission and parking is always free; and with advance notice, we can accommodate small groups for individual tours. An exciting development I'd like to mention is an agreement with the Crowne Plaza Hotel to cater special events at the History Center. Our venue is a perfect location for retirement parties, class reunions or any number of events that would benefit from an aviation themed setting. Please refer to our website for contact details and museum hours.

In other news, it is with great pleasure to introduce our newest member of the Northwest Airlines History Center board. Capt. Gene Peterson has joined as our new Treasurer and brings with him a wealth of knowledge not only in the field of accounting but also his role in Northwest Airlines history.

Reading the Wall Street Journal last October, I came upon a half page color obituary for Alan "Sky" Magary. Sky passed away September 28 at the age of 82. As Marketing chief he had a vision of prohibiting smoking on NWA flights. Hard to believe now, but this was very controversial in 1987 and was considered to be a marketing coup for the airline. It was not until 1990 that the US banned all smoking on domestic flights. If you are able to access this article, I think you will find it entertaining and a time capsule on airline life in the 80's. Sky once pointed to the smoking ban as his "one contribution to mankind".

Our museum is only as good as its members and we have great plans to position the museum for the future and that includes you! You can contribute in a number of ways by:

1. Volunteering your time
2. Give Freely
3. Renew your membership
4. Visit the museum
5. Spread the word about us!

Thanks for reading and I look forward to sharing the latest happenings with you in our next newsletter.

— Mike

Donor Thanks

The Board and all the volunteers at the Northwest Airlines History Center would like to thank our donors for their contributions this year. Donations enable our ongoing operations, cleanup and preservation tasks, outreach efforts, and work to design and gain approvals for our new permanent museum.

\$1,000 - \$4,999

Philip Hallin
Annette Herman
James D. Rogers
Thomas Turk
Capt. Mike Vetter
Sky King 310 LLC

\$500 - 999

Charles Bartlett
Michael Garrison
Grace Highway
Constance Thompson

\$100 - \$499

Raymond Alexander

William Alonso
Chris Anderson
John Badger
Robert Cameron
Beverly Carlson
Richard Cochran
Terry Confer
Raymond Cox
Capt. Woody Fountain
Edward Freuden
Ronald D. Gilmore
Joseph Hamernick
Elaine Hernke
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David Reeder
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Patricia Rummage
Eugene Sommerfeld
Rodger Sorensen
Edward Stephens
Kimm Viebrock

Check your basements and storage boxes!

Do you have physical materials, recordings, or electronic files to contribute to our museum? Please contact our collections manager at bruce.kitt@northwestairlineshistory.org or (952) 698-4478 with details of your items, photos if possible, and how we can reach you. We can not accept materials without this vetting step. Also, please do not bring materials to our museum location in Bloomington as we aren't able to process them there.

Buy wise to support the NWAHC!

Visit our online store, with world-exclusive designs on a wide variety of items - from shirts to mugs, travel gear to golf balls, and more, at shop.northwestairlineshistory.org. Or scan this QR code to jump to our store directly.

We also offer surplus materials and new apparel and pins for sale on **eBay** under the handle "cyberglitz" - the assortment changes every week!



Compass Readings

Progress on restoring the Crowne Plaza museum space - and reopening!

Flooding from the 10th floor sprinkler line break back in October 2024 caused over \$500,000 damage to the Crowne Plaza AiRE Hotel (see the December 2024 REFLECTIONS lead story), including walls, ceiling tiles, and carpeting in our museum space. The process of drying each affected floor with industrial dehumidifiers and blowers went through all of November, and visits from adjusters were delayed due to the fallout from dual autumn hurricanes in the southeast U.S.

Our exhibit materials, store checkout terminal, and electric outlets were thankfully spared (sometimes just only inches from disaster), but the grit and dust from damaged tiles and open ceiling panels, hazards of dangling fire alarms, and rust and dirt stains meant we

needed to wait for the hotel, its insurance carrier, and contractors to agree on funding and implement a plan of action.

Thankfully, once work started in January on our floor, progress was steady. Many of our volunteers assisted in moving display cabinets and exhibit pieces from one gallery to another to allow hotel crew to overhaul each room in succession. As of mid February, the carpet cleaning has concluded and we have one last volunteer push to set exhibits back into place!

We will be hosting a grand re-opening on Friday, March 7, 10 am - 6 pm, with hourly prize drawings, snacks, and discounts for in-store purchases. All members and air travel enthusiasts are invited to visit on this special day - meet our Board and volunteers, learn more about our development goals, and explore how you can get involved!



NWAHC meets with City of Eden Prairie



In the Dec. 2024 REFLECTIONS we described an interim pathway between our current small operation in the Crowne Plaza and a multi-story hangar at Flying Cloud as potentially being sited at Eden Prairie Center, allowing us to grow public awareness, build up staffing, and better network with other institutions. We have made initial contact with that property to gather

lease information.

On Friday, Feb. 14th, Directors Schwalen and Norris, and Collections Manager Bruce Kitt met with David Lindahl, Economic Development Manager for the City of Eden Prairie, as a formal introduction and familiarization with our museum and growth plan. While not asking anything material from the City at this time, we did inquire and received advice on how and when to formally engage. Lindahl also gave us updates on the status of Eden Prairie Center as well as commercial property near Flying Cloud Airport.

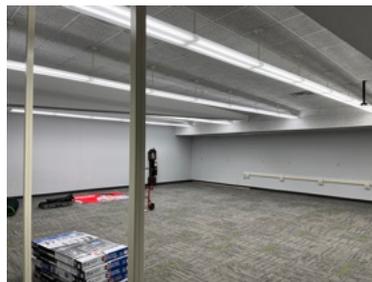
The NWAHC will further engage this year with the Eden Prairie Chamber of Commerce and other city officials to build contacts and informal relationships.

NWAHC leases additional archive space, begins physical move of film & video assets

Our museum has leased an additional 1,449 square feet in the ClubJet hangar where our Archives are housed. This space is directly across the hall from our two rooms of 1,764 s.f. combined, and will cost us about \$1,200 additional per month.

With ongoing indexing and de-duplication, we estimate we will be able to give up one of the current rooms in the next year, allowing a tempering of the increased rental cost. We also need to bring in about 8 pallets' worth of film and video recordings from NWA currently stored in a hangar on the far side of Flying Cloud Airport to prevent further environmental damage.

This new space also opens the potential for unique fundraising events - a new way to engage our current membership and potential donors and sponsors that we are excited to explore!



Meet new Finance Director, Gene Peterson

With Director Jeff Schwalen and his wife due to depart on an extended sail along the entire length of the Intracoastal Waterway, the duties of handling the NWAHC's finances, bookkeeping, and inventory needed to be picked up by someone in the Twin Cities. Our search led us to an NWA alum with just the skill set we needed. Let's hear now from Capt. Gene Peterson:



I hail from St. Peter, MN. I began my flight training in 1970 by hitchhiking to Flying Cloud field and Thunderbird Aviation, earning my private pilot certificate while still in high school. Total cost was a princely sum of \$675, compared to today's tens of thousands of dollars.

I attended St. Cloud State because they had a very active aviation club. I earned the rest of my ratings there and began flight instruction and charter flying while still in college. I managed to earn a BS degree in Business Management in 1976.

I did a brief stint that fall for Midwest Aviation in Marshall, MN. In January 1977, at the age of 22, Braniff Airways hired me as a Boeing 727 pilot and I flew with them until bankruptcy in May 1982. Northwest was allowed by the FAA (with reduced training time) to hire 727 pilots under the age of 35 with flight time in the airplane.

In 1989 I became an NWA Captain on the 727. I went on to fly the 757 and DC-10 and spent my final 20 years Captaining and

teaching on the Boeing 747-400. Along the way in 1995, I became the head of the Northwest Airlines ALPA pilot union.

Following that, CEO John Dasburg invited me to become VP of flight operations. Around 1999 he asked me to become the Chief Safety Officer reporting directly to the CEO. As the Delta merger approached I went back to line pilot flying.

I was the flight instructor for our 3 boys through all their pilot certificates and ratings. The two oldest are pilots at Delta, and the 3rd is in the US Air Force.

Of course, in 2008, Delta and NWA merged and we all became Delta pilots overnight. May 2019 brought me to age 65 and the government's mandatory retirement from the airlines. I failed retirement after about 6 months and began flight organ transplant flights for Aviation Charter out of Flying Cloud field. My middle son was my copilot and we spent a good deal of time as the Father/Son flight team there.

I am an IRS-enrolled agent and income tax specialist and operate a boutique tax business for individuals and small business, and continue to fly organ transplants. I also work with a non-profit called Twin City Cloud 7, an aviation organization out of Flying Cloud.

My wife Holly is a flight attendant, joining Northwest Orient in 1985, and still with Delta today. We met in Kuwait in 2008 while waiting out a sandstorm and flying troops. 10 years later we were married on the last 747 passenger flight in America as we flew the aircraft to the desert and its final rest.



Above: "The Herschde Hall Clock Co. Grand Prize"
Left: "Presented to "Speed" Charles Holman Winner of Class A Race New York - Spokane Sept 20-21, 1927"

'Speed' Holman's New York-Spokane Air Race grandfather clock award now with the NWAHC

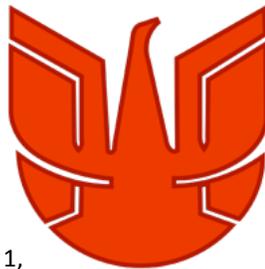
Noel Allard of the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame and our collections manager, Bruce Kitt, signed paperwork on February 14 to officially transfer the 1927 grandfather clock awarded to Charles "Speed" Holman by the City of Minneapolis to the NWAHC. This handsome artifact and more will be set up as a new exhibit about NWA's first Chief Pilot at our museum in time for the Friday, March 7 Grand Re-Opening - be sure to visit!

Cover Story

from page 1

Leveraging his organizational acumen, Brady's concept was to set up a parent airline corporation to handle maintenance, training, finance, accounting, and other administrative support functions. From the parent, wholly owned subsidiary airlines could then be established in a modular fashion, on a short timeframe, to feed a major airline partner. The resulting parent corporation was Phoenix Airline Services. As it was not affiliated with any particular airline, Phoenix Airline Services would have the freedom to pursue agreements with any number of larger carriers.

In early 1985, Republic Airlines decided to introduce a "Republic Express" branded commuter product to replace mainline flights at smaller cities that fed its growing hub in Memphis TN. Instead of partnering with an existing carrier at Memphis, as Republic had recently done with Simmons Airlines at Detroit, it signed a ten-year agreement with Phoenix Airline Services to create a new feeder from scratch. To operate the Republic Express flights, Phoenix Airline Services set up its first subsidiary, Express Airlines I. The efficiency of the concept was proven when Republic Express initiated service from Memphis on June 1, 1985, just four months later. Initial flights were flown with 19-seat Jetstream 31 aircraft, with larger 30-seat Saab 340s coming online in July.



N331BJ at Memphis, June 1985. Photo by Jordan Air Photos; slide from the Scott Norris collection.

October 15, 1985 route map

Republic Express schedule at Memphis, November 1, 1985								
Station	To Memphis				From Memphis			
	Depart	Arrive	Flight	Stops	Depart	Arrive	Flight	Stops
Columbus, MS								
GTR	7:05	7:48	1400	0	8:50	9:49	1403	1
	10:20	11:20	1404	1	12:20	13:03	1407	0
	13:45	14:28	1406	0	15:40	16:23	1411	0
	17:25	18:08	1410	0	19:20	20:03	1415	0
	20:30	21:13	1414	0	22:00	20:43	1417	0
Evansville, IN								
EVV	6:50	7:55	1412	0	8:45	9:50	1413	0
	10:15	11:20	1416	0	12:05	13:10	1423	0
	13:30	14:35	1418	0	15:30	16:35	1429	0
	17:10	18:15	1422	0	19:05	20:10	1433	0
	20:20	21:25	1428	0	22:05	23:33	1437	1
Fayetteville, AR								
FVY	6:45	7:53	1452	0	8:40	9:58	1457	0
	10:10	11:18	1456	0	12:00	13:06	1459	0
	13:30	14:38	1458	0	15:30	16:36	1469	0
	17:10	18:18	1462	0	19:00	20:06	1473	0
	20:20	21:25	1468	0	20:10	23:18	1475	0
Fort Smith, AR Effective Nov. 15, 1985								
FSM	6:45	7:53	1448	0	8:40	9:48	1401	0
	10:05	11:13	1472	0	12:00	13:08	1405	0
	13:30	14:38	1476	0	15:30	16:38	1409	0
	17:10	18:18	1478	0	19:00	20:08	1419	0
	20:20	21:25	1402	0	20:15	23:23	1477	0
Greenville, MS								
GLH	7:10	7:50	1444	0	6:20	7:00	1441	0
	10:30	11:10	1446	0	9:00	9:40	1443	0
	13:50	14:30	1440	0	12:25	13:05	1447	0
	17:25	18:05	1450	0	15:45	16:25	1449	0
	20:30	21:10	1454	0	19:25	20:05	1453	0
					22:10	22:50	1435	0
Jackson, MS								
JAN	7:00	7:45	1460	0	6:00	6:45	1461	0
	10:20	11:08	1464	0	8:50	9:38	1463	0
	13:35	14:23	1466	0	12:15	13:03	1465	0
	17:20	18:05	1470	0	15:45	16:30	1467	0
	20:25	21:10	1474	0	19:15	20:00	1471	0
Meridian, MS								
MEI	6:55	7:52	1480	0	8:55	9:52	1481	0
	10:25	11:22	1482	0	12:00	12:57	1483	0
	13:15	14:30	1484	1	15:35	16:52	1485	1
	17:15	18:12	1486	0	19:05	20:02	1487	0
	20:10	21:23	1488	1	20:10	23:25	1489	1
Monroe, LA								
MLU	7:00	7:55	1426	0	8:55	9:50	1421	0
	10:15	11:10	1420	0	12:15	13:10	1425	0
	13:40	14:35	1424	0	15:35	16:30	1427	0
	17:15	18:10	1430	0	19:10	20:05	1431	0
	20:25	21:20	1434	0	22:10	23:25	1435	1
Paducah, KY								
PAH	10:20	11:13	1432	0	9:00	9:53	1439	0
	13:30	14:23	1436	0	12:10	13:03	1445	0
	17:20	18:13	1438	0	15:45	16:38	1451	0
	20:25	21:18	1442	0	19:10	20:03	1455	0
					22:05	22:53	1437	0
Springfield, MO								
SGF	6:40	7:45	1490	0	8:45	9:50	1491	0
	10:15	11:20	1492	0	12:05	13:10	1493	0
	13:30	14:35	1494	0	15:40	16:45	1495	0
	17:15	18:20	1496	0	19:10	20:15	1497	0
	20:20	21:25	1498	0	20:05	23:10	1499	0
Tupelo, MS								
TUP	10:50	11:20	1404	0	8:50	9:20	1403	0
	14:00	14:30	1484	0	15:35	16:05	1485	0
	20:55	21:23	1488	0	22:10	22:40	1489	0

Examining the Republic Express schedule from Memphis in November 1985 reveals an intensive program with five daily departures at most stations, a much better offering from the one or two departures RC could offer with just Convair equipment (see the September 2019 REFLECTIONS for an in-depth discussion of how Republic utilized the CV-580 to make up for the shortcomings of Southern Airways' Swearingen Metro deployment.)

Most outstations saw an aircraft overnight, and daytime turnarounds were quick, with some as short as 10 minutes.

A cleverly-timed evening departure bank from the spokes increased aircraft utilization and allowed travelers robust connections across most of the outstations. Many final departures from Memphis left after 10 PM.

Aircraft would sit at Memphis for 45-60 minutes during most hub "pushes". With maintenance being conducted at MEM, this made swapping frames a smooth matter.

Altogether, even at this early date, we can see how the future Northwest regional operation would be a well-tuned connection machine out of Memphis.

Republic Express

Quick Reference Schedule

EFFECTIVE JUNE 1, 1986

ABERDEEN
BEMIDJI
BRAINERD
RHINELANDER
WATERTOWN

New Service to

- Burlington
- Rhineland
- Ft. Dodge
- Mason City



Saab promotional photo.



With the Memphis operation up and running, Republic awarded a second agreement to Express Airlines I to establish a Republic Express operation at MSP. Express Airlines I initiated Republic Express service at MSP on December 15, 1985, using Jetstreams to replace mainline Convair 580 flights on routes to Aberdeen and Watertown. South Dakota.

The service grew rapidly, and by June 1986 Express I was operating Republic Express flights to 15 destinations in Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Six of these routes (Aberdeen SD, Bemidji, Brainerd, Hibbing, and Rochester MN, and Cedar Rapids IA) were flown in head-to-head competition with Mesaba/Northwest Airlink.

Expansion continued at a steady clip even while secret negotiations between Republic and Northwest were underway in the summer of 1986. Express I opened up additional stations in both the northern and southern regions, such as Dubuque IA, Texarkana AR, and Joplin MO, while Republic redeployed Convairs off traditional markets such as Rhinelander WI and International Falls MN to open new midsize short-haul markets from Detroit, such as Fort Wayne IN and Erie PA. Republic Express was also used to provide additional frequencies on mainline routes such as Minneapolis/St. Paul to Duluth, Sioux Falls, and Grand Forks.



Stand Tall with Republic Express

The fast, pressurized Jetstream 31 with its uniquely large 18-place cabin was built by British Aerospace to set standards of passenger comfort unmatched by any other airliner in its class.

Republic Express operates 'wide body' style Jetstream 31 airliners to and from Memphis International Airport. See your agent or call your Republic reservations number for fares and schedules.

PRINTED IN ENGLAND

Cover Story



Neil Ralston photo.

The Red Tail Era

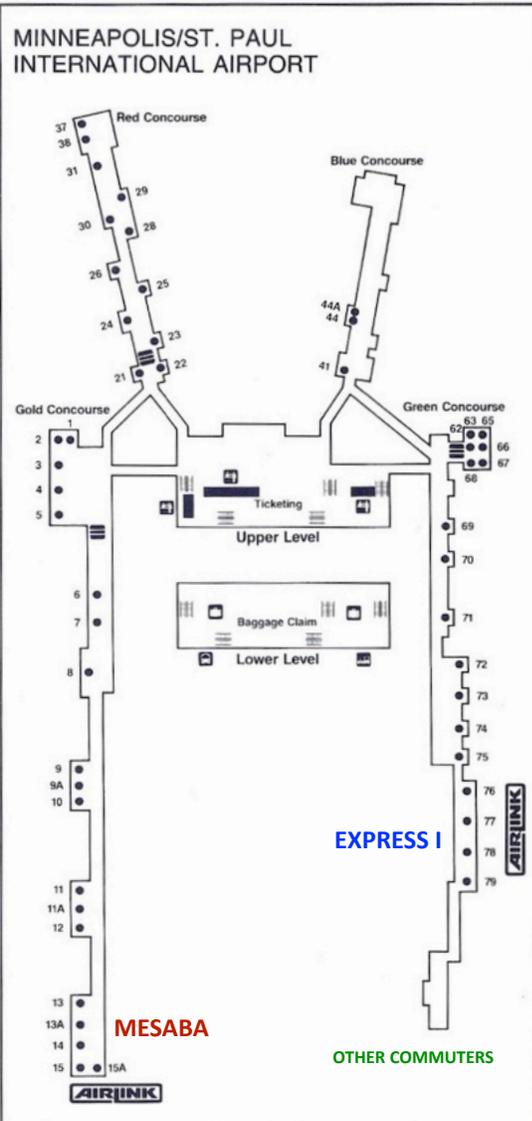
On October 1, 1986, the flight operations of NWA and Republic were merged into a combined Northwest. This meant Express I and Mesaba were now on the same team. Northwest network planners set out to rationalize the Airlink system and assigned one carrier to each feed market. Express I was the selected Airlink carrier for two markets previously served by both carriers – Hibbing MN and Cedar Rapids IA. Express I also picked up Duluth MN from Mesaba, and began new service to Eau Claire, Green Bay, and Oshkosh WI, and Rockford IL. Mesaba was assigned for several previous Express I routes – Watertown SD, and Bemidji, Brainerd, and Rochester MN.

Although the tails of the Express I aircraft were quickly painted red and given Northwest Airlink titles, many retained the grey stripes of their former Republic Express paint scheme for several years to come. Further, Express I flights at MSP continued to use the former RC ground-level boarding Gate 79 at the end of the Green Concourse, compared to Mesaba who was located at the end of the Gold Concourse.

In June 1993, Phoenix Airline Services split the Minneapolis-based Airlink operation into a separate corporate entity identified as Express Airlines II. Express II subleased its aircraft, and contracted for its crew scheduling, operational control, and flight training from Express I. This arrangement proved to be short-lived, as Express II was integrated back into Express I by mid-1995.



Neil Ralston photo.



This November 1986 gate map of MSP shows how each Airlink operator occupied opposite sides of the terminal complex. Connections between Express I and Mesaba operated flights would entail a very lengthy walk, as the connector bridge between today's C (Green at the time) and G (Gold) concourses was only a glimmer in airport planners' minds then. Likewise, the tram running alongside today's C concourse did not exist then - passengers had to walk the whole distance, with only the moving sidewalks on the Gold concourse being in operation at the time. The Mesaba side had some covered walkways onto the ramp for a degree of passenger comfort, but the Express I side was all open-air with aircraft lined up sometimes three deep.

Most non-aligned commuter carriers such as Air Wisconsin, Air Midwest, Mississippi Valley, Norcanair, and Great Lakes were relegated even further to a completely separate terminal beyond the security zone of the Green concourse. (REFLECTIONS will feature some of these carriers in upcoming issues.) The Commuter Terminal and the rental car lots and buildings even farther south were all bulldozed to construct today's A and B concourses.



Neil Ralston photo.



Saab promotional photo.

Tragedy struck the newly-formed Express II on December 1, 1993 when Flight 5719, a Jetstream 31 that had departed MSP, collided with terrain when approaching to land at Hibbing during poor nighttime weather. Both crew and all 16 passengers onboard were fatally injured in the crash. According to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the probable cause was a breakdown in coordination and the loss of altitude awareness by the flight crew. The aircraft was not equipped with a ground proximity warning system, which at the time was mandatory for larger aircraft.

In March 1997, Northwest Airlines purchased Express I from Michael Brady's Phoenix Airline Services. Northwest installed Phil Trenary, former CEO of Lone Star Airlines, as the new CEO and President of Express I.



Phil Trenary. Via Memphis Commercial Appeal

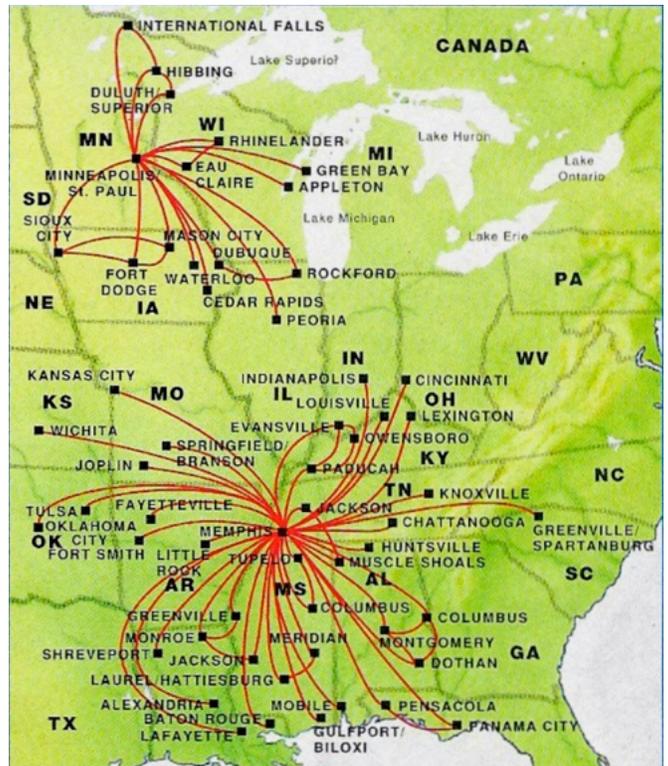
To consolidate the MSP Airlink operation, Saab 340 flying was transferred to Mesaba Airlines in August 1997. Some Express I Jetstream 31s lingered at MSP a bit longer, flying routes until January 1998 under a wet-lease agreement with Mesaba. For the next few years, Express I focused exclusively on building the Memphis Northwest Airlink operation. The exception to this was a short-lived intra-state shuttle route between Rapid City and Sioux Falls, South Dakota that Express I flew with Jetstreams in 1998.



Saab promotional photo; Memphis

The Regional Jet Age Begins

In May 1999, Northwest announced that it would place new 50-seat Bombardier CRJ aircraft with Express I, instead of Mesaba. The first Express I/Northwest JetLink CRJ flight operated from Memphis in June 2000. In July, Express I returned to MSP with a new CRJ route to Tulsa OK, along with Saab 340 replacement flights in several other markets. Express I's employment doubled to 1,300 by mid-2001 and a Detroit base was opened, with 17 CRJs and 26 Saabs in the fleet.



August 1996 route map. Outside of intra-South Dakota flying, this represented the zenith of Express I's propeller-driven system, with Saabs running from Memphis all the way to Greenville SC, Wichita KS, Panama City FL, Kansas City and Indianapolis.

Following the September 11 attacks, however, 650 staff were let go and the Saabs divested to Mesaba, leaving Express I an all-jet operation.

Cover Story

Further reorganization came in early 2002. In January, a new holding company for the airline, Pinnacle Airlines Corporation, was established. Shortly thereafter, Express I was formally renamed Pinnacle Airlines. In March, a new service agreement was inked with Northwest to increase Pinnacle's CRJ fleet to 95 aircraft by the end of 2004 (later increased to 139). Northwest divested its majority interest and in November 2003 Pinnacle became a publicly-traded company.



N8516C at Minneapolis/St. Paul, July 2005. Scott Norris photo.

After filing for bankruptcy protection in September 2005, Northwest removed 15 aircraft from Pinnacle's fleet. In 2006, Pinnacle entered into a new service agreement with NWA allowing it to operate larger aircraft up to 76 seats, and removed restrictions about entering into flying agreements with other airlines.

Pinnacle promptly responded to its new-found freedom. In January 2007, it purchased Colgan Airlines. As a wholly-owned subsidiary, Colgan operated turboprops in code-sharing agreements with Continental, United, and US Airways. Then, in April, Pinnacle Airlines announced it would begin flying 76-seat CRJ-900 aircraft for Delta Airlines starting in December 2007.

The Delta Connection

Delta and Northwest merged in October 2008, bringing all Pinnacle Airlines flying under the Delta Connection brand.

Pinnacle purchased Mesaba Airlines, its longtime Northwest Airlink and Delta Connection competitor, from Delta in June 2010. (See *REFLECTIONS* March, June, and September 2024 issues for how Mesaba's evolution led to this junction.) Mesaba's jet operation was to be consolidated with Pinnacle, while Mesaba was to take over remaining turboprop flying from the Colgan subsidiary, which had been badly tarnished by the high-profile crash of one of its Continental Connection flights at Buffalo NY in February 2009. Although Delta had terminated turboprop flying in November 2011, agreements were still in place with United and US Airways.

However, several factors – including challenges with integrating the Mesaba operation and poor financial performance of its turboprop agreements – led Pinnacle to file for bankruptcy protection in April 2012. Through bankruptcy, Pinnacle was able to end its turboprop flying agreements and shutter both Colgan and Mesaba. After reorganizing, Pinnacle emerged from bankruptcy in May 2013 as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Delta Airlines. To signify a fresh start, the company changed its name



July 2002 route map, with Mesaba taking over prop operations at Memphis.



CRJ-900 N186PQ at Minneapolis/St. Paul, Dec. 1, 2023, Scott Norris photo.

to Endeavor Airlines, installed a new management team, and moved its headquarters operation from Memphis to MSP.

One of the few regional airlines serving MSP in the 1980s to survive into the present day, Endeavor currently flies exclusively as a Delta Connection carrier serving 126 destinations. Still flying under the original Express I "9E" operating certificate, it has a fleet of 130 aircraft and is the world's largest operator of the CRJ-900 type. Although Endeavor continues to serve some short-haul routes from MSP to original Express I destinations including Rochester, MN and Cedar Rapids, IA, it also operates longer flights from MSP to destinations including New York-JFK and Memphis.

ENDEAVOR AIR CITIES SERVED

Endeavor 2023 route map.



CRJ-700 N376CA visiting Flying Cloud Airport (site of our museum archives) for Girls In Aviation Day 2024.



Michael Brady's other franchise: Chicago Express

While successfully retaining the Northwest Airlinck contract into the 1990s, Phoenix Airline Services had failed to sign agreements with any other major U.S. carrier. In an effort to better utilize administrative, training, and maintenance investments, the next option available was to start a regional carrier on its own. A significant untapped market for both origin-destination as well as transfer traffic was Chicago's Midway Airport, whose eponymous carrier had shuttered in 1991.

While Southwest Airlines moved to fill many longer-range routes from MDW with its 737s, closer centers that had been served by Midway Connection now lacked connections. Using Jetstream 31s for commonality, Brady launched Chicago Express operations in August 1993.

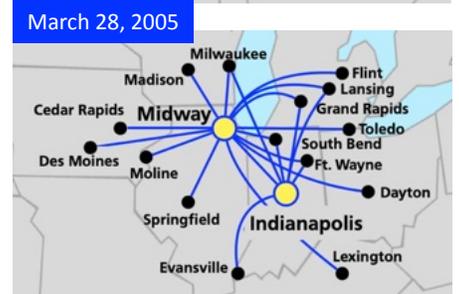
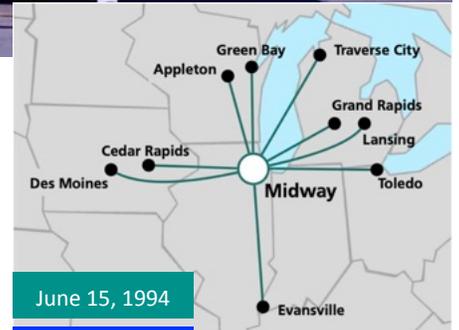
With head-office and sales functions run in common with Express I, several Chicago Express (IATA code C8) stations also ran side by side with NW Airlinck to share ground staff.



Werner Fischdick via aviation-safety.net

Steady growth in destinations was not matched with profit, and after the sale of Express I to NWA in 1997, Phoenix could not cover the overhead of an operation without code-share support.

For just \$1.9 million, Chicago Express was sold to ATA in June 1999, who continued operating it to feed their growing low-cost network, also replacing Jetstreams with 16 Saab 340s and adding an Indianapolis focus operation. However, ATA's bankruptcy in 2004 and asset sale to Southwest - who did not use regional feeder carriers - led the division to shut down on March 28, 2005.





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Photo by Zach Bogart

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