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## The development of the Omaha Municipal Airfield, 1924-1930

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OMAHA MUNICIPAL  
AIRFIELD, 1924-1930

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Leslie R. Valentine

May, 1980

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of  
Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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## PREFACE

There are several persons who have contributed directly to the completion of this project. Without the patient encouragement of my parents, Roy and Lorraine Valentine, my sister Christine Valentine, my brother Greg Valentine, and my grandmother Jody Valentine, it is doubtful whether this study would have succeeded. Mr. Milton Wuerth, Operations Director of the Omaha Airport Authority, was always willing to help in any way and aided greatly in an understanding of airport problems. Mr. Raymond Fahrlander and Mr. William Dean Noyes took time to discuss their recollections of the Omaha airfield and aviation in general during the 1920's and were of substantial assistance. The Inter-Library Loan Office of the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library was of great help in the acquisition of source material as was Joyce Jenson of the Library's Microforms Section. The records of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Omaha Post Number One of the American Legion and the Omaha-Douglas County Election Commissioner's Office were an important part of this thesis and these groups cooperated extensively in making these sources accessible. Finally, Dr. Harl Dalstrom, Dr. Tommy Thompson, and Dr. Orville Menard deserve much credit for their constant support during the preparation of this study.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1920, American aviation was still in its infancy, a description applicable to every aspect of the industry. The airplanes of this period were delicate, curious, contraptions. Still, these fragile craft, dwarfed by the magnitude of today's ships, were amazingly efficient, agile, and thrilling methods of transportation. Few realized then what importance these airplanes would have in the future.

The expansion of aircraft use and development necessitated another aspect of the industry: government control. Well into the 1920's, though, governmental regulation was almost non-existent. Typifying the glamor and freedom of these early years were the barnstormers--gallant young men in goggles who would captivate the public with their aerial maneuvers. Many observers were so enthralled by these aviators that they readily spent \$2.50 per person for a five to ten minute ride.<sup>1</sup> The passengers usually got their money's worth, but the fear and occasion of tragedy did much to prompt government certification of pilots, aircraft, mechanics, and the general regulation of aviation.<sup>2</sup> Some people began to realize that aviation had more to offer than World War I veterans on barnstorming tours. As an industry of the future, aviation promised and almost insured huge dividends

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Fahrlander, private interview held in Plattsmouth, Nebraska, November 30, 1978.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate, Civil Air Navigation Bill, H.R. 1262, 68th Cong., 2nd sess., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 2, 9-10.



for the state, city, or individual who did not delay, but got in on the ground level.

Local public reaction to aerial development was a very important aspect of this new industry. If the taxpayers in a certain area did not share a farsighted attitude toward aviation, aerial development could be a slow, difficult, at times extremely frustrating, process. This situation plagued Omaha as its aviation enthusiasts tried to develop a municipal airport from 1924 to 1930. Contrary to the claims of unity and air-mindedness expounded by one politician in 1931, the city's polarized views on the subject of aeronautical development had surfaced on practically every aviation issue.<sup>3</sup> A listless uncaring attitude by a large portion of Omaha's population contributed greatly to the delays and problems encountered in the quest for an airport.

From the spring of 1924, when the search for what became the present airfield began, to the dedication of the Boeing hangar in the fall of 1930, the city battled over the development of the airfield. On one side were the proponents of the project: politicians, businessmen, and, generally, the more affluent section of the population. These people knew that they stood to gain much from Omaha as an air center, both financially and because a faster method of transportation would be at their disposal. This is not to say that all active supporters were compelled solely by opportunism. Many seemed genuinely dedicated

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<sup>3</sup>Dean Noyes, "The City of Omaha and Aviation," Official Souvenir Program of the Omaha Air Races, May 15-18, 1931, 24-25.

to the development of the city's aviation facilities.

On the opposite side were those people who were not necessarily against Omaha's expansion, either from a general or an aeronautical standpoint, but were more concerned with day to day life. This group primarily, but not exclusively, came from the less than affluent areas of Omaha, and saw no indication that the development of aviation would touch their lives or help their city. After all, up to the middle of the twenties, aviation seemed to be a hobby or sport of the wealthy--a youthful side show carried on by barnstormers and displaced World War I pilots.<sup>4</sup> Understandably, many persons in the working class found it difficult to identify with any one in these categories.

Due to the intense efforts of a handful of business and political leaders, and in spite of apparent apathy, Omaha succeeded in building an airfield. These were the "frontier days of aviation," a period in which even air-minded citizens considered an airport a novelty, a luxury, a gamble.<sup>5</sup> According to aerial leaders in Omaha, the cities that were willing to gamble the most in the shortest time would be the ones to profit from aviation's clear destiny. The fact that this destiny was not obvious to a great number of people is interesting. A study of the struggles to develop an airport in Omaha, then, is more than merely another chapter in the progress of aviation. It provides a valuable insight into the type of city Omaha was during these years and

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<sup>4</sup>Raymond Fahrlander, private interview held in Plattsmouth, Nebraska, November 30, 1978; Sunday World-Herald, April 18, 1943, 2C.

<sup>5</sup>Jimmy Doolittle, "'I am not a very timid type . . .,'" an Interview by Robert S. Gallagher, American Heritage, XXV (April, 1974), 101.

the struggle its leaders had to undertake to develop an aviation status for their community.

## CHAPTER I

### BACKGROUND: GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION AND EARLY DIFFICULTIES FOR OMAHA AVIATION

Government regulation of the aviation industry and concern over its development had a great effect upon aviation in Omaha and came about for two reasons. First, the deluge of fatalities among the unregulated pilots was shocking.<sup>1</sup> The safety records of private American aviators did not even approach those of the Post Office and the Army, whose flying was regulated to some extent by the government. In the period 1922-25 the Army flew over 900,000 miles "without a single casualty." The air mail had also accrued an impressive record. In 1925, the mail travelled over 2,500,000 miles with only two deaths.<sup>2</sup>

These records contrasted sharply with that of the "itinerant" pilot. In 1924, over 1,000,000 miles were flown by private parties. The result, seventy-five deaths and ninety-one injuries, constituted "a ratio of one fatality for every 13,500 miles flown."<sup>3</sup> In the years between World War I and 1925

300 persons [were] killed and 500 injured in flying accidents

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<sup>1</sup>U.S. Congress, House, Civil Air Navigation Bill, H.R. 1262, 68th Cong., 2nd sess., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 2, 9. Hereafter cited as Civil Air Navigation Bill.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate, The Promotion of Commercial Aviation, S. Rept. 2, 69th Cong., 1st sess., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 2. Hereafter cited as Commercial Aviation.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

which could have been prevented had there been in existence and enforced a statute regulating the operation of commercial aircraft in interstate commerce.<sup>4</sup>

These statistics were powerful weapons to those who advocated government regulation of the airways.

Realizing that aviation development within the United States had failed to keep pace with that in other countries, the supporters of regulation had another argument for increased government control. Although President Calvin Coolidge claimed that the United States did not lag behind, evidence was found to the contrary.<sup>5</sup>

Many countries in Europe "far more distraught in their political and industrial affairs" after World War I than the United States, had developed air regulations capable of being models anywhere.<sup>6</sup> England, France, Germany, and other air-minded European countries, by 1925, were providing government aid to aviation. England granted \$1,750,000 for the support of private aviation in 1924 and, along with France and Germany, created government offices for the promotion of aeronautics.<sup>7</sup>

The air-minded position of foreign nations combined with the dilatory stance of America to cause certain diplomatic difficulties. In 1919, the United States, along with twenty-two countries, participated in the International Air Navigation Convention. As a primary objective of this meeting, these nations sought to insure that each

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Civil Air Navigation Bill, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Commercial Aviation, 1-2.

enacted regulatory and safety laws regarding commercial aviation. The fifth article of the convention prohibited "from flight above the territory of any nation a party to the convention the aircraft of any nation not a party to the convention."<sup>8</sup> The proposals of this convention were never presented to the Congress for approval. Consequently, the airplanes of the United States were not legally allowed in the air space of Canada, which had approved the articles of the convention. Supporters of government regulation looked upon this condition as both as inconvenience and an embarrassment. They envisioned a tremendous future for commercial aviation and were fearful that America would be unprepared.<sup>9</sup>

Legislation had to be developed that would solve the safety problem and help the country keep pace with other nations. Valid precedents for such legislation existed then in the form of government regulations covering all aspects of water transportation. Many aerial supporters found it ironic that a myriad of laws regulated how passengers could be transported from one side of Long Island Sound to the other while almost none covered a transcontinental airplane trip.<sup>10</sup> If the United States enacted suitable aerial legislation it would be insured proper preparedness for the "boom period" currently on the horizon for aviation,<sup>11</sup>

The Air Commerce Act of 1926 provided the solution to these

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<sup>8</sup>Civil Air Navigation Bill, 8.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 9.

<sup>10</sup>Commercial Aviation, 4.

<sup>11</sup>Civil Air Navigation Bill, 9

problems. Probably the most important statute governing American aviation in the entire decade, this act granted the Secretary of Commerce the power to begin the registration and rating of planes, pilots, and air facilities.<sup>12</sup> In addition, this legislation authorized the Secretary to appoint an Assistant Secretary of Commerce to aid in the performance of this act and to supervise the general encouragement of commercial aviation.<sup>13</sup> The passage of this legislation marked the end of a free-wheeling romantic era in the history of American aviation. Just months before, aviation in America had very little government attention.<sup>14</sup> Now, at least the United States government thought of aviation as a first class industry worthy of aid and requiring regulation.

While air commerce received deserved attention in Washington, it experienced decidedly slower development in Nebraska. Of all the air-minded groups in the entire state, the Aerial Transportation Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce had the most impact upon the advancement of aviation. The Chamber began this committee in 1919 when it looked as though Omaha would be chosen as an airmail station due to its central location. The government chose Omaha as the western terminus of the transcontinental airmail and in November, 1919, the Chamber of Commerce gave the Aerial Transportation Committee the

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<sup>12</sup>U.S. Statutes at Large, Vol. 44, pt. 2 (Dec. 1925-March 1927), "Air Commerce Act of 1926," May 20, 1926 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1927), 569.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 573.

<sup>14</sup>Commercial Aviation, 4.

responsibility for directing the construction of a hangar to house the airmail planes. The hangar was completed under the committee's guidance and the airmail service out of Omaha began on May 15, 1920.<sup>15</sup> By 1926, the importance of this committee had grown tremendously. Its members supported the Air commerce Act and thought it should be "of interest to the entire country, as well as Omaha . . . ." <sup>16</sup> The concentrated efforts of this group were invaluable in the establishment of an air-field in Omaha by 1931.

On the state level, Nebraska's first major action upon aviation came in 1921 when the legislature passed House Roll 206. This authorized cities "of the metropolitan class, . . . of the first class, . . . or of the second class . . . to acquire lands for the purpose of establishing an aviation field" and to make improvements upon the land funded by the sale of bonds.<sup>17</sup> Not until April 24, 1929, when it had the example of the Air Commerce Act to imitate, did the Nebraska legislature pass another significant piece of aviation legislation. House Roll 374 required airmen and mechanics to be licensed. This law also gave the

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<sup>15</sup> George H. Tweney, "Air Transportation and the American West," Montana, The Magazine of Western History, XIX (Oct., 1969), 70; Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Public Finance Committee Minutes, September 8, 1927, 309-310.

<sup>16</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Executive Committee Minutes, April 20, 1926, 133.

<sup>17</sup> Session Laws Passed by the Legislature of the State of Nebraska, 40th sess., H.R. 206, "An Act to authorize cities . . . to acquire lands for the purpose of establishing an aviation field . . .", "March 15, 1921 (Lincoln: The Kline Publishing Company, 1921), 658.



State Railway Commission the power to oversee aviation within the state.<sup>18</sup>

Senator Hiram Bingham of Connecticut, sponsor of the Air Commerce Act of 1926, sharply criticized Nebraska's slow response to aviation. Three months before the passage of House Roll 374, Senator Bingham denounced the lackadaisical attitude in Nebraska: "'It is quite extra-ordinary that a state that has as much flying territory as Nebraska has no legislation whatever regulating flying of an intra-state character.'"<sup>19</sup> Calling the situation "one of unusual gravity," Bingham stated that eighty-five per cent of the fatal accidents in the preceding year were "with unlicensed pilots and unlicensed planes." This being the case, Bingham argued, Nebraska should immediately adopt laws requiring federal inspection and licensing of all aircraft within its boundaries.<sup>20</sup> The Aerial Transportation Committee expressed similar sentiments and supported House Roll 374 while the legislature had it under consideration.<sup>21</sup> With the approval of that bill, Nebraska had finally recognized the need for regulation--almost three years after the Air Commerce Act pointed out the necessity of such action.

On the same day the legislature approved House Roll 374, another

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<sup>18</sup>Session Laws Passed by the Legislature of the State of Nebraska, 45th sess., H.R. 374, "An Act relating to the licensing of airmen and aircraft . . .," April 24, 1929 (York: Blank Book Company 1929), 145-147.

<sup>19</sup>Sunday World-Herald, January 13, 1929, 9A.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Aerial Transportation Committee Minutes, February 15, 1929, 8. Hereafter cited as ATC Minutes.

bill concerning aviation in Nebraska went into effect. House Roll 424 expanded upon the law of 1921. This legislation made it possible for a city developing an airfield to levy a property tax for the airport. It also stated that the United States Department of Commerce must approve "the location and specifications" of such an airfield before any bonds could be sold or taxes levied.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, as far as airfields in general were concerned, House Roll 424 formally declared what had been implied by House Roll 206 in 1921, that airfields within the state of Nebraska, if organized properly, were "a public purpose."<sup>23</sup>

The debate over whether municipal airports were a public purpose helps to explain the infantile state of aviation at this time. Many people still thought that aviation had strictly private advantages and that public land, facilities, and money should not be used for its advancement. In a 1929 article for the Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America, Harry J. Freeman of New York University discussed this subject. Freeman argued that the prohibition of public funds for aviation purposes under the guise of private advantage was invalid. In other words, he contended that aviation and its advancement did, indeed, constitute a public purpose and pointed out that "the courts which have had occasion to consider the question have without exception so held."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Session Law Passed by the Legislature of the State of Nebraska, 45th sess., H.R. 424, "An Act relating to municipal corporations . . ." April 24, 1929 (York: Blank Book Company, 1929), 147-149.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 148.

<sup>24</sup>Harry J. Freeman, as cited in U.S. Congress, Senate, Municipal Airports as a "Public Purpose," 71st Cong., 2nd sess., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1929), 1.

Freeman cited examples from many states to prove his contention.

In a Missouri case the point of contention revolved around whether municipal bonds could be issued to establish an airport. Those who argued that tax money could not be legally used for aerial needs bespoke the image of the airplane as the toy of the leisure-seeking rich:

It (the airport) will afford a starting and landing place for a few wealthy, ultra-reckless persons, who own planes and who are engaged in private pleasure flying

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The number of persons using the airport will be about equal to the total number of persons who engage in big-game hunting, trips to the African wilderness, and voyages of North Pole exploration.

\* \* \*

True, it may be permitted to the ordinary common garden variety of citizen to enter the airport free of charge, so that he may press his face against some restricting barrier and sunburn his throat gazing at his more fortunate compatriots as they sportingly navigate the empyrean blue.

But beyond that, beyond the right to hungrily look on, the ordinary citizen gets no benefit from the taxes he is forced to pay.<sup>25</sup>

The court disagreed and contended that the promising destiny of aviation certainly justified the money spent at that time.<sup>26</sup>

Nebraska experienced a similar case when the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled on the public propriety of aviation. In June, 1928, the city of Lincoln sought funds to develop an airport and the court ruled "a majority vote . . . sufficient" to authorize the issuance of bonds designated for the establishment of an airfield. The Nebraska Court also considered municipal airports a public purpose "for which bonds

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 4.

may be voted and taxes levied and collected."<sup>27</sup>

Congress passed an act that ended, at least on the national level, the confusion and debate on this subject. Approved on May 24, 1928, this law authorized "the leasing of public lands for use as public aviation fields" and dealt, in general, with the controversy over the public aspect of airfields. This act allowed the Secretary of the Interior "to lease for use as a public airport" public land "not to exceed six hundred and forty acres in area . . . ." <sup>28</sup> The enactment of this legislation, though perhaps of limited substantive significance, along with the previous Air Commerce Act of 1926, reflected the growth of aviation. The safety of the airplanes and the quality and experience of their pilots and mechanics were dealt with in 1926. Now, with the right to set aside public lands for aviation purposes, an increase in the number of landing fields was at least theoretical and the dream of famed aviator Harry F. Guggenheim, to see "airports within 10 miles of each other in every direction all over the country," seemed less idealistic. <sup>29</sup>

Just because Congress dignified the status of aviation did not mean the public response would be swift and positive. A sense of apathy best described the reaction of the people in Omaha regarding the furtherance of aviation in their community. Yet in spite of this

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<sup>27</sup> State ex. rel. City of Lincoln v. Johnson, State Auditor, 220 North Western Reporter, 273, (1928).

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Statutes at Large, Vol. 45, pt. 1 (Dec. 1927-March 1929), "An Act to authorize the leasing of public lands for use as public aviation fields," May 24, 1928 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1929), 728.

<sup>29</sup> Omaha World-Herald, February 1, 1929, 9,

attitude, Omaha held a stop along the transcontinental airmail route. From March, 1920, through June, 1924, the government operated the airmail out of the Chamber of Commerce Hangar stationed on land owned by the Ak-Sar-Ben Exposition Company. Located on Sixty-Sixth Street one block north of Center Street on the southwest outskirts of Omaha, Ak-Sar-Ben was a public enterprise organization "for the promotion of the civic and commercial interests of Omaha" and was happy to help the city succeed in aviation.<sup>30</sup> The hangar cost nearly \$32,000, an amount the Chamber raised from public subscriptions and which the postal service suggested would be reimbursed by the federal government. By 1924, Congress had not refunded any of the money spent on the airmail hangar. The close proximity of the mail service, though, provided many benefits for the business community as well as the city in general and undoubtedly counterbalanced some of the initial expense.<sup>31</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce realized this but remained concerned about the large investment in the hangar. When Ak-Sar-Ben expressed the desire to have the "property vacated," and the Airmail Service gave notice that it planned to move to another site, the Chamber looked to the July 1 lease expiration with dismay.<sup>32</sup> Not only would the Chamber possess a \$32,000 hangar without an airfield, but the city would lose a

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<sup>30</sup> Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads of the House of Representatives on H.R. 4326 and H.R. 4642, 69th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 1926 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1926), 25. Hereafter cited as Post Office and Post Roads Subcommittee Minutes.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 16, 26.

<sup>32</sup> ATC Minutes, January 17, 1924, 20.

valuable aerial connection. In January, 1924, the Aerial Transportation Committee began searching for ways to keep the mail service near or within Omaha. Some committee members thought a bond issue should be floated in the spring for the purchase of a level expanse of land east of Carter Lake, Iowa. Although there was no official study of the site, it was generally thought to be an excellent location for an airfield, and the Ak-Sar-Ben hangar could be moved there easily. The committee soon learned, however, that the government had already decided to move the mail service to Fort Crook, a military installation a short distance from the city.<sup>33</sup>

Had Ak-Sar-Ben not desired to end the lease arrangement, the airmail would have moved anyway. Night flying was coming into general acceptance at that time and the postal authorities thought the field too small to fly safely after sunset. The mail service found Fort Crook not only spacious but equipped with much needed lighting facilities.<sup>34</sup> Late in its search for another field, the Chamber could not hope to compete with the advantages of Fort Crook. The Aerial Transportation Committee dropped the matter with the meager hope that the airmail would not move to a military installation after all, but to a location nearer Omaha. They also abandoned immediate debate over whether the hangar should be moved to a new site.<sup>35</sup>

On June 22, 1924, eight days before the lease expired, a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, April 23, 1924, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Post Office and Post Roads Subcommittee Minutes, 25.

<sup>35</sup> ATC Minutes, April 23, 1924, 22.

tornado destroyed the hangar and seven of the planes it sheltered.<sup>36</sup> The consequences for the airmail were surprisingly minor. Fortunately, the Post Office had the airmail hangar at Fort Crook almost completed and the transfer of operations underway when the storm occurred. The airmail experienced only a "weeks delay" and no "serious confusion."<sup>37</sup> The ease with which the mail service handled the situation contrasted sharply with the feeble attempts of Omaha to establish itself, once again, as an airmail center. The Chamber of Commerce received only \$20,000 insurance for the hangar and suffered a \$12,000 loss. The deficit would have been unnecessary had the government lived up to the reimbursement understanding.<sup>38</sup> This initial ill fortune was prophetic.

It turned out to be over six years until the airmail was officially established within the city of Omaha. These six years abounded with controversy and chronic delay at every turn. The failure of the exhaustive attempts by influential business and civic groups to re-establish an airfield near Omaha very quickly can only be explained by a public that was extremely apathetic and, at times, openly contrary. The same untiring efforts precipitated the eventual success of the airport drive. By late 1930, though, the people of Omaha were still highly apathetic but gradually accepting the idea that

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<sup>36</sup>Omaha Daily News, June 23, 1924, 1.

<sup>37</sup>Post Office and Post Roads Subcommittee Minutes, 25.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 26. Apparently, no one in Omaha secured a written promise from the government to repay the money spent on the hangar. Had this been done it would certainly have strengthened the city's claims for reimbursement.

aviation, as a permanent thriving industry, was here to stay and would surely have an influence upon their lives.



## CHAPTER II

### YEARS OF INDECISION 1925-1927

By the end of 1924, Omaha's significance as an aerial center had dwindled substantially. The offices of the Airmail Service remained in downtown Omaha but the city did not have an airfield or hangar and the mail planes landed at a field twelve miles away.<sup>1</sup> Omaha seemed to be drifting away from aviation while other cities moved speedily ahead.

In the unfortunate months before 1925 the Omaha Chamber of Commerce established itself as Omaha's leader in the advancement of aviation. For the next three years the Aerial Transportation Committee served as the catalyst around which the aerial plans of the Chamber, as well as the city, formed. The members of this committee had to start from scratch because the events of June had eliminated much of the reason for their existence. This committee decided to switch directions. Rather than continuing to mourn the movement of the air-mail and the loss of the Ak-Sar-Ben field and hangar, the Aerial Transportation Committee began urging Omaha to forge ahead with the development of a municipal airport.

The reasons given for prompt construction of an airfield resounded with civic duty and pride. Seeing no reason to remain idle, the Chamber thought Omaha had to act immediately to get to "the fore-

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<sup>1</sup>Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal, XIII (August 30, 1924), 5. Hereafter cited as Chamber Journal.

front in air traffic." Convinced that "the greatest possibilities for the future" were in aerial transportation, the Chamber members believed that if Omaha acted quickly the city could compete with other areas that were not as centrally located.<sup>2</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce expressed an understandably civic-minded approach to the problem. As shock over the loss of the Ak-Sar-Ben airmail connection rapidly diminished, the Chamber realized that the Fort Crook location, "under army regulations," could not be "used for commercial purposes."<sup>3</sup> This placed the matter in a totally different perspective. The quest for an aerial status for Omaha became more than an attempt to bring the airmail nearer to the downtown area. Although the Aerial Transportation Committee foresaw the eventual return of the airmail, in early 1925 all thoughts were on the acquisition of an airfield and the prompt capture of any available commercial business.

Sources dealing with the beginnings of the Omaha Municipal Airfield are very scarce. One of these, a first-hand account written by Ted Landale, appeared in the Omaha World-Herald on April 18, 1943. In this generally helpful article, Landale claimed that three sites were given equally serious attention by Omaha aerial authorities as possible locations for an airport. The first two potential locations included a site thirteen miles west of downtown on Dodge Street and a dairy farm at the north end of Sixteenth Street. Landale admitted that

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, August 2, 1924, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Aerial Transportation Committee Minutes, March 23, 1925, 58. Hereafter cited as ATC Minutes.

the third site had the best chance of approval: a flat piece of land between Carter Lake and the Missouri River.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the reason Landale suggested for the elimination of the site in west Omaha casts some doubt upon his credibility. His story involved the air of affluence which surrounded any mention of the western part of the city. Supposedly E. John Brandeis, prominent west Omaha businessman, owned an airplane and his family desired a landing field in the western part of the city. Yet Alan Baer, a nephew of E. John Brandeis, recalled that Brandeis never owned an airplane, but the city commissioners at the time knew that many Omahans considered "airplane piloting . . . a sport akin to polo, and about as useful." These politicians were not willing to risk public controversy by building an airport near what many people thought to be a well-to-do area of the city.<sup>5</sup>

As this article suggested, there were indeed many suitable locations for Omaha's airfield.<sup>6</sup> However, from the destruction of the Ak-Sar-Ben hangar onward, the Aerial Transportation Committee gave only one location more than off-hand attention. The 160 acres east of Carter Lake, Iowa, and southeast of Florence Lake consistently received the most consideration.<sup>7</sup> Although highly criticized in later years, in

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<sup>4</sup>Sunday World-Herald, April 18, 1943, 2C; September 3, 1961, 9J.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, April 18, 1943, 2C; Alan Baer to author, July 23, 1979.

<sup>6</sup>Chamber Journal, XIII (February 14, 1925), 18.

<sup>7</sup>Omaha World-Herald, February, 1925, 1; ATC Minutes, January 17, 1924, 21; April 23, 1924, 22; January 15, 1925, 54-55; February 24, 1925, 56-57; March 23, 1925, 58-61.

early 1925 this area received much support as a potential airfield.<sup>8</sup>

Two of the authorities that judged the worthiness of the Carter Lake site were Carl F. Egge, head of the Airmail Service, and Major Lawrence Churchill, head of the Seventh Corps Area Flying Service. Egge labelled the proposed tract of land a very good spot for an airfield. He also urged quick development of the site if Omaha wanted to take advantage of the regulations disallowing commercial use of Fort Crook Field. Omaha, Egge thought, could easily lure aerial business to this location.<sup>9</sup> Major Churchill agreed with the appraisal of Egge and thought this location could be developed into an "ideal landing field."<sup>10</sup> The Aerial Transportation Committee valued the consultation of Egge and Churchill and, although confident over the propriety of the site, also sought the approval of most important political and business leaders from within the city.<sup>11</sup>

In early spring, 1925, the acceptance of the Carter Lake site seemed imminent. Due to the need for organized effort, the joint aerial committees of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Omaha Association, a group of business men whose objectives were to promote Omaha, formally looked into the matter. The report of this joint committee stated that of the 2,000 airfields in the country 228 were "municipally owned fields." To the committee, this proved the

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<sup>8</sup> Chamber Journal, XIII (February 28, 1925), 11, 14.

<sup>9</sup> ATC Minutes, March 23, 1925, 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Sunday World-Herald, April 18, 1943, 2C; ATC Minutes, January 15, 1925, 54-55.

feasibility of Omaha's desires to develop an airfield.<sup>12</sup> The report cited the 1921 Nebraska law that allowed a city to vote bonds for the purchase and improvement of an airfield.<sup>13</sup> Due to the long delay until the next election, however, the joint committee urged Omaha to ignore this option. As long as the value of the land remained under \$100,000, the property could be purchased through the city's right of eminent domain "as an addition to the Omaha park system."<sup>14</sup> Then, if the development of aviation did not proceed as planned, the city would still possess a valuable and easily re-sellable tract of land.<sup>15</sup> This caution proved that even the faith of these supposedly staunch aerial supporters had limits. The 'air-minded' members of this joint committee recognized that Omaha must act quickly or be left behind by other cities. Still, this did not reveal their entire reason for circumventing the electorate. A bond proposition of this sort, if allowed on the ballot in 1925, would probably have been unsuccessful.

There are many reasons for this conclusion. Apparently, many Omaha citizens thought of aviation as a useless sport or hobby.<sup>16</sup> Also, judging from the effort and anxiety which attended the passage of aerial

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<sup>12</sup>ATC Minutes, March 23, 1925, 58.

<sup>13</sup>Session Laws Passed by the Legislature of the State of Nebraska, 40th sess., H.R. 206, "An Act to authorize cities . . . to acquire lands for the purpose of establishing an aviation field . . ." March 15, 1921 (Lincoln: The Kline Publishing Company, 1921), 658.

<sup>14</sup>ATC Minutes, March 23, 1925, 59.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, Chamber Journal, XIII (February 28, 1925), 14; (January 31, 1925), 11; (February 14, 1925), 18.

<sup>16</sup>Sunday World-Herald, April 18, 1943, 2C.

bond propositions in the future, it seems highly unlikely that the city could have approved the sale of bonds as early as 1925. Even certain politicians in this period were not convinced of the importance of aviation. The views of Park Commissioner Joseph Hummel, a highly respected and popular member of the City Commission, typified the persisting image of aviation as a novelty.<sup>17</sup> After the City Council voted the new airport site within his department Hummel stated that he had supported that action. The Commissioner considered aviation "an activity, as gold, tennis, baseball, horseshoes."<sup>18</sup> It followed, then, that an airport belonged within a city's park department. Certainly many more people agreed, and believed aviation to have an equally minimal value to their community.

Regardless of the lack of aerial enthusiasm within Omaha, on May 5, 1925, the city adopted an ordinance acquiring as park property and by eminent domain the 198-acre expanse of land destined to become the Omaha Municipal Airfield.<sup>19</sup> Although the Omaha World-Herald reported the size of the purchase as 160 and 192 acres in 1943 and 1961 articles respectively, 198 seems to be the more reliable figure.<sup>20</sup> The difficulties that were to haunt the field began quickly. It took until August for the evaluation of the land to be completed. When the

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<sup>17</sup> William Dean Noyes to author, July 21, 1979.

<sup>18</sup> Omaha Bee, August 6, 1925, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Omaha City Council, Chamber Journal Minutes, May 5, 1925, 5255. Hereafter cited as City Council Minutes.

<sup>20</sup> Sunday World-Herald, April 18, 1943, 2C; September 3, 1961, 9J; Omaha Bee, August 6, 1925, 1.

City Council received the appraisals on August 5, 1925, the value arrived upon, \$41,215, did not even approach the \$100,000 limit for this type of purchase. However, the eighteen property holders were not satisfied with the appraised value of their land. The Council announced a meeting with these citizens in which the city intended to appeal to them "from the standpoint of public spiritedness" to accept the evaluation.<sup>21</sup> The City Commissioners in Omaha displayed "a feeling of great urgency" in the acquisition and development of a municipal field.<sup>22</sup> To these men the appraisal of farmland presented an obstacle in Omaha's quest for aerial supremacy. Some of the landowners, though, were not willing to sacrifice a fair compensation for their homes in favor of the future of aviation in Omaha.

In September, 1925, the City Council accepted the second evaluation involving 117 acres of the disputed land. Investor's Realty Company, owners of nineteen acres, received \$12,000 rather than the original appraisal of \$8,500. The price of George Warren Smith's ninety-eight acres rose to \$29,460 from \$15,000. Finally, the evaluation placed upon the lease-hold of Hans Christenson increased from one dollar to \$1,500.<sup>23</sup> These alterations increased the payment for the future airport land from \$41,215 to \$60,574 and later

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<sup>21</sup>Omaha Bee, August 6, 1925, 1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Omaha World-Herald, September 1, 1925, 4; City Council Minutes, September 1, 1925, 6843-6845.

re-evaluations raised the total to over \$80,000, still well beneath the maximum figure for an eminent domain acquisition.<sup>24</sup>

Omaha had finally acquired an airfield site and on September 3, 1925, a mere two days after the Council agreed upon these appraisals, twenty-one men "armed with corn knives" began clearing sixty-one acres of the property.<sup>25</sup> It looked as though Omaha's airport, as part of Joe Hummel's Park Department, would soon take shape. Although neither he nor his department had any experience in airfield planning or development, Commissioner Hummel vowed that the field would be usable for the American Legion Convention to be held in Omaha that fall.<sup>26</sup>

The enthusiastic hopes of Hummel and others for Omaha's immediate aerial future, though, faltered under the onslaught of misfortune. With no explanation, Postmaster General Harvey S. New, in the middle of September, announced that the government had made a mistake by stationing the airmail headquarters in Omaha. He intended to see that the headquarters were transferred to Washington as soon as possible.<sup>27</sup> Only an old law of 1882 prevented Omaha from losing the airmail station immediately. This statute stated that Washington D.C. employees could not "be paid out of money appropriated for federal

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<sup>24</sup> Complete original property evaluations can be seen in City Council Minutes, August 6, 1925, 6555-6562; Omaha World-Herald, January 1, 1926, 10; Douglas County Legionnaire, VI (July 14, 1927), 1. Hereafter cited as Legionnaire.

<sup>25</sup> Omaha World-Herald, September 3, 1925, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Omaha Daily News, September 18, 1925, 1.



employees outside the district." Postmaster New, however, had declared his intention to achieve "a switch in appropriation from the next congress" so that his plan might be implemented.<sup>28</sup> The headquarters, safely in Omaha for the time being, seemed destined to move eventually and, as could be expected, New's plans brought an immediate reaction from Omaha aerial leaders.

Gould Dietz, treasurer at the Charles N. Dietz Lumber Company, President of the Omaha Chapter of the Aeronautic Society of America, and one of the city's foremost aerial enthusiasts, said he would use every connection he possessed in Washington to prevent the removal of the airmail headquarters. Dietz, highly surprised at the announcement, also declared his intention to "'sit in the gallery of the senate all winter if necessary,'" or until the Postmaster's plans were foiled.<sup>29</sup> The shock of Dietz and many other aerial leaders within Omaha at the announcement seemed genuine. Assistant Postmaster General W. Irving Glover, during a visit to Omaha in late August, had described the city as "'the logical location for airmail headquarters,'"<sup>30</sup> This position, far from hinting at the airmail's removal from the city, had led Omaha to believe that the headquarters would remain safely within the city. Understandably, the Aerial Transportation Committee and others considered this plan unbridled government deception.

The Chamber's aerial committee reacted immediately to this

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4.

attempted "double-cross." Victor Roos, committee member and future general manager of the Swallow Airplane Company of Wichita, Kansas, stated that "'definite action'" would be taken on this matter.<sup>31</sup> However, apart from the initial statements of indignation, this committee did very little. On October 23 and again on December 29, 1925, the Aerial Transportation Committee considered this subject in their meetings. On either date the Committee's "'definite action'" encompassed only general discussion and a plea to Nebraska's representatives in Congress to do what they could to combat the measure, something they, perhaps, would have done without the Chamber's encouragement.<sup>32</sup> As the weeks passed the controversy seemed to fade away and the plans of Postmaster New were not carried out. The threat to the airmail headquarters revealed the limits of power wielded by the Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber's aviation committee paid scant attention to the matter because it did not have much influence over national policy. The focus of the committee members remained near home during the fall of 1925, where their influence continued to be a good deal greater.

Besides the problem over the retention of the airmail headquarters, the Aerial Transportation Committee dealt with a more local difficulty; one that could be handled easily. The subject of quick aerial advancement received much attention in the newspapers from the beginning of 1925. By the fall of the year, with Post Office objectives promising to stall Omaha's aviation future, one newspaper's civic mindedness produced friction with the Chamber of Commerce.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>ATC Minutes, October 28, 1925, 66; December 29, 1925, 73.

On September 20, 1925, the Omaha Daily News, in a front page editorial, argued against Postmaster New's plans to move the airmail headquarters. Such an attempt, said the Daily News, should be a "call to arms" for Omaha businessmen, for the move to Washington was a highly illogical choice. The headquarters should be in the Middle West "where there is the greatest airmail activity." Describing Omaha as "inexcusably indifferent" to the advantages that the airmail brought, the Daily News claimed that the city must no longer "sit with hands folded in its lap." Omaha would have to accept the responsibility for the entire controversy and must fight with much more intensity than it had showed up to that time to remain an aerial center. The editorial pointed out that Omaha "accepted the airmail offices apathetically . . . dilly-dallied about getting a municipal airfield" near downtown and had "to be prodded" into improving the usually muddy road to Fort Crook.<sup>33</sup> The Daily News closed saying that, realistically, the government could not be blamed for wanting the headquarters removed from such an uncooperative location. The newspaper hoped that the airmail headquarters would remain, but warned that if the city continued to be "as lukewarm in trying to keep them" as it had been in fulfilling its aerial potential "we might as well kiss the headquarters good-bye right now."<sup>34</sup> Little doubt remained as to the position of the Daily News on this matter.

The Daily News' criticism did not end there because on October 1,

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<sup>33</sup> Omaha Daily News, September 20, 1925, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

1925, a second editorial regarding Omaha's aerial stagnation appeared. The Daily News quoted a statement by Major Howard Wehrie of the National Aeronautical Association claiming that Omaha's potential "'as a leading commercial flying center'" could not be beaten. Wehrie warned Omaha, though, that other cities were proceeding more rapidly to overcome Omaha's natural geographic advantage. These comments were interpreted by the Daily News as politely ignoring the city's "backwardness" in establishing an airfield and its inability "to take full advantage" of its chances for aerial leadership.<sup>35</sup>

The Aerial Transportation Committee made little response to these two editorials. The members decided to reaffirm their faith in Commissioner Hummel by drafting a letter commending him for his efforts regarding the Municipal Field.<sup>36</sup> After a thorough discussion the committee ruled that the improvements to the field had proceeded adequately up to that point. These men did not consider the airport's development behind schedule or under poor direction and thought the response and explanations they offered to the Daily News' initial two editorials were sufficient.

Soon after, though, a third editorial claimed that

the Omaha field was being used for pasturing cows and that no effort was being made by either the Greater Omaha Committee or the Chamber of Commerce to further develop or improve it.<sup>37</sup>

This criticism could have been prompted by the failure of the Municipal

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, October 1, 1925, 1.

<sup>36</sup> ATC Minutes, October 28, 1925, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 68.

Field to attract members of the American Legion Convention. The Chamber felt, however, that had the weather cooperated, the field would easily have been prepared for the convention.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of what brought about the Daily News' statements, the businessmen on the Chamber's aerial committee believed that "publicity of this kind served no purpose" and constituted "poor advertising for the city." Consequently, the Aerial Transportation Committee created a four member Unfavorable Publicity Committee. This subcommittee, interestingly enough, made no attempt to deny the charges or criticism of the editorials. These men were merely to "wait on the 'News' and suggest that items of this kind might well be discontinued."<sup>39</sup>

This subcommittee called upon the editor of the Daily News, Joseph Polcar. Polcar assured the subcommittee members that his newspapers had attempted to build "public sentiment in favor of the improvement" of Omaha's aviation facilities. Furthermore, Polcar told the subcommittee that the Daily News fully supported the Chamber's aerial projects.<sup>40</sup> The members of this subcommittee achieved an almost complete reversal in the position of the Daily News--from one of severe criticism to utter approval of the Chamber's actions. Certainly the Chamber of Commerce wielded much influence. Yet, it cannot be proven that the Unfavorable Publicity Committee applied inordinate pressure upon Polcar to alter

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, December 15, 1925, 69.

the stand of the Daily News.<sup>41</sup>

Although the negative commentary from the Daily News had upset the Aerial Transportation Committee, by the end of 1926, the complete lack of coordinated effort or communication among the major aerial groups advocating the development of a municipal airfield would prove the paper correct. On September 29, 1925, the Ford Reliability Tour had landed at Fort Crook Field. These sixteen good-will pilots easily recognized the great inherent potential Omaha possessed as an aviation center and praised the city's location along natural air routes encompassing all directions.<sup>42</sup> Yet, near the end of 1926 William McCracken, head of aviation for the United States Department of Commerce, visited Omaha. He, too, found reason to praise only Omaha's great aerial potential, proving that the airfield had not undergone any concrete improvements during 1926 and that the fears of inaction expressed by the Daily News in October, 1925, had been realized.<sup>43</sup>

Even though the actions of the Aerial Transportation Committee regarding the Municipal Field during 1926 were unstructured and not widely publicized, they established three main areas of concern. These were the improvement of the field conditions, the search for a hangar, and the education of the public on the advantages of aviation to Omaha. The failure of this committee to achieve the basic improvements to the

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<sup>41</sup>Paul Schliesser, Manager of Transportation of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, to author, July 30, 1979.

<sup>42</sup>Omaha Daily News, September 30, 1925, 1.

<sup>43</sup>Omaha World-Herald, November 23, 1926, 1.

field best exemplified the lack of coordinated effort so common in Omaha's early struggle for aerial development. It took the city ten months to finish the grading and levelling of the field. In September, 1926, the committee announced why it had not seen that the airfield improvements were completed. Supposedly, in the months following the purchase of the site, the committee expected Carter Lake to be dredged, with the excess dumped on the field. This, it argued, would have raised the level of the airfield two or three feet. The "low condition of the lake, however, prevented this action."<sup>44</sup> This answer was superficially logical, for such an increase in the height of the field would facilitate drainage. However, in their minutes during the first half of 1926 the Aerial Transportation Committee had made no mention of the Carter Lake dredging project, the objective of raising the height of the field, or of an engineering study that certainly would have been necessary in a plan of this magnitude.

To the contrary, in January of that year the Chamber's aerial committee, along with the Real Estate Board, called upon the City Council to grant a \$5,000 expenditure to grade and level the field which would be finished by spring.<sup>45</sup> The action and optimism of this committee during this month hardly supported their later claim that they made "no immediate demand . . . for the improvement of the field."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Executive Committee Minutes, September 14, 1926, 262; October 12, 1926, 289. Hereafter cited as Executive Minutes.

<sup>45</sup> ATC Minutes, January 28, 1926, 34.

<sup>46</sup> Executive Minutes, October 12, 1926, 289.

The excuses offered by the committee for the almost total lack of progress could have been easily refuted. Had the Carter Lake dredging plan been of such importance to the Aerial Transportation Committee's objectives in 1926, certainly there would have been some mention of it in their meetings prior to September.

In the winter and spring of 1926, with the airfield admittedly "in a dangerous condition," the committee allowed themselves to get off the track and begin debate over the necessity of acquiring a hangar for the field.<sup>47</sup> Seemingly oblivious to the fact that they did not possess a decent field on which to place such a structure, the Aerial Transportation Committee became convinced that the field needed a hangar at once. By April, the committee had decided that a balloon shed from Fort Omaha would make a possible hangar and could be remodeled suitably at a cost of \$2,000. A hangar at Fort Riley, Kansas, also received consideration from the committee members, its movement to Omaha entailing a \$4,000 expenditure.<sup>48</sup> The committee decided, though, that the cost of the hangars were prohibitive at that time.<sup>49</sup> Rather than pushing forward with much needed field improvements, the Chamber's aerial committee had spent a great deal of time and debate over the acquisition of an airplane hangar when the airfield remained in shambles and their finances were such that they could not even afford \$2,000 to remodel a balloon shed.

In September the committee seemed to have realized their mis-

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<sup>47</sup> ATC Minutes, February 4, 1926, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, April 19, 1926, 49-50.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 50.



take. The members observed that none of Omaha's air-minded groups had combined to discuss the needs of the Municipal Field. The committee decided that "the cooperation of the other organizations interested" in aviation must be obtained and they also agreed that the grading and leveling of the field should continue "before any other improvements" were made.<sup>50</sup> The Aerial Transportation Committee's realization of its lack of planning did not arise without motivation. They were well aware of the renewed debate over whether the airmail service should be transferred to Omaha's airfield. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover had declared that, due to the expected increase in commercial aviation and the fact that Fort Crook could not be used for commercial purposes, the airmail should be moved to the Municipal Field in Omaha.<sup>51</sup> The Airmail Service had announced earlier that, because of the fog hazard and the money already expended at Fort Crook, the chances were not good of a move to that Omaha location.<sup>52</sup> Now there seemed increased hope of that transfer and immediate need for organized cooperative field improvement.

The possibility that Omaha might once again receive the airmail marked a turning point for the Municipal Field. It had been allowed to remain in deplorable condition for the first nine months of 1926. In October, after a definite plan of improvement and priorities had been established, the grading and levelling began in earnest. More importantly, the Council placed the improvement of the field under the super-

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid, September 3, 1926, 53.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid, September 30, 1926, 56.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, February 23, 1926, 46.

vision of City Commissioner Dean Noyes.<sup>53</sup> Within ten days of his appointment 200 acres of the field were cleared and placed in "first class condition."<sup>54</sup> As Street Commissioner, Noyes seemed the proper man to see to the improvement of the field and the establishment of runways.

With serious discussion of the airmail's transfer, the Aerial Transportation Committee began a campaign to educate the public on the benefits of aviation. This committee provided many speakers who addressed public assemblies, urging the support of Omaha's aviation objectives. They hoped that, within a year, Omaha could be instructed in the necessity of supporting aerial growth.<sup>55</sup> The establishment of Omaha as an airmail and eventually a commercial aviation center required the support of its citizens and, significantly, the Aerial Transportation Committee believed that the people of Omaha were in great need of such an aerial education. Their optimism for the swiftness of their success, however, proved unfounded. It took most persons in Omaha three or four years to show true support for the development of aviation within their city.

The Aerial Transportation Committee, of course, did not realize this and felt, as 1927 began, that Omaha's immediate aerial future looked bright. Although held up by cold weather, the improvements to the field were proceeding as planned and the committee thought the time

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, October 11, 1926, 59.

<sup>54</sup> Executive Minutes, November 2, 1926, 313.

<sup>55</sup> ATC Minutes, November 10, 1926, 60.

had come to renew their quest for an airplane hangar. The committee members held a meeting with City Attorney Dana Van Dusen to discuss the hangar project. Van Dusen stated that "the city could not legally use park funds for the construction of a municipal hangar."<sup>56</sup>

The City Attorney proposed three alternatives to get around this legal obstacle. One method involved the leasing of a portion of the airfield by private individuals who would build a hangar at their own expense. The city would have to give assurance, though, that it would not build a municipal hangar, thus destroying their investment. Another possibility involved the passage of a bond issue at the spring election allowing the property to be used for aerial purposes. This solution did not seem feasible due to the nearness of the election. The committee agreed that it would require "a vigorous campaign" for the bonds to carry. The third plan suggested that private parties raise and lend the city the money to build a hangar. When the expense became budgetable Omaha would repay the amount.<sup>57</sup>

The first method involved a rather risky arrangement with the city. The lease would have to be temporary "and subject to withdrawal at any time."<sup>58</sup> Omaha would also be obliged to end its hopes for a municipal hangar. The suggested bond issue did not meet with the approval of the Aerial Transportation Committee which did not seriously consider seeking the approval of the electorate at this time. Even

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, February 4, 1927, 20.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, March 18, 1927, 26.

with the on-going educational campaign, they surely realized that the city's air-mindedness left something to be desired. Due to the obvious drawbacks of the first two alternatives, the third plan proved to be the most likely to succeed--if a reliable air-minded group could be found to raise sufficient funds.

This description fit Omaha Post Number One of the American Legion very well. In June, 1927, concerned over the state of aviation in Omaha and the public propriety of aviation matters, the Legion filed a test suit "to determine if the city could legally expend park funds" to develop an airfield.<sup>59</sup> This began three years of headstrong positive action by the American Legion to see that Omaha fulfilled its potential as an aerial center. The Legion considered an airfield "valueless without a hangar," and expected a rapid and favorable judgement in the test case.<sup>60</sup> Their optimism turned into disappointment as the case languished in the courts under one delay after another. The Court did not issue a ruling until December. Under this judgement Omaha could use the park property for aerial purposes "until the city or the court" discovered that the park system needed the area.<sup>61</sup> The Omaha World-Herald lauded the ruling. Describing the airfield and the future hangar as "only a small beginning," the paper declared that at last proof had arisen of Omaha's commitment to a policy of "taking full advantage" of its aerial opportunities.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Legionnaire, VI (June 23, 1927), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Omaha World-Herald, December 9, 1927, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., December 12, 1927, 10.

While this suit struggled through the legal process, the American Legion did not remain idle. Although they had hoped for an early decision, the Legion worked out a plan that would acquire a hangar for Omaha and leave the legal "technicalities" to be "worried about later."<sup>63</sup> This plan, part of a nation-wide "community-betterment" program, involved the raising of \$30,000 in subscriptions to build a municipal hangar.<sup>64</sup> The Legion, highly hopeful that this drive would succeed, also remained very critical of Omaha's aerial progress. To these men, Omaha's leaders had waited long enough--the airfield must be developed immediately:

The pioneers of Omaha met obstacles greater than this and overcame them. They did not hesitate to do the things that had to be done for Omaha's progress, albeit they occasionally rode roughshod over the feelings of some who did not agree with them . . . There is too much at stake to give further consideration to those who preach delay.<sup>65</sup>

The Legion conducted their subscription drive with equal consternation and enthusiasm.

Allan A. Tukey, Chairman of the newly formed Legion-Airport Corporation, announced his hope to have all money collected by the fifteenth of September. The corporation would sell 30,000 shares of its stock at one dollar per share. Groups of Legionnaires would be formed to solicit contributions from the people and businesses within Omaha.<sup>66</sup> Potential

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, July 15, 1927, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, July 18, 1927, 1; Legionnaire, VI (June 16, 1927), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Legionnaire, VI (July 14, 1927), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, (July 28, 1927), 1.

subscribers were warned that, although the Legion intended to reimburse all money collected, if the city could not repay the entire amount their "subscription may actually prove to be a donation."<sup>67</sup>

Praise and support for the Legion program came from many areas. The World-Herald described the Legion as "made up of young men who have already shown as individuals capacity for vigorous work and inspiring leadership." Omaha's support, argued the World-Herald, must be immediate if it wants to compete with other cities in aviation.<sup>68</sup> The Chamber of Commerce viewed this campaign not only as a way to secure the long sought after hangar, but also as a method by which criticism might be diverted from its Aerial Transportation Committee. The Executive Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce strongly endorsed this project and declared its intention to subscribe liberally to the drive. Such a contribution, thought the committee, "would do much to offset the thought that the Chamber had failed in their undertaking of the improvement of this field."<sup>69</sup>

The Legion hangar drive began in late July, 1927, and ended successfully in early September. The goal of \$30,000 had been achieved, but hardly in as glorious a manner as city officials claimed at a later date.<sup>70</sup> The Legionnaires found themselves in a struggle at every turn to raise the money by the target date. From the start the World-Herald

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Omaha World-Herald, July 18, 1927, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Executive Minutes, July 26, 1927, 196.

<sup>70</sup> Dean Noyes, "The City of Omaha and Aviation," Official Souvenir Program of the Omaha Air Races, May 15-18, 1931, 24.

urged Omahans to support this drive. The newspaper thought "the campaign should be short and sweet," and the city must be appreciative of the time these Legion men had sacrificed for its future. The Legion made its biggest appeal to the business interests since any investment in Omaha's aerial future would be returned many times over by vast increases in commerce and industry.<sup>71</sup>

Yet, people in Omaha did not readily see the advantages of aviation and the drive bogged down in August. Immediately, the World-Herald printed a scathing editorial criticizing the community for its backwardness. The newspaper considered it "shameful" that the Legion should have received any resistance in its subscription efforts. The drive to raise \$30,000, a mere "14 cents per capita," promised "direct and material and great advantage to the city as a whole . . . ." <sup>72</sup> The paper printed a list of the contributors up to that point. Every citizen in Omaha, argued the editorial, should study these names to discover who has contributed and what monetary worth each placed upon the quest for aerial supremacy. The newspaper thought many people could have given far greater amounts than they had up to now. The editorial closed with an assurance that this list resembled "a map merely of Omaha asleep;" the city would, eventually, awaken to the advantages of aviation.<sup>73</sup> Another World-Herald editorial pointed out the aerial progress of other cities and argued that Omaha lagged far

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<sup>71</sup>Omaha World-Herald, July 27, 1927, 14.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid, August 10, 1927, 8.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

behind those communities in such development. One of these examples, Buffalo, New York, had spent over \$700,000 on its airport; another, Baltimore, Maryland, spent \$1,500,000 on aviation facilities. The paper thought it shocking, then, that Omaha's attempt to raise only \$30,000 should be so lengthy.<sup>74</sup>

With the successful conclusion of the drive the same newspaper congratulated the Legion for assuring Omaha "a place on the air maps of the world." In spite of an intense feeling of apathy and "an honest feeling" by the Omaha people that the city, itself, should equip the field, the drive succeeded. The people of Omaha had taken a giant step toward aerial primacy.<sup>75</sup> A glance at the list of contributors though, showed that Omaha's businesses rather than its citizens dictated the success of the airport drive. Allan Tukey had declared that, due to the short time available to the Legion workers, it would be important that "business houses subscribe more than would normally be their proportion in a campaign of this size."<sup>76</sup> The contributions in the name of business, led by Standard Oil of Nebraska and Northwestern Bell as well as many local concerns, proved that they had much to gain from Omaha's development as an air center.<sup>77</sup> This also meant that, even though many individual citizens in Omaha contributed, the success of the Legion drive did not necessarily mean Omaha had developed into an air-conscious city.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, August 12, 1927, 22.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, September 11, 1927, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, July 28, 1927, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, July 27, 1927, 1; August 11, 1927, 1.



The American Legion did not conduct their hangar drive in a vacuum. The dedication of the Municipal Airfield took place just before the official beginning of the campaign and in a manner definitely designed to swell the interest and pride of Omaha in their airport. Approximately 25,000 people were present at the airfield on July 10, 1927, to view the arrival of the sixteen Ford Reliability Flyers. These aviators had much praise for Omaha's field development and, once again, easily recognized its potential. The Aerial Transportation Committee organized the dedication and hoped that it would "have the effect of interesting Omaha to the extent that there will be general demand" for improvement of Omaha's air facilities.<sup>78</sup>

As the airfield dedication greatly aided the beginning of the drive in June, so did two individuals come to the rescue of the severely stalled drive in August. Although the efforts of the Legion in this month cannot be overstated, the campaign got a big boost at this crucial time by the visits of two world renowned transatlantic aviators. On August 23 Clarence Chamberlain, a Denison, Iowa, native, came to the city for the purpose of urging its people to support the Legion airport drive.<sup>79</sup> Chamberlain's popularity brought a very warm reception from the Omaha people. His visit did much to draw attention to the airfield and "to inspire the men" who conducted the Legion drive.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Chamber Journal, XVI (July 16, 1927), 3.

<sup>79</sup>Omaha World-Herald, August 19, 1927, 1.

<sup>80</sup>Chamber Journal, XVI (August 27, 1927), 3.

The real boost for the Legion program came on August 30, with the arrival of Charles Lindbergh, just three months after the completion of his famous transatlantic flight. "Lindy" had received his first lessons in flight "at the Nebraska Aircraft Corporation" in Lincoln just five years earlier and the welcome he received showed that Nebraskans approved of his return.<sup>81</sup> Judging from the tremendous reaction to Lindbergh's visit no one would have suspected Omaha's faltering attempts to improve its airfield. Thousands of Omahans lined "Lindy's" parade route cheering him as a conquering hero. In a speech before a crowd of 10,000 at Ak-Sar-Ben Field, Lindbergh urged Omaha to take an interest in aviation:

Today the most necessary step . . . is the construction of suitable landing fields. There is very little use in having airports at a distance of an hour or more from the city they serve.<sup>82</sup>

Lindbergh's words favoring the close proximity of airfields to the downtown area were perhaps more appropriate than anyone in 1927 could realize.

On July 25, 1927, the South Omaha Merchants Association had announced plans for the construction of an airfield near Bellevue "which would replace the current site at Carter Lake."<sup>83</sup> This proposal promised to have a definite effect upon the Legion hangar program. The organizers of the South Omaha project claimed that an

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid,

<sup>82</sup>Omaha World-Herald, August, 31, 1927, 2.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid, July 25, 1927, 1.

extraordinary fog hazard and the low level of the municipal field would prevent the Airmail Service and other major aerial concerns from moving to that location. Thomas Shea, South Omaha businessman, stated that this fear alone prompted these actions and that his group desired only a safe usable field near Omaha. The proposed South Omaha site, claimed to be of adequate height and "absolutely free from fog," did not develop at this time "due to the failure of a cash subscription campaign . . . ." <sup>84</sup> However, the publicity it received during the hangar drive certainly showed the great need for positive action regarding the Municipal Field.

The aerial situation in Omaha by the fall of 1927 had reached a turning point--a position reminiscent of a year earlier. With the hangar drive successfully completed and public consciousness of aviation probably as high as it had ever been, the city's air enthusiasts saw a radiant future for the Municipal Field. In the next year, however, Omaha's aerial leaders had to face a problem they had avoided for quite a while. In 1928 the people of Omaha were finally allowed to voice their opinion on the fate of aviation in their community.

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid, July 26, 1927, 1; August 26, 1929, 1.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PUBLIC VIEW OF OMAHA AVIATION

The year 1928 proved to be of pivotal importance to the Omaha Municipal Airfield. Following three years of generally indecisive and uncoordinated action, Omaha's aviation promoters now moved boldly toward their objectives. The airfield finally began to take shape in 1928 and, at last, a feeling of cooperation appeared among major air-minded groups as Omaha fought off its many critics and began to solidify the reputation of its municipal airfield. The successful adoption of an Aviation Bond Charter Amendment in November, more than any other event, initiated Omaha's new aerial status. Indeed, this single issue turned out to be the most important step taken in the decade toward the formulation of the airfield. Credit for the extremely organized, methodical, campaign required to achieve the charter amendment's passage belonged to the Chamber of Commerce. The extremely close polarized vote on the proposition, however, lessened the sense of victory of its proponents and proved to Omaha's aerial critics that the city still hesitated to see a public responsibility for the advancement of aviation.

Omaha airport promoters had considered soliciting the opinion of the electorate for quite a while. The events of late 1927, though, showed the absolute necessity of active public support for Omaha's aviation growth. The successful hangar drive and the court decision that permitted the land to be used for aerial purposes constituted victories for those who supported aviation. Along with those victories came the realization that the city did not have sufficient funds to

develop suitably and improve the airport as quickly as many air enthusiasts had desired. In January, 1928, the City Council appointed a committee of three of its members to consider the financial needs of the airport from an official standpoint. Along with Dean Noyes and Joe Hummel, the Council chose Commissioner John Hopkins, Vice-President of the City Council and Superintendent of the Department of Accounting and Finance.<sup>1</sup>

This committee suggested that "in order for Omaha to keep abreast of the times in aviation development" the city should submit an ordinance at the November election. This proposed ordinance would allow the city to sell a certain amount of bonds each year for the improvement and maintenance of an airport. The committee thought this suggestion should receive prompt consideration. They did not want Omaha in a position in which it would be "embarrassed for lack of funds" and could not keep pace with other cities.<sup>2</sup> At this moment bond ordinance rhetoric sounded very public-minded but neither the Council nor the Chamber of Commerce considered it seriously. The monetary situation would have to become very tight and the airfield conditions very bad for the city's aviation advocates to allow the voters to have a voice on air development.

Yet, such a critical situation arose in late August. Water lines had recently been extended to the field, and city officials expected gas tanks to be installed within a short time which proved that the field

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<sup>1</sup>Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Aerial Transportation Committee Minutes, January 6, 1928, 10. Hereafter cited as ATC Minutes.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

had not been totally ignored. Still, these improvements did not proceed quickly enough and an ancient argument of Omaha's aerial proponents appeared once again. Many thought that aerial advancement in Omaha did not compare with other cities that provided "funds for fields to take care of the increasing amount of air travel,"<sup>3</sup> This old argument had the ring of truth because, since the purchase of the field in 1925, its usage had steadily increased regardless of the lack of technical improvements and the Omaha-Legion Airport Hangar had quite frequently become overcrowded. The claim that the city had failed to provide comparably adequate funds for the airport's development, however, received the most attention.<sup>4</sup>

The Aerial Transportation Committee held a meeting with representatives of many of Omaha's staunchest aviation groups to consider methods by which the city could provide increased financial assistance to the airfield. The first possible alternative involved obtaining funds out of the current city budget, something all in attendance considered " . . . out of the question . . . ." Secondly, a bond issue similar to that suggested in January could be presented to the voters. However, because such a bond issue required "a three-fifths vote of the electorate," the odds of its passage seemed slim, given the apathetic views of the people in Omaha toward aviation.<sup>5</sup>

The third plan involved a charter amendment allowing the city to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, August 29, 1928, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 55-56

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 58.

issue \$50,000 in general obligation aviation bonds per year for five years. All agreed that this would provide adequate funds for the improvement, maintenance, and expansion of the airfield. The fact that this alternative required only a simple majority to pass made it very appealing. The Aerial Transportation Committee officially voted to suggest that the City Council place an amendment on the November ballot; confident on the surface of its success yet highly cognizant of the intense struggle that would be necessary to achieve its passage.<sup>6</sup>

On September 4, 1928, the Omaha City Council accepted the idea of an aviation bond charter amendment and took steps to place it in the November sixth election. These Councilmen considered aviation very important to the city "as a business proposition."<sup>7</sup> Others, such as Allan Tukey of the Legion-Airport Corporation, thought Omaha should have more concern over its role in the tremendous aerial competition throughout the United States. If communities like Kansas City, Missouri, and Lincoln, Nebraska, could vote \$800,000 and \$200,000 respectively toward aviation, thought Tukey, Omaha must accept this proposition, take advantage of its location, and move to the front in aviation.<sup>8</sup> The optimistic expectations which Omaha aerial leaders expounded seemed genuine. Actually, this confidence was superficial and, perhaps, was a tactic designed to conceal very real fears of groups like the Aerial Transportation Committee that this measure could fail.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 55-61.

<sup>7</sup>Omaha World-Herald, September 4, 1928, 1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 2.

The true attitude of the Chamber's aerial committee appeared in an October 9 meeting called to discuss the upcoming amendment. Committee Chairman Amos Thomas of Brome, Thomas, Ramsey, and McGuire, attorneys at law, announced, after consulting the Omaha newspapers and certain air-minded organizations within the city, that unless the city took "some very drastic action . . . the amendment would be defeated." This dire prediction arose from the fact that many other financial measures appeared on the same ballot and, as all knew, the voters in Omaha tended to react against anything that threatened to increase taxes.<sup>9</sup> Along with the aviation amendment, the proposed Douglas County Hospital Bonds, for a free Missouri River bridge, and a proposition that provided funds for increased fire and police protection would be up for approval.<sup>10</sup> With so many important monetary issues to consider, the Aerial Transportation Committee thought that "a considerable amount of educational work" would have to be done before the people considered the aviation worthy of passage.<sup>11</sup>

Another situation that promised to harm the amendment's hopes of passage was the "division between classes of voters" in Omaha. The Aerial Transportation Committee recognized that this class distinction would prompt certain Omahans to vote against any "increased expenditure," particularly that for aviation advancement.<sup>12</sup> The actions of the Aerial

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<sup>9</sup>ATC Minutes, October 9, 1928, 62.

<sup>10</sup>Omaha World-Herald, November 5, 1928, 1.

<sup>11</sup>ATC Minutes, October 9, 1928, 62.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 63.



Transportation Committee members proved their awareness of this division. From the beginning, the campaign adopted by the Chamber's aerial committee differed from their earlier efforts at producing air-mindedness. The committee created a "strategy board" to coordinate all actions regarding the charter amendment.<sup>13</sup> Due to the short time available, on October 19 this special air subcommittee accepted a program of sheer propaganda labelled the Manly Plan (after committee member Robert H. Manly). This program promised to solicit by impulse the votes of those who would not normally favor the proposition.<sup>14</sup> The subcommittee admitted that Omahans "were not air-minded at . . . present" and its members thought that "no active campaign should be started in favor of the charter amendment until just prior to the election . . . ."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the special air subcommittee spent most of October organizing their campaign into an effective propaganda and publicity force.

The air subcommittee chose the week of October 29 as the target date for their campaign, entitled "Aviation Week."<sup>16</sup> Although they planned no mention of the charter amendment until two or three days before the election, the people would be deluged by aerial publicity during this period. One of the most significant methods by which the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Special Air Subcommittee Minutes, October 15, 1928, 67-68. Hereafter cited as Subcommittee Minutes; ATC Minutes, October 19, 1928, 73-74.

<sup>15</sup> Subcommittee Minutes, October 15, 1928, 66; ATC Minutes, October 9, 1928, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Subcommittee Minutes, October 15, 1928, 66, 69,

special air subcommittee hoped to draw the voter's attention to aviation in Omaha consisted of dropping free airplane ride tickets from the air or distributing them in downtown stores. Since each ride cost about two dollars, the committee decided, in an obvious expression of their business-like approach to this campaign, that "just a few rides would serve the same purpose from a publicity standpoint as 400 or 500 free rides."<sup>17</sup>

The importance of Omaha's future as an air center would also be pointed out to the people through the abundant use of speakers, posters, advertisements, and announcements in theaters. Posters urging passage of this amendment were placed in several downtown stores, including Brandeis, Kilpatricks, Orchard-Wilhelm, Haydens, and Herzbergs. The organizers of "Aviation Week" had hoped that Charles Lindbergh would visit Omaha before the election. During this time, though, "Lindy" was on a hunting trip in Mexico and unable to bring this support to the campaign. Although the Lindbergh visit would have been ideal, the Aerial Transportation Committee arranged for seven pilots from Fort Riley, Kansas, to give an aerial show at the Municipal Field on the Sunday before the election. The committee thought this would "stimulate interest in aviation and . . . bring . . . 'Aviation Week'" to a successful conclusion but, due to "mud and lack of spectators," the show was postponed to the following day. The Aerial Transportation Committee and the special air subcommittee believed that the events of "Aviation Week" and a "short, quick demonstration and publicity campaign" just before the election "would put

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<sup>17</sup>ATC Minutes, October 19, 1928, 71,73.

over the charter amendment."<sup>18</sup>

Approximately two weeks before the election, an item appeared in the Omaha Bee-News that greatly upset the special aviation bond subcommittee and promised to lessen the effect of their upcoming drive to secure the passage of the amendment. On October 22, 1928, the Bee-News reported that certain key city officials favored a proposal to transfer control of the Municipal Airfield to the Metropolitan Utilities District Board. The report quoted Omaha Mayor James C. Dahlman as highly responsive to the proposed transfer. A member of the Utilities Board himself, Dahlman expressed confidence that the board would "be able to handle the munny airfield efficiently and successfully."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps a more important endorsement for Utilities Board control came from Street Commissioner Dean Noyes, who had received sole responsibility for the field in March.<sup>20</sup> As reported by the Bee-News, Noyes seemed anxious to rid himself of the airfield:

Two weeks ago I offered to turn the field over to any city commissioner who would run it . . . I do not believe anyone could have done any better than I have done without any money, and it takes money to equip and operate an airfield. So far as I am concerned the Metropolitan Utilities Board may have the field tomorrow with my blessing and best wishes.<sup>21</sup>

The Bee-News reported Noyes' remarks in an inaccurate context. The

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<sup>18</sup> Omaha Sunday Bee-News, October 28, 1928, 3A; Omaha Bee-News October 29, 1928, 3; October 30, 1928, 2; November 5, 1928, 11; November 6, 1928, 4; Subcommittee Minutes, October 15, 1928, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Omaha Bee-News, October 22, 1928, 2.

<sup>20</sup> ATC Minutes, January 6, 1928, 11; Omaha World-Herald, March 13, 1928, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Omaha Bee-News, October 22, 1928, 2.

Commissioner's feeling toward Omaha aviation did not resemble the uncaring attitude suggested by his published remarks. Rather, Noyes' words represented very evident frustration after months of pressure to develop an airport with only the meager funds he scraped from his Street Maintenance budget.

The accuracy of Bee-News reporting did not concern the Chamber of Commerce as much as the effect such a story could have upon the election. If the voters thought a chance existed that the Metropolitan Utilities District Board would control and finance the airport there would be no need to risk additional taxation by the passage of the aviation bond charter amendment. The special subcommittee held an unscheduled meeting on October 24 to discuss fears over the possible consequences of the Bee-News story. The seriousness of the crisis brought about debate over whether Aviation Week should be cancelled. The subcommittee, however, decided to continue with their plans while taking the precaution of calling on the editor of the newspaper and requesting that the Bee-News no longer "publish stories detrimental to the airport bonds until after the election."<sup>22</sup> Evidently this subcommittee and the members of the Aerial Transportation Committee as a whole did not dread the transfer of airport control to the Metropolitan Utilities District Board. Their only fear continued to be the effect that rumors of a transfer might have upon the Aviation Bond Charter Amendment and the rapid development of the airfield.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Subcommittee Minutes, October 24, 1928, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Executive Committee Minutes, October 30, 1928, 242.

Although the Omaha Chamber of Commerce remained the primary advocate of the special charter amendment, calls for its passage came from all over the city. No doubt due to the substantial commitment they had placed in the airfield, Omaha Post Number One of the American Legion highly encouraged the amendment's passage.<sup>24</sup> A resolution adopted by the Legion Executive Committee warned the people of Omaha that the defeat of the measure "would be 'a vital blow to the city's development, and a nullification of the air program . . . .'" The "apathy and seeming indifference" of many Omahans had the Legion "up in arms" and its members worked strenuously for the success of the amendment.<sup>25</sup> Amos Thomas of the Aerial Transportation Committee agreed with the Legion and urged Omaha to "keep faith with the people who contributed the 30 thousand dollars" for the Municipal Hangar. Without this amendment the promise to develop the airport could not be fulfilled. If the aviation measure should go down to defeat, thought Thomas, it would break the faith with the American Legion and seriously hinder Omaha's aerial development.<sup>26</sup>

Other groups which supported the aviation amendment included the Tax Research Association, the National Aeronautical Association, and the Real Estate Board. Members of the Tax Research Association, a group whose opinion was solicited on any subject effecting taxation, preferred the control of the Utilities Board but, like the Chamber of

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<sup>24</sup> Omaha Douglas County Legionnaire, VII (October 11, 1928), 1. Hereafter cited as Legionnaire.

<sup>25</sup> Omaha World-Herald, October 31, 1928, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Commerce, wanted field improvements to begin immediately and thought the Municipal Field "'an essential development . . . . to assure Omaha of its proper place on the air map.'"<sup>27</sup> The National Aeronautical Association, though extremely displeased with the way the field had been managed, called for the amendment's passage.<sup>28</sup> Louis C. Thoelecke, Secretary of the Omaha Branch and Chief Examiner of the National Security Fire Insurance Company, commented that the airfield needed "extensive improvements" immediately, which would be provided by the aviation amendment.<sup>29</sup> When compared to the air-minded accolades of many other groups, the Real Estate Board issued a less-than-warm approval of the amendment. After announcing their opposition to all other bond issues on the ballot, the Board offered its support to the charter amendment:

The board members are in favor of the airport bonds because they will effect taxes only slightly, because of the small amount involved, and because of the far-reaching effect immediate improvement of our airport will have on the future development of the city . . . .<sup>30</sup>

Although these three groups were rather peripheral to the advancement of aviation in Omaha, their support probably aided the campaign to secure the passage of the charter amendment. Yet, without a doubt, the Omaha World-Herald constituted the most vocal single element advocating the aviation measure.

Unlike the Chamber of Commerce, the World-Herald's impassioned

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<sup>27</sup> Omaha Bee-News, November 4, 1928, 2.

<sup>28</sup> ATC Minutes, October 15, 1928, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Sunday Bee-News, November 4, 1928, 2A.

<sup>30</sup> Omaha World-Herald, November 1, 1928, 15.

civic-minded pleas for the advancement of aviation reached into homes throughout the Omaha area. In an editorial on October 31, 1928, the World-Herald declared its support for the amendment and described the Omaha field as a highly inadequate "bit of cleared ground." The editorial argued that "groups representing every division of public opinion in the city" had announced support for the airport measure and each realized its importance to Omaha's future. In an effort to sting the civic pride of Omaha citizens, the newspaper urged the city not to lose this great opportunity for their community to rise to the pinnacle of aviation.<sup>31</sup> The World-Herald's editor, Gilbert Hitchcock, later announced his newspaper's support for all bond issues on the ballot. Each, thought Hitchcock, promised great material rewards for the city.<sup>32</sup>

The Omaha Bee-News reacted differently to the upcoming aviation charter amendment. Regardless of the disapproval that its earlier publicity prompted, the Bee-News opposed the aviation measure and endorsed Metropolitan Utilities District control of the airfield. Should the amendment pass, argued the paper, "it would mean a charge against the taxpayers for years . . ." and the constantly altering political situation in Omaha would severely hinder the efficiency of the field. The Bee-News hoped that the transfer to the Utilities District would occur very rapidly:

Should legal methods be worked out to transfer the airport . . . it would be possible to use the district revenue to improve the field, efficient management would be assured, and within the course of a few years--when the airfield will have become a profitable enterprise--the District will get the benefit of it,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, October 31, 1928, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, November 5, 1928, 26.

the city's growing commerce will get the benefit, and the people will have been saved the taxes that a bond issue would call for.

After the receiving the support of many important organizations and influential citizens, the charter amendment came under the scrutiny of the electorate. As a 'last-ditch' effort, on election day the Omaha World-Herald printed a telegram from Harry F. Guggenheim, President of the Guggenheim Foundation for the Promotion of Aeronautics. His words of warning corresponded well with the fears of Omaha's aerial leaders:

Any community that does not make provision for the establishment of an airport must of necessity be excluded from the benefits that this most recent means of communication offers now and in the future.<sup>34</sup>

During the campaign to secure this amendment's passage, no organized movement appeared in opposition to the aviation measure.<sup>35</sup> Still, judging from the results of the election, many Omahans cared little about the supposed benefits of an improved airport and only very faintly heard their aerial leaders' clamorous calls for the approval of the aviation charter amendment.

Omaha voters approved the charter measure in such a manner as to exemplify the city's class division and lack of air-consciousness. The outcome in each of Omaha's twelve wards showed the extremely polarized stance of the electorate on the aviation charter amendment and the

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<sup>33</sup> Omaha Bee-News, October 25, 1928, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Omaha World-Herald, November 6, 1928, 7.

<sup>35</sup> The Omaha Chamber of Commerce possibly had a hand in stifling negative reaction. Even the Union Pacific Railroad, many of whose workers lived in wards that were not to pass the aviation amendment, did not work for the issue's defeat nor urge its employees to vote against the measure. At this time the growing use of the automobile worried the Union Pacific much more than the increasing numbers travelling by air. See Report of President Carl R. Gray, 32nd Annual Report of the Union Pacific Railroad Company, Year Ended December 31, 1928, 10.



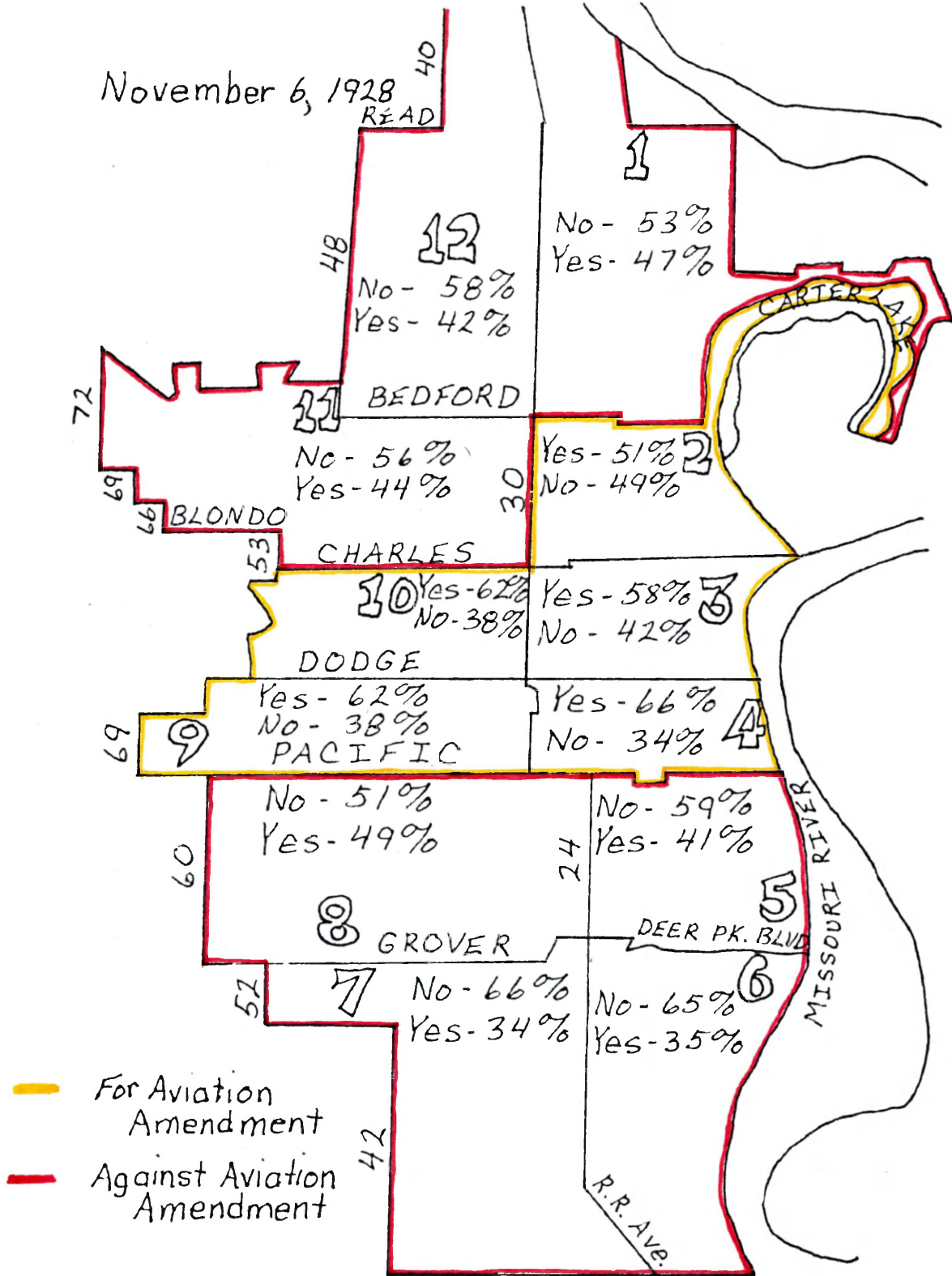
subject of aerial development in general (see map on the following page). Seven of the twelve wards voted against the amendment; three of these were in north Omaha and the remaining four were in south Omaha. The five wards that voted for the measure comprised the geographic center of the city: the downtown area and immediately west.<sup>36</sup>

This obvious polarization of Omaha's voting population appeared due to the differing views on the nature and future of aviation. This was especially apparent in wards 5, 6, 7, and 8, south of Pacific Street. Of the 22,515 total votes cast on this issue in these wards, the aviation measure failed by 59% to 41%--13,439 to 9,076. The negative reaction was even more obvious by a study of the precinct vote. Of the 49 total precincts that comprised the entire electorate south of Pacific Street, only 6 voted for the aviation charter amendment. The voters in the southern neighborhoods of Omaha were primarily working class citizens, separated both geographically and financially from those who advocated rapid expansion of aviation. Ward 7 best exemplified this status--10 out of 11 precincts voted against the aviation issue and this measure was crushed by a 66% to 34% margin--3,072 to 1,553. The situation was similar in the northern areas of the city. Of the 41 precincts that made up wards 1, 11, and 12, thirty-one voted against the issue and it failed by 55% to 45%--11,402 to 9,140. Many of the people in the northern and southern sections of the city still thought of aviation as an expensive, relatively upper class, sport or hobby. Consequently,

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<sup>36</sup>Map taken from Omaha World-Herald, April 9, 1928, 10.

November 6, 1928



the risk of higher taxation outweighed the argument of civic pride and the threat of aerial backwardness utilized by pro-amendment forces.<sup>37</sup>

Residents of the western, definitely more wealthy, areas of Omaha viewed aviation differently. To most of these citizens, aviation provided rapid communication and travel, as well as the advancement of the city. Wards 9 and 10 comprised the wealthiest areas of the city. Neighborhoods such as Dundee, Happy Hollow, and Blackstone contained many "elegant mansions" and represented the power base of the affluent. As witnessed by their vote on the aviation charter amendment, these "wealthy and well-to-do" people supported aviation in their community.<sup>38</sup> Of the 40 precincts in wards 9 and 10, thirty-eight voted for the amendment, and it passed by a 62% to 38% majority--11,377 to 6,784. The downtown areas of Omaha had a similar interest in the city's growth and also voted heavily in favor of the amendment. Wards 2, 3, and 4 comprised this area and only 7 out of 40 precincts in the downtown section of Omaha voted against this measure, as the aviation bonds passed by 57% to 43%--6,846 to 5,026. More than likely, this represented the influence of the business and political leaders in Omaha and an awareness

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<sup>37</sup>T. Earl Sullenger, *Studies in Urban Sociology* (New York: The Survey, for the Bureau of Social Research, Municipal University of Omaha, 1933), 119-157; Howard Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans, Residential and Social Mobility in Omaha 1880-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 61-83. Sullenger and Chudacoff discuss the effects of immigration and the working class ethnic background of South Omaha from 1880-1920; *Sunday World-Herald*, April 18, 1943, 2C; Raymond Fahrlander, private interview held in Plattsmouth, Nebraska, November 30, 1978; William Dean Noyes, private interview held in Omaha, Nebraska, April 3, 1979.

<sup>38</sup>Margaret Patricia Killian, *Born Rich: A Historical Book of Omaha* (Omaha: Assistance League of Omaha, 1978), 41-51.

of the advantages an improved airport so close to downtown would have to the heart of the city.

The extremely close vote totals on the aviation amendment provided another interesting aspect about this election. Of the 73,090 votes cast on this issue on election day, the charter amendment failed to pass by 212 votes--36,651 to 36,439. A count of the large number of absentee votes, however, showed a 875 to 508 plurality in favor of the amendment. With the 367 vote edge provided by the absentee voters, the charter amendment passed by 155 votes--37,314 to 37,159. The outcome of the mail vote did not surprise most aerial promoters. Those persons who travelled frequently had an opportunity to realized the value an improved airfield could have to a community.<sup>39</sup>

Reaction to this unique election came from many sources. Before the official returns, and when it looked as though the amendment had been defeated, the Omaha World-Herald printed a highly critical editorial. The newspaper admitted the possibility that the official count might change the final result, but thought that such a count would probably "increase the majority against the bonds." The World-Herald could not understand how the Omaha people had so easily "forgotten Charles Lindbergh and his spectacular campaign to develop a condition of air-mindedness among" Omahans. Calling the defeat "deplorable," the World-Herald seemed to recognize the city's divided views on aerial growth:

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<sup>39</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal, XVII (November 17, 1928), 8. Hereafter cited as Chamber Journal; Results of election taken from official Douglas County Election Returns, November 17, 1928, No 3 Office of Election Commissioner, Omaha-Douglas Civic Center, Omaha, Nebraska.

Aviation, not as a sport or spectacle, but as the practical handmaid of commerce is not of the future. It is here now. Its growth and development are almost as sure as the proverbial death and taxes.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, the paper found that it had 'jumped the gun' and the aviation amendment had been saved from defeat by the absentee voters.

In an editorial cartoon appearing immediately after the announcement of the official results, the World-Herald breathed an embarrassed sigh of relief at the close victory for Omaha aviation (see following page). The cartoon depicted the mail (absentee) vote flying in a single engine, two seat, vintage 1928 airplane after it had swooped down and rescued the infant aviation bond issue from the clutches of a dastardly-looking cleaver-wielding man meant to represent the anti-bond vote. Certainly this 'cliff-hanger-like' scene described very well the view of the city's aerial leaders toward the outcome of the charter amendment.<sup>41</sup>

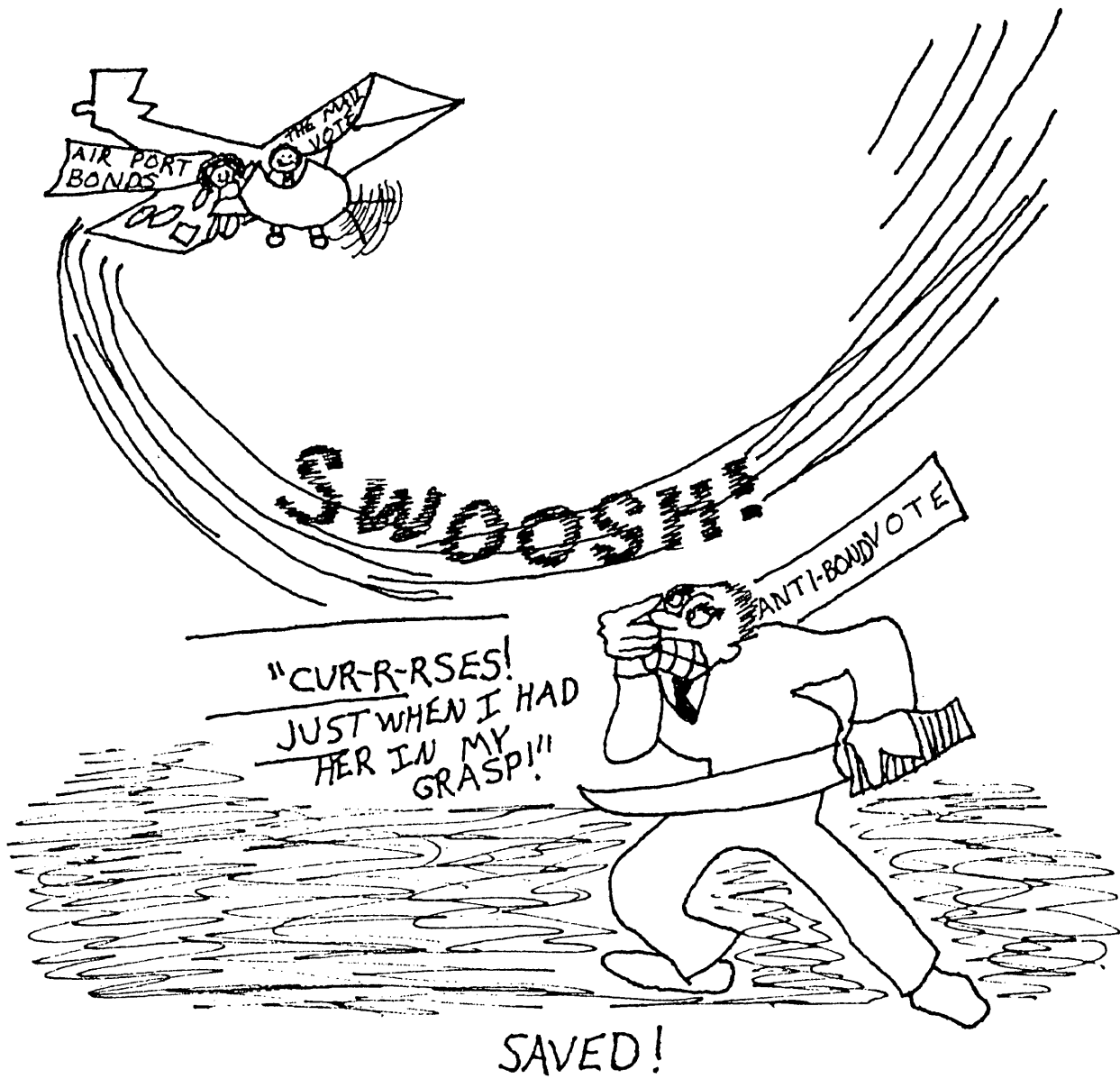
Regardless of the close vote, the city could finally plan to move ahead in aviation. This feeling found expression in the second World-Herald editorial designed as a reaction to the aviation amendment's outcome. In this instance, the paper praised the election results and, due to the amendment's near defeat and the airfield's close proximity to death, described the airport as "the heroine in a movie thriller." The editorial placed the responsibility for the close election on those people who had "no faith in the future of aviation and its influence upon city growth . . . ." The World-Herald concluded that the last big step toward air supremacy had been taken.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Omaha World-Herald, November 9, 1928, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Cartoon taken from Ibid, November 12, 1928, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Omaha World-Herald, November 12, 1928, 3.



Like the World-Herald, the Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal seemed very relieved at the amendment's passage. The Journal, though, remained highly critical of Omaha in spite of the victory and thought the community as a whole should not be credited with this success. Along with the half of the electorate that proved their air-mindedness at the ballot box and the few hard working organizations such as the Aerial Transportation Committee and the American Legion, those who submitted mail votes deserved much praise. These "intelligent" voters, thought the Journal, travelled very frequently and often found themselves "in a position to see what other air-minded cities" had accomplished along aerial lines. With an air of disgust unusual after a victory, the Journal urged Omaha to "wake up . . ." if it desired a place on the air maps of the world.<sup>43</sup> The reaction of the World-Herald and the Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal differed from the response of the Bee-News. Other than reporting the close victory, the newspaper remained editorially silent on the success of this measure.<sup>44</sup>

The passage of the \$250,000 charter aviation bond amendment suddenly made the airfield a far more important project. The American Legion seemed to be the first major group to realize this and their reaction to the measure's passage was calm and business-like. Because of the \$30,000 investment that the Legion-Airport Corporation had in the airfield, the Legion intended to see that the city made adequate use of

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<sup>43</sup> Chamber Journal, XVIII (November 17, 1928), 8.

<sup>44</sup> Omaha Bee-News, September 9, 1928, 1.

the first \$50,000 installment.<sup>45</sup> The success of this measure solved the continual obstacle to the development of the Municipal Airfield--adequate financial backing. Through the success of the amendment, the city's aerial leaders got a clear picture of the quality of air-mindedness in their community. They had definite reason to hope that, from here onward, the air-consciousness of the city would increase, making the goal of superior air facilities easier to attain. Now, with sufficient monetary support and at least the encouragement of part of the electorate, Omaha's aerial officials could tackle the problems that had haunted the development of the airport throughout the past year.

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<sup>45</sup>Legionnaire, VIII, November 15, 1928, 1.



## CHAPTER IV

### EFFORTS AT FIELD DEVELOPMENT 1928-1929

The difficulties that the passage of the November, 1928, Aviation Bond Charter Amendment promised to solve became apparent by January of that year. In the fall of 1927, between the completion of the hangar drive and the court decision on the test suit, the Municipal Airfield remained in limbo and the problem of field development received little attention. Without a positive judgement regarding the use of the field, the city could not move ahead with improvements to the Carter Lake site. Near the end of 1927, though, the district court consented to the use of the land as an airport and Omaha's aviation leaders looked to 1928 with optimism. The World-Herald admitted that the current location needed much improvement and had "its disadvantages as a landing field." Yet, the newspaper expressed hope and confidence that the city could now become more than "merely a whistling post on the air lanes of the United States."<sup>1</sup>

For the Omaha airfield to achieve the superior status desired by most aviation enthusiasts it had to be improved to the point where the field received an A-1-A rating by the United States Department of Commerce. The Air Commerce Act of 1926 gave the Commerce Department the responsibility of rating all airfields in the country and the A-1-A

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<sup>1</sup>Omaha World-Herald, December 30, 1927, 18.

designation constituted the highest status an airport could achieve.<sup>2</sup> The first "A" signified the airfield's rating on general equipment and facilities. The facilities required for an "A" rating included "at least one hangar measuring not less than 80 by 100 feet," adequate first aid and emergency services, enough personnel to run the airfield all day, waiting and rest rooms, and a restaurant "not more than one-half mile distant."<sup>3</sup> An airport also needed sufficient weather instruments, "including an anemometer, barometer, and a thermometer," with a bulletin board on which to post recent meteorological developments.<sup>4</sup>

The numeral in the Commerce Department rating designated the size of the airport's landing area. To achieve a "1" status the field had to have "at least 2,500 feet of effective landing area in all directions" and be in proper "condition for landing at all times . . . ." Another prerequisite for this rating involved the necessity for an airfield to have completely "clear approaches." For an airport to have a sufficiently clear approach in all directions there could not be any "buildings, towers, [or] other obstacles over which a 7 to 1 glide or climb to or from the edge of the landing area would not be possible . . . ."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>U.S. Statutes at Large, Vol. 44, pt. 2, (Dec. 1925-March 1927), "Air Commerce Act of 1926," May 20, 1926, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1927) 569. Hereafter cited as "Air Commerce Act."

<sup>3</sup>United States Department of Commerce, Aeronautics Branch, Aeronautics Bulletin No. 16, "Airport Rating Regulations," Effective as Amended January 1, 1929, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 6-8. Hereafter cited as "Rating Regulations."

<sup>4</sup>D.M. Little, "Meteorological Needs of a Class A 1 A Airport," Monthly Weather Review, Vol. 57 (August, 1929), 336.

<sup>5</sup>"Rating Regulations," 9.

The final "A" in the rating represented the quality of a field's lighting equipment. Most importantly, a landing field had to possess a permanent and very powerful beacon light. Other necessary night flying facilities included "an illuminated wind-direction indicator," adequate boundary and obstruction lighting, and sufficient personnel to operate all lighting equipment during the night hours.<sup>6</sup>

The Omaha Municipal Airfield did not develop an A-1-A distinction by 1931. As late as August, 1928, the port had been developed so poorly that it did not approach a superior rating in any of the three Commerce Department categories. Although the American Legion completed a hangar of suitable size by the middle of the year, the lack of basic repair and customer facilities, in addition to the failure of the city to provide a permanent, knowledgeable, caretaker for the airfield, precluded any possibility for an "A" rating on the field's general equipment. The size of the airfield's landing area also failed to meet minimum requirements. The field had the required 2,500 feet of landing surface northwest to southwest but had only 2,100 feet of landing area north to south and east to west and just 1,500 feet northeast to southwest. In the case of lighting equipment, the Omaha Airfield did not install permanent boundary and field lighting until the following year.<sup>7</sup>

The reason for the inability of the field to develop during

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 12-17.

<sup>7</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Aerial Transportation Committee Minutes, August, 23, 1928, 54. Hereafter cited as ATC Minutes.

1928 involved more than a lack of competent, organized, leadership because in many ways the supervision of the airfield improved greatly during that year. The Legion-Airport Corporation awarded their hangar contract to Peter Kiewit's Sons who submitted the low bid of \$27,435 and completed construction in March.<sup>8</sup> Had the city played a major role in the finance or construction of this structure, its completion would very likely have been delayed like many other improvements. Another positive influence in the leadership of the Municipal Airfield came on March 13, 1928, when the City Council transferred the field from the Park Department to the Street Cleaning and Maintenance Department under the control of Commissioner Dean Noyes. For the next two years Noyes found himself caught in the middle--between the aviation leaders of Omaha who desired rapid development and his fellow city officials who could not or would not provide sufficient funding for field improvements.<sup>9</sup>

The chronic problem of inadequate financial backing plagued Commissioner Noyes throughout his years in charge of the airport. Especially bad during 1928, this problem prompted Noyes to speak out publicly on the necessity of proper funding.<sup>10</sup> One method of eliminating some monetary pressure involved the development of a system of charges levied on pilots who used the field and hangar. The fact that

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<sup>8</sup> Omaha World-Herald, January 18, 1928, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, March 13, 1928, 15; William Dean Noyes, private interview held in Omaha, Nebraska, April 3, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Omaha World-Herald, March 15, 1928, 2; May 7, 1928, 1.

such a policy had to be implemented by the city in the form of ordinances regulating the use of the field explained the delay of such an obvious and necessary step.

The first formal suggestion of a series of field ordinances appeared in January, 1928. The district court had just ruled that the city could utilize the field for aerial purposes and the Omaha City Council appointed a committee of three of its members, Commissioners John Hopkins, Dean Noyes, and Joe Hummel, to investigate and make suggestions as to the next steps to be taken at the airfield. This committee proposed the adoption of "an ordinance for the control of the field patterned after the ordinance suggested by the Department of Commerce."<sup>11</sup> This proposal was a highly important but hardly novel idea. Two years earlier the Air Commerce Act of 1926 encouraged the establishment of

air traffic rules for the navigation, protection, and identification of aircraft, including rules as to safe altitudes of flight and rules for the prevention of collisions between vessels and aircraft.<sup>12</sup>

The Council's apparent consideration of this suggestion two years after the government pointed out the necessity of such control exemplified Omaha's hesitation to commit itself on the future of aviation.

The Aerial Transportation Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce vigorously supported the proposal of these Councilmen to establish field ordinances. In contrast to the City Council, the Aerial Transportation Committee had often recognized the need for firm municipal control of

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<sup>11</sup>ATC Minutes, January 6, 1928, 10.

<sup>12</sup>"Air Commerce Act," 570.

aviation. In early 1926 the committee wrote to St. Louis, Missouri, for information as to its field regulations, including "charges made, expenses incurred, and methods of financing." The committee members realized that this information would be of value when the city organized an airfield.<sup>13</sup> A year later the Aerial Transportation Committee seemed more convinced of the need for regulation of the Municipal Field. The committee thought the time would soon appear when "rules and regulations governing the operation of the Municipal Field, as well as a schedule of charges for the use of the field, hangar space, etc.," might become necessary.<sup>14</sup> Naturally, then, when serious official consideration appeared on the adoption of airfield ordinances, the Aerial Transportation Committee strongly endorsed the proposal.

Immediately, the Chamber's aerial committee appointed a subcommittee to draw up a series of ordinances. On May 2, Louis C. Thoelicke, Chairman of the subcommittee and Secretary of the Omaha branch of the National Aeronautics Association, submitted a draft of potential regulations covering the use of the Omaha Municipal Field and the general quality of flight above Omaha. Thoelicke's suggestions had already received the approval of the American Legion and served as the basis of future Omaha aviation regulations.<sup>15</sup>

The prompt establishment of a system of charges for field usage, however, was more immediately important. If a sufficient fee could be

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<sup>13</sup>ATC Minutes, January 28, 1926, 34.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, January 14, 1927, 12.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, May 2, 1928, 30.

agreed upon, the field would begin to finance its own improvements and take some pressure off Commissioner Dean Noyes. Noyes had been forced to continue field improvements regardless of improper financing, and the fact that he kept the Omaha field in usable condition at all during the early months of 1928 proved his able leadership. The Commissioner utilized the equipment and budget of the Street Maintenance Department as well as a large amount of donated labor from his employees "to aid in getting the field in shape."<sup>16</sup>

Noyes realized that the field could not develop suitably or rapidly enough under those circumstances and heartily endorsed efforts to establish a revenue generating system of airport and hangar fees. Commissioner Noyes suggested that 15 per cent of a flyer's "net proceeds should go to the city."<sup>17</sup> The City Attorney's office, though, spoke out against this plan and claimed it would "make the city jointly liable for acts of the pilots."<sup>18</sup> Noyes also found himself in disagreement with the airplane owners who believed they should "have the privilege" to charge whatever they wanted for an airplane ride and lobbied against the city's attempts at fee regulation.<sup>19</sup> Commissioner Noyes became

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<sup>16</sup> Omaha World-Herald, March 15, 1928, 2; July 31, 1928, 10; August 24, 1928, 16; William Dean Noyes, private interview held in Omaha, Nebraska, April 3, 1979. According to William Noyes, Dean Noyes' son, such an expression of loyalty from his father's employees would not be unusual. Dean Noyes was a popular Commissioner with the ability to get along very well with his workers.

<sup>17</sup> ATC Minutes, April 2, 1928, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Omaha World-Herald, May 12, 1928, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, May 7, 1928, 1.

understandably frustrated in the spring of 1928--along with his duties as Street Commissioner, Noyes, as the only symbol of authority at the airfield, often found himself no more than a policeman attempting to keep under control such dangerous and illegal practices as unlicensed aircraft, mechanics, and pilots, and the new problem of "air-petting."<sup>20</sup> The burden of Commissioner Noyes lessened somewhat in July when the City Council passed an ordinance regarding field usage that eventually generated over one hundred dollars a month.<sup>21</sup>

While the discussion continued over revenue and field ordinances, many weeks passed and the city made little concrete improvement at the airfield. This fact did not go unnoticed and in the middle of 1928 much criticism appeared once again over the slow development of the field. The World-Herald took the lead in this concern and by July became quite obvious in its criticism of the airfield's under-development. With definite disgust at the slow progress of the airport, the World-Herald concluded:

A municipal airport in which landing directions are not plainly marked, which conceals pitfalls that might cause an airplane to be damaged in landing or taking off, which does not have facilities for refueling the engine or oiling it, and which does not have running water, is not an airport.

Due to lack of these necessities, argued the editorial, many fliers ignored the Municipal Airport in favor of the Fort Crook Field.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, March 13, 1928, 15,

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, July 31, 1928, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, March 28, 1928, 6; Raymond Fahrlander, private interview held in Plattsmouth, Nebraska, November 16, 1978.



Commissioner Noyes responded by stating that all field improvements would be completed by early September. The arrival of the International Air Race Pilots on their way to California on September 9 mandated that completion date.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of Noyes' optimistic expectations, many aviation enthusiasts became extremely impatient with the city's aerial progress during the summer. J.T. Stewart of the Chamber of Commerce aerial committee called it "an outrage" that pilots would have to pass up the Omaha port for other landing fields. W.A. Ellis, secretary of the Aerial Transportation Committee, urged immediate action at the field, even if it took a campaign similar to the hangar drive to acquire funds. Louis Thoelicke described the "present equipment" at the field as "an absolute disgrace" and warned that another airfield would develop if the city did not provide its Municipal Field "with necessary facilities at once."<sup>24</sup>

The Omaha Municipal Airfield received some favorable publicity in the summer of 1928. In the midst of the reports of disgust and frustration over the airport's lackadaisical development, certain sources actually praised the location, potential, and condition of the landing field. An article appeared in the Chicago Daily News that contradicted arguments in the World-Herald that the Municipal Field received only negative, if any, national publicity.<sup>25</sup> In this story, Elsie Weil, a travelling correspondent for the Daily News, described her travels

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<sup>23</sup>Omaha World-Herald, August 22, 1928, 2A.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

through Omaha and praised Omaha's efforts to establish an airport. Weil labelled Omaha "a pioneer city in aviation" and admitted that "Omaha's participation in aviation was a little premature for municipal development," but stated that the political leaders of the city had committed themselves to establishing "aviation on an active and practical basis."<sup>26</sup>

Another positive reaction came from Dudley M. Steele, a representative of the International Air Races. Steele declared the field ideally located, graced with perfect soil, and thought that, with proper facilities, the Omaha airport could be "second to none in the country." Mr. Steele inspected the Municipal Field and safely rode with Commissioner Noyes along its runways "at speeds ranging from 40 to 50 miles an hour . . . ." After his trip, Steele admitted that the field needed much work but remarked at the quality of the runways and claimed that it was unusual to be able to drive an automobile so safely at such high speeds on a dirt runway.<sup>27</sup> The complimentary statements of persons not directly associated with Omaha's airfield contrasted sharply with the remarks of those close to the aerial difficulties within the city. The political and business leaders in Omaha knew that money remained the key to the future of aviation in their city. They also realized that these funds would be difficult to obtain and looked for ways to capture prestige and attention for the airport until proper financing could be arranged.

One proposal that promised to draw attention to the Municipal

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<sup>26</sup> Chicago Daily News, July 24, 1928, 5; Omaha World-Herald, August 2, 1928, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Omaha World-Herald, July 27, 1928, 1.

Field revolved around the possibility of an Omaha to Winnipeg, Manitoba, airmail and passenger route centered in Omaha. The Aerial Transportation Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce called a special meeting of representatives from towns interested in forming the route. The municipalities represented included Winnipeg, Fargo, North Dakota, Sioux Falls and Watertown, South Dakota, and Sioux City, Iowa.<sup>28</sup> The attempt of Omaha to exert itself as an aviation center received much support at this time. F.B. Wadsworth, Superintendent of the Airmail Service of the Post Office Department, thought that "Omaha should develop as one of the leading air centers of the country because of its central location." Amos Thomas of the Aerial Transportation Committee, and one of the foremost aviation enthusiasts in the city, stated that such a route would surely succeed because people in the city finally realized "the importance of making Omaha an air transportation junction point . . . ." <sup>29</sup>

Among much civic-minded rhetoric, the representatives of five key northern cities met with the Aerial Transportation Committee on April 26, 1928. All in attendance vowed to support the proposed Omaha to Winnipeg route and thought it a certain success due to the 700,000 persons residing along the route. During the meeting the representatives organized the Omaha-Winnipeg Airways Association. Gould Dietz of the Chamber's aerial committee, and a member of the Omaha branch

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<sup>28</sup> ATC Minutes, April 26, 1928, 25-28.

<sup>29</sup> Omaha World-Herald, April 19, 1928, 13; General Jimmy Doolittle agrees about the importance of Amos Thomas to Omaha aviation and also mentioned Gould Dietz. These men, wrote Doolittle, "were aviation enthusiasts. They believed that aviation had a bright future and they were very kind to itinerant pilots." General Jimmy Doolittle to author, May 1, 1979.

of the National Aeronautics Association, volunteered to submit the proposals to the postal authorities in Washington within a week.<sup>30</sup>

From the optimism expressed at the organizational meeting, the success of the Omaha to Winnipeg route seemed a certainty. The Omaha World-Herald also responded to this new air proposal with an overflow of public spirit. The newspaper remained convinced that the new association would succeed

because the men of the cities concerned have organized to bring it about. With the same foresight that led the pioneers to bring the railroads through their hamlets, so that they might become towns and cities, the builders of today are encouraging the development of air ports so that towns and cities may become greater.<sup>31</sup>

The Omaha Bee-News joined the World-Herald in its optimism over this air route. The Bee-News was certain that Omaha would seize this opportunity for aviation advancement and described the city's aviation future in idealistic terms: "As the cross roads of the air, Omaha will experience all the advantages of this development that is certain to follow this great advance in quick and safe transportation."<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, this public spiritedness and confidence escaped the Post Office Department. Assistant Postmaster General W. Irving Glover informed Gould Dietz that there would not be "'enough business to warrant'" an Omaha to Winnipeg airmail route.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> ATC Minutes, April 26, 1928, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Omaha World-Herald, April 28, 1928, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Omaha Bee-News, April 28, 1928, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Omaha World-Herald, May 1, 1928, 1.

The attitude of confidence and expectation that promoters in Omaha had for the proposed Omaha to Winnipeg route was mirrored in Fargo, North Dakota. The Fargo Forum was very proud of the city's future in aviation and felt that this route, and air travel in general, had a bright future:

Transportation by air is rapidly taking its place in American commerce and industry. It is developing and growing far more rapidly than one imagines. It will not be long before there is a network of air routes throughout the country and Fargo is one of the strategic centers that must be taken into consideration in laying out new routes.

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The Omaha-Winnipeg Airway Association must have the cooperation of the entire city. It will get it, for Fargo is anxious to grow and develop and to take advantage of every opportunity to its own interest and the interests of the territory it serves [sic].<sup>34</sup>

The Fargo Forum did not react editorially to the failure of the Omaha to Winnipeg route. The newspaper merely reported that the Post Office Department was "swamped" with proposed air lines and did not have sufficient funds "even to make preliminary surveys" of possible routes.<sup>35</sup>

The Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, expressed similar sentiments. The newspaper was proud that the secretary of the Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce, Ben B. Lawshe, had been elected President of the Omaha-Winnipeg Airway Association and felt that there was ample justification for the establishment of the air-mail route.<sup>36</sup> The Argus-Leader thought that the Omaha to Winnipeg route

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<sup>34</sup> Fargo Forum, April 28, 1928, 6, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, May 8, 1928, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, April 30, 1928, 16.

was just another step in the "well-defined line of travel through several cities of the Northwest." As did the Forum, the Argus-Leader expressed confidence that this air route would be established. The newspaper, however, thought that this new air line would necessitate the building of much needed landing fields. Although the Sioux Falls airport was one of the "finest . . . in the Northwest," thought the Argus-Leader, this section of the country badly needed proper aviation facilities.<sup>37</sup> The Sioux Falls paper reported that Postmaster W. Irving Glover frowned upon the Omaha to Winnipeg proposal because it was not suitably efficient: "'The route hardly appears logical. Most of the mail on the route moves toward the Twin Cities [Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota]. Offhand I would say that a route from Winnipeg to the Twin Cities would be more logical.'"<sup>38</sup> The Sioux City Journal, of Sioux City, Iowa, also on the proposed Omaha to Winnipeg route, did not comment editorially on the matter and gave only minimal coverage to the proposal.<sup>39</sup>

The International Air Races from Windsor, Ontario, to Los Angeles, California, provided another method in which the Omaha airport could be brought into the limelight. Aviation leaders in the city expected the arrival of the forty Canadian contestants to bring favorable national publicity and force the immediate improvement of the airfield. In April, 1928, the California Air Race Association

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, April 30, 1928, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, May 2, 1928, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Sioux City Journal, April 24, 1928, 1; April 22, 1928, 5; May 1, 1928, 2.

wrote to the Omaha Chamber of Commerce and announced that they had chosen Omaha as an overnight stop in the September 9 race. The Association requested that the city offer lap prizes for the first three arrivals, provide contestants with gas and oil free from charge, furnish mechanics, and initiate reduced hotel rates.<sup>40</sup>

The city heartily responded to the proposal and granted most of the requests of the Air Race Association. The Standard Oil Company "agreed to contribute their part of the gas and oil, if other Omaha companies would do likewise," and the Conant and Eppley hotels agreed to offer reduced rates.<sup>41</sup> The Executive Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, however, considered the city "not in the position to offer" lap prizes but felt that "all possible encouragement should be given this event, as it was necessary to encourage anything tending to increase aerial transportation, and Omaha's importance in this activity."<sup>42</sup> Obviously, the Chamber desired the publicity and prestige that such an event would bring but did not want to invest a large amount in the race itself.

In July, Dudley M. Steele of the Air Race Association inspected the Omaha landing field and, afterward, met with the Aerial Transportation Committee. His descriptions of the field in the private committee meeting did not differ substantially from those impressions

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<sup>40</sup>ATC Minutes, April 2, 1928, 23.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, May 2, 1928, 29-30; July 27, 1928, 46.

<sup>42</sup>Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Meeting of the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee, April 3, 1928, 92.

related to the public. While Steele thought Omaha had the beginnings of a very good airfield, he warned the committee that it "needed improvements in the way of facilities, marking, etc." Although the present condition of the field was highly inadequate, Steele stated, Commissioner Noyes had given personal assurance that he would have the airfield in first class condition by September 9. Noyes intended to continue to smooth and grade the field, outline the entire area with white paint, and see that his workers painted "Omaha" on the top of the hangar.<sup>43</sup>

The improvements to the airfield in August proved that the city's aviation leaders valued this event greatly and that the improvement of the field required only impetus and momentum. The Aerial Transportation Committee acquired the needed facilities in an amazingly efficient manner. By the organization of a "special committee on gas, supplies, repairs, lights, etc.," the Chamber of Commerce achieved greater concrete improvement in the month of August, 1928, than it had achieved in the previous two years. The special committee saw to the acquisition of all necessary facilities, including temporary lighting, "a gas tank and pump," and the connection of a water main to the airfield.<sup>44</sup> Commissioner Dean Noyes and his Street Maintenance Department also had a key role in the successful preparation of the airfield. Due to the short time and lack of money, twelve of Noyes' street crews donated "four days labor" before the arrival date to assure a safe airfield for

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<sup>43</sup>ATC Minutes, July 27, 1928, 45-48.

<sup>44</sup>Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Minutes of the meeting of the special committee on gas, supplies, repairs, lights, etc., August 23, 1928, 53; ATC Minutes, August 22, 1928, 49-52.



the air race contestants. Through the efforts of Commissioner Noyes and the Aerial Transportation Committee, the Omaha airfield successfully received the International Air Race.<sup>45</sup> Still, the completion of the Municipal Field came barely 'under the wire,' which exemplified the absolute need for proper funding and set another phase in the development of the Omaha Municipal Airfield into motion.

The success of the \$250,000 bond issue in November marked the beginning of this new phase of airport development. Immediately after the election, the official attitude toward the Municipal Airfield altered from the desire for immediate improvement to the call for extreme caution. Aviation leaders in Omaha began asking questions which perhaps they should have asked and resolved much earlier. Since no bonds could be sold until the following year, the Omaha City Council appointed a committee of Commissioners Dean Noyes, John Hopkins, and Henry Dunn, "to make a thorough investigation of conditions surrounding the municipal airport." The major question was whether an airport commission should be appointed by the City Council to aid Commissioner Noyes in the supervision of the airfield. Another proposition came from C.P. Sturtevant, President of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, who supported the "retention of expert advice before going ahead on the field . . . ."<sup>46</sup> Regardless of the many delays to this point, support for the advisory commission, the consultation of expert advice, and the

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<sup>45</sup> Omaha World-Herald, August 23, 1928, 6; Sunday Bee-News, September 9, 1928, 3A; Omaha Bee-News, September 10, 1928, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Omaha World-Herald, November 19, 1928, 2.

generally cautious stance toward future improvement arose from many sources.

Although the American Legion did not favor any delay in field development, its members expressed support for the advisory commission through the auspices of the Legion-Airport Corporation. Allan A. Tukey of the corporation cited the \$30,000 investment in the airfield and argued that the Legion had the right to make suggestions regarding the future of the airfield. The Legion members, announced Tukey,

recommended that the control of the airport be vested in an Airport Commission composed of interested citizens and that the Council follow the recommendations of this commission in the expenditure of the money derived from the bond issue . . . ,<sup>47</sup>

This body, thought Tukey, should have "entire charge of the operation and improvement of the field."<sup>48</sup>

Omaha Mayor James Dahlman agreed and led the movement for this commission. Before the city spent any more money at the airfield, stated Dahlman,

I want a definite plan so we may know what is necessary to be done, the cost of maintenance, whether the present field is in the proper place, whether we need additional land, and how much more it will cost us for a fence, hangars, lights, shop, and equipment.<sup>49</sup>

The mayor offered no explanation for this extremely late desire for organization.

The World-Herald admitted that the organizational impetus

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<sup>47</sup>Douglas County Legionnaire, VIII (November 15, 1928), 1. Hereafter cited as Legionnaire.

<sup>48</sup>Omaha World-Herald, November 13, 1928, 1,

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 1-2.

appeared "at a rather late moment . . .," but expected the final outcome to make up for the probable delay.<sup>50</sup> The newspaper expressed concern that Omaha had fallen behind other areas in aviation development. The city must organize its efforts, take advantage of its growing aerial awareness, and make "the most of the opportunities" that have begun to appear.<sup>51</sup>

As with every year since 1925, the approach of 1929 sparked much optimism from Omaha's aviation boosters toward the future of the airfield. In an ironic contrast to the suddenly blossoming aerial future in Omaha, the World-Herald printed an interview with Orville Wright, twenty-five years after he and his late brother altered the world with their flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Wright's views differed greatly from the optimistic expectations in Omaha--he thought aviation had neared its limit and that transoceanic flight by heavier than air craft was impractical and should be left "to the dirigibles."<sup>52</sup> Fortunately for the Omaha field and the future of aviation, Orville Wright in this instance was behind the times.

Expressing the desire to forge ahead in Omaha aviation, on January 14, 1929, Mayor Dahlman appointed the six members of the Aviation Advisory Board. The mayor selected James E. Davidson, Vice President and General Manager of the Nebraska Power Company, and Amos Thomas to serve for six years, Dr. John A. Tamisiea, long time Omaha

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, November 15, 1928, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, November 22, 1928, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Sunday World-Herald, December 23, 1928, 8C.

physician and aviation enthusiast, and Arthur H. Feters, mechanical engineer for the Union Pacific Railroad, to serve four years each, and Gould Dietz and John S. McGurk former Chairman of the Bellevue-Omaha Airport movement and President of the South Omaha State Bank, to serve two years each.<sup>53</sup> City Commissioner Dean Noyes continued to have the airport in his Street Cleaning and Maintenance Department and acted as head of the airport commission. The Airport Advisory Board found themselves unable to launch immediate improvements because, "owing to legal delays," no revenue from bond sales would be available until March.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the growing attitude of hesitation and caution prevailed and the Board decided to consult expert advice regarding the suitability of the present airfield site.

According to Amos Thomas who, along with his service on the Airport Advisory Board, served as Chairman of the Aerial Transportation Committee, "one of the first actions taken by the . . . air board" was to ask the United States Department of Commerce for expert advice concerning the airport.<sup>55</sup> As a result of the Board's plea for assistance, Assistant Secretary of Commerce William P. McCracken announced that airport specialist William F. Centner planned to inspect the Omaha Municipal Airport and offer suggestions as to its future.<sup>56</sup> The Airport Advisory Board also organized two man committees which would

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<sup>53</sup>Omaha World-Herald, January 14, 1929, 1.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>ATC Minutes, February 8, 1929, 3.

<sup>56</sup>Omaha World-Herald, January 23, 1929, 6.

look into airport matters in more detail. Commissioner Noyes appointed committees on the development, lighting, management and in the planning of buildings, grounds, and weather facilities at the airfield.<sup>57</sup>

The advisory commission also considered the old problem of airfield and hangar usage fees. The Board overturned the rate of twelve dollars a month for use of the field and hangar in favor of a more complicated, graduated, system of charges. The city now charged airplanes according to their size:

Hangar space for ships with a wing spread up to 35 feet, \$25 per month, or \$1.50 a day; between 35 and 45 feet, \$30 per month, or \$2 a day; between 45 and 50 feet, \$35 per month, or \$2.50 a day; over 55 feet, \$50 a month, or \$3 a day.

If no space existed inside the hangar, the commission decided to charge "the same rate for use of ground space where a ship is staked out." Along with a one dollar landing fee, the Board set a minimum rate of \$2.50 per passenger, of which the city received ten per cent, and set a two dollar an hour fee on the use of field lights.<sup>58</sup> Although the Airport Advisory Board later eliminated the one dollar landing fee upon the suggestion of William Centner and plan owners, these rates succeeded in producing revenue and keeping "out the barnstormers of the air."<sup>59</sup>

The decision of the airport commission to seek expert advice on the stability of the Carter Lake airfield site, however, proved of more importance and controversy. Due to its investment in the

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<sup>57</sup> ATC Minutes, February 8, 1929, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Omaha World-Herald, January 18, 1929, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, February, 21, 1929, 10.

airfield, the American Legion actively supported the present location east of Carter Lake and spoke out in opposition to the statements of persons such as Board member J.A. Tamisiea, who disliked the current field and "favored any possible action to obtain a new location."<sup>60</sup> The American Legion felt very strongly on this issue and resolved "to fight any move toward abandonment of the municipal field." The great role they had played in the development of aviation in Omaha, thought the Legion, entitled the "Omaha Post to some consideration at the hands of the city administration, insofar as the future of the field . . . was concerned."<sup>61</sup> As the situation developed, it became clear that such consternation was unnecessary.

The drastic changes in the airfield envisioned by the Legion-Airport Corporation never materialized. Two weeks before his formal inspection of the airport, William F. Centner told the Aerial Transportation Committee that he did not consider it unusual for a city to desire official approval of its aerial facilities. According to Centner, "25 to 30 cities" contacted the Commerce Department each day with serious questions regarding their new future in aviation. Because Omaha purchased the present airport "before the Department of Commerce began to rate any fields," said Centner, the location should be inspected at the soonest opportunity. He urged the committee members to strive for an A-1-A rating. Centner observed that if an airfield

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, January 18, 1929, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Legionnaire, VIII (February 14, 1929), 1; (February 21, 1929), 5; Omaha World-Herald, February 15, 1929, 2.

could be kept in first class shape and not looking "like a back yard,"  
an airport would be "one of the best civic assets" possible.<sup>62</sup>

William F. Centner conducted the long awaited official inspection of the Omaha Municipal Airfield on February 21, 1929. Much to the dismay of local authorities, Centner could not "comment on conditions he observed . . ." and the city had to await the arrival of a written report of Centner's recommendations on further activities regarding the airfield.<sup>63</sup> On March 6, 1929, the Advisory Board received the report from the Commerce Department and Centner commented very favorably as to the suitability of the site. The Commerce Department airport specialist labelled the Omaha port "very excellent . . . of better than class A-1-A requirements and entirely commensurate with present and future needs." Centner recommended that "competent engineers be employed" to organize the growth of the field, that the surface of the field be conditioned, and that "class 'A' lighting equipment be installed."<sup>64</sup> The report of the Commerce Department gave many aviation authorities what they desired--competent, reliable, assurance that they had located the airfield in the proper spot and that its use and expansion were feasible.

On March 7, 1929, with the approval of the Commerce Department in hand, the Airport Advisory Board unanimously "recommended to the

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<sup>62</sup>ATC Minutes, February 8, 1929, 3-4; Omaha Bee-News, February 9, 1929, 3; Omaha World-Herald, February 9, 1929, 4.

<sup>63</sup>Omaha World-Herald, February 22, 1929, 6.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid, March 7, 1929, 1, 11.

City Council that the aviation field be retained and developed." On the same date, the Board solved another long standing problem--that of an adequate caretaker for the airfield. The Advisory Board directed the City Attorney to draw up a contract with Lawrence Enzminger, owner of the Travel Air Company of North Platte, Nebraska.<sup>65</sup> Enzminger offered, as early as the summer of 1928, to serve as superintendent of the field "without salary." The city, Enzminger said, would have to give him permission "to establish a repair and service station, using his own mechanics and furnishing his own stock of airplanes."<sup>66</sup> Omaha's cautious stance in aviation matters during that year, though, necessitated some delay in the acquisition of a permanent caretaker for the airport. Although the City Council routinely approved Airport Advisory Board suggestions, in this instance it rejected Enzminger. Instead the Council offered the position to Jay Dudley, former clerk in the Omaha Street Cleaning and Maintenance Department, who became Omaha's first Airfield Superintendent.<sup>67</sup> In the spring of 1929, however, the Airport Advisory Board successfully brought Enzminger and his aviation company to the Omaha field. Upon the suggestion of the Advisory Board, the City Council gave Enzminger a ten year contract to move his operations to the city, "the first three years" of which he agreed to pay the city "five hundred dollars annually."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>66</sup> ATC Minutes, June 6, 1928, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Sunday World-Herald, November, 24, 1929 7C.

<sup>68</sup> Omaha World-Herald, March 7, 1929, 11.



By negotiating a long-term agreement with Lawrence Enzminger, the Airport Advisory Board made one of the most significant decisions in the entire early development of the Omaha airfield. Aviation authorities expressed much hope that Enzminger and his associates would not only aid in the actual development of the airport but also offer the field a measure of consistency and permanence that Omaha aviation had lacked for so long.<sup>69</sup>

Lawrence Enzminger soon proved the expectations of these city officials correct. On April 7, 1929, Enzminger announced a merger between his own Travel Air Company of North Platte and the Burnham-Miller Flying Service of Council Bluffs, Iowa, to establish the Midwest Aviation Corporation. Enzminger served as President of the Omaha-based company, which had service facilities in Sioux City and Des Moines, Iowa, and Grand Island, Nebraska, and had "an authorized capitalization of \$2,250,000." Construction began almost immediately on a one hundred foot square steel hangar and a "brick office building," along with the organization of an aviation school with famous airmail carrier Jack (Skinny) Knight in charge.<sup>70</sup> The formulation of the Midwest Aviation Corporation brought an important organization to the airfield and proved that the Airport Advisory Board has acted very wisely by negotiating a contract with Lawrence Enzminger.

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<sup>69</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal, XVII (March 23, 1929), 14. Hereafter cited as Chamber Journal; Omaha World-Herald, April 27, 1929, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Sunday World-Herald, April 7, 1929, 1A, 7A; For more information on Jack Knight see George Tweney, "Air Transportation and the American West," Montana, The Magazine of Western History, XIX (October, 1969), 72-73.

Another significant, but not as immediately successful, decision of the Airport Advisory Board came on March 8, 1929, when its members voted to recommend that the City Council

retain the Austin Company, airfield construction engineers and contractors of Cleveland Ohio to make a survey of the field and draw up a comprehensive plan for its improvement.

The City Council approved the recommendation the following week and expected William E. Arthur, the "engineer who laid out the runway from which Charles Lindbergh took off on his transatlantic flight," to take charge of the "preliminary work." J.C. Prosser, advance representative of the Austin Company, inspected the Omaha field and considered it "in better condition than 75 per cent of the landing fields in other cities." Grading and drainage remained the biggest problems according to Prosser, who stated that quite a bit of work could be completed with the 1929 allotment of \$50,000.<sup>71</sup>

As payment for the preliminary survey, Omaha planned to give Arthur and his company \$2,000. In addition, the Austin Company received six per cent of the costs of construction "for which it prepares specifications and blueprints." The Austin Company became responsible for the complete organization of the airfield, including the recommendations as to what improvements "should be undertaken each year with the \$50,000 annually available."<sup>72</sup>

The establishment of Lawrence Enzinger and the Midwest Aviation Corporation at the Omaha Municipal Airfield, along with the hiring of the

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<sup>70</sup> Omaha World-Herald, March 9, 1929, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Austin Company as airport consultants, showed that aerial leaders in the city meant to succeed in aviation. Proof of the possibility of this quest came in May with the introduction of the first Omaha-built airplane. On May 12, 1929, the Overland Sport Trainer, the "first commercial airplane to be built in Omaha" received its initial test flight. A product of Overland Airways Inc., 4110 Commercial Street, the Sport Trainer sold for just under \$2,500. According to Jack Kenwood, Omaha pilot, the Overland plane handled quite well: "'It's a bearcat and I like every thing about it, . . . I've handled a number of sport planes and none of them compare. It's going to be a credit to Omaha to have it manufactured here.'"<sup>73</sup>

Another indication of Omaha's advances in aviation came on May 25, 1929, when the Airport Advisory Board accepted the field drainage plans submitted by the Austin Company. William Arthur, in his capacity as Chief Engineer of the company, considered drainage the most important problem and one that should be handled immediately with a cost of approximately \$20,000 to \$25,000. Arthur's plans called for the installation of "seven and one half miles of drainage pipes . . . at least two feet below the surface . . . ." The position of the field, between two bodies of water, the Missouri River and Carter Lake, combined with the three foot water table, thought Arthur, made drainage the first job to tackle.<sup>74</sup> The quality and substance of the soil beneath the Municipal Field proved to be another reason for the drainage difficulty. The

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid, May 13, 1929, 1, 6.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid, May 25, 1929 2.

Missouri River over many centuries had deposited much of the soil on the field in layers of sand, gravel, and clay--all of which drained differently.<sup>75</sup> Despite the confidence of the Austin Company, the proper drainage of the Omaha Municipal Airfield and its cost remained the most difficult problem throughout this period. William Arthur, however, saw no reason why the problems of the Omaha field could not be overcome and praised the potential of the field: "'Any pilot who can't use it . . . had better get out of the air. Within a year, . . . I predict one hundred planes will be stationed there at all times.'"<sup>76</sup>

The City Council did not take long to react to the suggestions of the Airport Advisory Board and on May 29, 1929, they advertised for bids on the drainage work. Although Commissioner Noyes had no experience in airport planning, he publicly favored the establishment of a circular field. The possibility of collision prompted William Arthur to disagree and plan for the beginnings of a square field.<sup>77</sup> The Austin Company called for the laying of drainage pipes to serve three runways, each of which would be three hundred feet wide. Lengthwise, plans called for the south runway, that ran east and west, to be 2,800 feet long, the west runway, running north and south, to be 3,300 feet long, and the final runway, going southeast to northwest, close to

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<sup>75</sup>Mr. Milton Wuerth, Chief of Operations, Omaha Airport Authority, to author, October 20, 1978.

<sup>76</sup>Omaha World-Herald, May 25, 1929, 2.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid, May 17, 1929, 2; May 25, 1929, 2; Arthur's position seemed more valid and corresponded with the prevailing attitude of many municipalities throughout the decade. See Archibald Black, "How to lay out and Build an Airplane Landing Field," Engineering News-Record, Vol. 89 (September 28, 1922), 504-507.

3,300 feet long. The Austin Company expected the runways to be covered with grass and later treated with an all weather surface. The approach of June saw "unprecedented activity" at the Municipal Field. Commissioner Noyes began work on a temporary landing area to be used while drainage work continued, construction began on the Midwest Aviation Hangar, and "numerous mechanics and assistants" remained "busily engaged throughout the day."<sup>78</sup>

All of the bustling activity at the airfield initially prompted positive responses from Omaha's aviation leaders. The Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal acclaimed the actions of Midwest Aviation Corporation, the manufacture of the Overland Sport Trainer, and the growing interest in the "American Legion model plane contest." The Journal expressed the view that interest in aviation had finally become "general in Omaha."<sup>79</sup> The Omaha World-Herald expressed similar sentiments and claimed that the Advisory Board "acted wisely" in seeking expert consultation on Municipal Field development. A World-Herald editorial stated that aviation was "at last going to be given a chance to grow here, after a disappointing apathy and an opportunity-killing indifference." The editorial called upon the people of Omaha to give the Airport Advisory Board and the City Councilmen their "united support" and not allow these officials "to relax, for a day, their vigilant efforts to achieve for Omaha a place in aviation."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Omaha World-Herald, May 28, 1929, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Chamber Journal, XVIII (June 1, 1929), 6.

<sup>80</sup> Omaha World-Herald, May 30, 1929, 16.

As happened so often in the growth of the airfield, a startling reversal took place in the civic-minded expressions of support for the progress of aviation in Omaha. The frequent statements of optimism that appeared in May deteriorated greatly in June. William A. Ellis, secretary of the Aerial Transportation Committee, and Assistant Commissioner of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, set a tone of impatience on June 5 that continued, in varying degrees, throughout the month. "'Omaha,'" he said, "'must step on the gas and get its municipal airport improved as quickly as possible or we can't expect to progress very much as an aviation center . . . .'" As if he expected an airfield that had been mismanaged and often ignored for three years to take form overnight, Ellis strongly criticized the slow, cautious, approach of the airport consultants.<sup>81</sup> Although the Legion Hangar became overcrowded quite frequently during this period forcing some airplanes to be staked outside, Ellis' criticism of the port's progress seemed invalid. Midwest Aviation expected the completion of their one hundred foot square hangar in the near future, which promised to put an end to that practice.<sup>82</sup> Regardless of the many improvements that the airport consultants planned for the airfield, progress was jeopardized by ignorance of technical problems and ill-timed and ill-conceived booster rhetoric.

On June 18 the next stage of unrest appeared when Commissioner Noyes called a special meeting of the Advisory Board to "consider

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid, June 6, 1929, 5.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid, June 7, 1929, 1.

specifications for lighting the many airfield." Local businesses complained that the Austin Company's lighting plans "were drawn for particular types of lighting, so that other firm's appliances would not fit in with the general scheme." These specifications greatly dissatisfied Noyes and he claimed that "'It would be illegal for the city to advertise for bids on a system for which only one type of lighting could be used.'" The controversial lighting facilities called for in the Austin scheme included "12 landing area flood lights, one beacon tower . . . various obstruction lights, . . . and a switchboard for central control," all in the Crouse-Hinds variety "or its equal."<sup>83</sup>

Two days later, the City Council announced its decision to "readvertise for bids on lighting equipment." This announcement came on the heels of the refusal of the Council to accept the bids for drainage due to the exorbitant cost. Consequently, the concern over the seemingly slow development of the field "which had been smouldering for some time, . . . burst into flame . . . ."<sup>84</sup> The Airport Advisory Board laid the blame for the unrest and delay on the Austin Company. James E. Davidson, Board member, expected a certain amount of delay but thought the actions of the Austin people "somewhat dilatory." Commissioner Noyes conveniently forgot the unanimous vote of five months earlier to succumb to caution and seek expert advice. Noyes' remarks proved his "openly impatient" stance: "'If they had turned all this work over to me instead of calling in these 'experts' I would have had

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, June 17, 1929, 1,

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, June 19, 1929, 1-2.

the field drained and the lights ready to install by this time.'" Convinced that the public could not fault him or the Advisory Board for the delay, Noyes criticized the Austin Company's blueprints for development: "'... all the Austin Company has done is to draw pictures. I can't build anything by pictures. If they would leave it to me I'd build that field so fast it would make them dizzy.'"<sup>85</sup>

Other interested persons in Omaha expressed similar, if less brash, sentiments. Aviation Board member J.A. Tamisiea stated that Noyes remained the only man to do "'anything for the field this year.'" Tamisiea thought that Noyes could accomplish the drainage work in less time and with much less expense than the lowest bid of \$31,000. Glen Eastburn, Industrial Commissioner of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, warned that you had "'to run like hell to stand still in the air game today, [and] Omaha hasn't even been running.'" Leo Bozell, American Legion member and President of Bozell & Jacobs Advertising Agency, stated that Omaha had made a "'mighty poor showing'" and that other cities did not let "'grass grow under their feet.'"<sup>86</sup> The Journal of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce entered the controversy by a comparison of the Omaha airfield with the Kansas City, Missouri, field. The Journal stated that the airport in Kansas City had so much activity that it "resembled a state fair." The Kansas City field, with its many ongoing improvements, far surpassed the Omaha Municipal Field. Consequently, pilots landed at Kansas City "in numbers resembling

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid, June 21, 1929, 1.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.



ducks coming into a blind."<sup>87</sup> The Journal's statements were confusing because, a little more than a month earlier, the Douglas County Legionnaire reported that the Omaha field did not lag "so far behind if compared to Kansas City's." The Legionnaire described the field in Kansas City as "just a piece of ground" similar to that in Omaha and, although it possessed more hangars, none of them were the quality of the Legion Hangar.<sup>88</sup> The reason for the often misinformed criticism of the Austin Company and the less than immediate field development had its roots in the city's virtual infancy in regard to aviation matters.

William E. Arthur proved Omaha's aerial immaturity in the defense of his company's actions. Arthur declared that the Austin Company had "more experience in airport designing than any other firm in the country" and defended his methodical approach to the development of the Omaha field. As he said, "'You could have started to work right away and made a lot of dirt fly, but it wouldn't have done any good, . . . . When you are building an airport you want to do things right and you must plan carefully.'" In response to the lighting specifications controversy, Arthur argued that he had "specified the best lighting system made . . . .'" Omaha, stated Arthur, should not "sacrifice its lighting system to please a bunch of local contractors who can't provide the kind of equipment we specify."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Chamber Journal, XVIII (June 29, 1929), 6.

<sup>88</sup> Legionnaire, VIII (April 25, 1929), 6.

<sup>89</sup> Omaha World-Herald, June 19, 1929, 1. The piping specified by William Arthur, for example, was, indeed, of superior quality because, according to Milton Wuerth of the Omaha Airport Authority, the original piping was not replaced until 1946.

Aviation Board member A.H. Feters remained a calming force in this controversy. Feters saw no fault in either the Austin engineers or the city and still supported the decision to consult experts who could "'help us avoid'" the errors of other municipal airfields. Commissioner Noyes received support from Feters who described the Commissioner as having "'given more time, and more hard work, and more intense interest . . .'" than any other person to the improvement of the airport. Feters was convinced that the Austin engineers desired only the best equipment for the field and stated that "'thorough engineering'" always took much time and defended the lighting and drainage specifications of the Austin Company. Nevertheless, Feters announced an alteration in the original lighting specifications so that they no longer called for an individual company's lighting system.<sup>90</sup>

On June 21, 1929, a break in the controversy appeared when the Crouse-Hinds Company demonstrated its five thousand watt flood lamp at the Municipal Airfield. Dean Noyes' son Billy threw the switch that fully illuminated much of the field in the presence of "hundreds of spectators." The whole event generated much excitement and the giant lamp appeared more than sufficient.<sup>91</sup> The suitability of the flood light served as a redeeming factor for the Austin Company and William Arthur--who had originally called for Crouse-Hinds lighting at the field.

For the remainder of June a stalemate existed between the Austin Company and the city. Austin officials thought the current progress at

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid, June 20, 1929, 2.

<sup>91</sup>William Dean Noyes, private interview held in Omaha, Nebraska, April 3, 1979; Omaha World-Herald, June 21, 1929, 2.

the field sufficient and the drainage and lighting specifications perfect for the Omaha field. The city, though, led by Dean Noyes, considered the progress minimal and all specifications either unnecessary or much too costly.<sup>92</sup> Drainage continued to be the main point of contention. Commissioner Noyes, despite his lack of technical knowledge, absolutely refused to spend the specified amount for drainage supplies and questioned the need for "such elaborate drainage" at a field "where water sinks away almost immediately."<sup>93</sup> Unlike William Arthur, Noyes did not realize the difficulties of draining this large an area and should not have taken the unusual complexities of the soil beneath the Municipal Field so lightly. The obvious need for experience and organization in the preparation of a class A-1-A landing field eventually became evident and Omaha's aviation enthusiasts stopped meddling in the affairs of their own experts.

On July 13, 1929, the representatives of the Austin Company successfully convinced the Airport Advisory Board that its methods and plans best suited the Municipal Field. On the motion of James E. Davidson, who feared that if Omaha varied from the Austin plans it would "'have a mongrel field,'" the Board recommended that the entire field development be placed in the hands of the Austin engineers. William E. Arthur appealed to the Board to give his company "' . . . a free hand . . .'" in the development of the airfield and vowed that his blueprints gave the city a quality airfield and its "'money's

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<sup>92</sup>Omaha World-Herald, June 22, 1929, 1-2, 4.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid, June 24, 1929, 3.

worth."<sup>94</sup> The decision of the Airport Advisory Board constituted a victory for Arthur. From the beginning he argued that the proper facilities, not the cheapest costs, were most important. Although the Board's expression of faith in that position cleared the way for the eventual improvement of the Omaha airfield, it also helped bring about the major financial burdens of the following twelve months.

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid, July 13, 1929, 2.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BOEING ACQUISITION 1927-1929

From 1927 to 1929 the possibility that the Boeing Airplane Company of Seattle, Washington, might locate at the Omaha Municipal Airfield underscored all actions of the city's aviation leaders. Every time Omaha took a step toward development or slipped into controversy and delay it had to consider the reaction of the Boeing Company. Many air enthusiasts viewed Omaha's future in aviation as directly related to the appearance of Boeing at the Municipal Field. The roots of the desire to reach an agreement with Boeing stretched back to 1924-- before Boeing was a household word and when the city seemingly had more importance as an aviation center.

In that year Omaha served as a landing spot on the trans-continental airmail route, which the government extended to Omaha on May 15 and expanded to San Francisco, California, on September 8, 1920.<sup>1</sup> Aviation promoters in Omaha seemed satisfied with Ak-Sar-Ben Field, the Chamber of Commerce Hangar, and the general status of aviation in their city. In 1924 several events destroyed this contentment and left Omaha without any practical role in aviation. During the summer the Ak-Sar-Ben Exposition Company notified the Chamber of Commerce that it

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<sup>1</sup>George H. Tweney, "Air Transportation and the American West," Montana, The Magazine of Western History, XIX (October 1969), 70. Hereafter cited as Tweney, "Air Transportation."

wished the landing field vacated, a tornado destroyed the airplane hangar, and the government declared the field at Ak-Sar-Ben "too small for night flying."<sup>2</sup> Before Omaha could argue the advantages of another site within its boundaries, the Airmail Service moved to the government installation at Fort Crook. The success of the airmail proved the feasibility of night flying and the move to Fort Crook, where lighting existed, coincided with efforts of the Post Office to develop lighted fields all along the route from New York City to San Francisco. The transfer to Fort Crook helped the Airmail Service achieve this goal and on July 1, 1925, it began overnight mail service.<sup>3</sup>

The decision of the United States Post Office to remove its transcontinental stop from Omaha devastated the city's immediate future in aviation and necessitated the difficulties it endured to reestablish aviation prominence for the community. Because the "expansion of civil aviation in the U.S. in the 1920's was concerned mainly with carrying mail," air travel in Omaha had no where to proceed after it lost the Ak-Sar-Ben airmail connection.<sup>4</sup> From 1925-1927, while Omaha tried to get back on the track in aviation matters, the Airmail Service took on a new dimension. By the middle of the decade the Post Office made it clear that government operation of the airmail was only temporary and, "as soon as possible, the carrying of the mail by air

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<sup>2</sup>U.S. Congress, House. Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads on H.R. 4326 and H.R. 4642, May 3, 1926, 69th Cong., 1st sess., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1926), 25.

<sup>3</sup>Tweney, "Air Transportation," 72-73.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 72.

would be turned over to private industry." The success of the airmail initiated the "airline industry" and the "beginnings of air transportation" in general. Postal authorities, then, did not anticipate difficulty in the establishment of private transportation of the airmail.<sup>5</sup> Congress facilitated this on February 2, 1925, when it passed the Airmail Act. Also known as the "Kelly Act," after Clyde Kelly of Pennsylvania, this legislation intended to "encourage commercial aviation and to authorize the Postmaster General to contract for airmail services."<sup>6</sup> Because the government considered the entire transcontinental expense "too arduous for a single operator," the Post Office Department accepted bids for the New York to Chicago and the Chicago to San Francisco routes separately.<sup>7</sup>

The Post Office awarded the New York to Chicago route to the National Air Transport Company on March 8, 1927, but the Chicago to San Francisco route remained of more interest to Omaha aviation leaders.<sup>8</sup> The government received bids from four companies for this route. Columbia Air Lines bid \$4.47 per pound of mail. Stout Air Services bid \$2.64 for the initial thousand miles and 26.4 cents for "each additional hundred miles." Western Air Express bid \$2.24 per pound for the "first thousand miles" and 22.4 cents for "each additional hundred

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 73.

<sup>6</sup>U.S. Statutes at Large, Vol. 43, pt. 1, (Dec. 1923-March 1925), "An Act to authorize the Postmaster General to contract for air mail service," February 2, 1925, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 805.

<sup>7</sup>Tweney, "Air Transportation," 73.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

miles." The Boeing Airplane Company bid \$1.50 per pound for the "first thousand miles and 15 cents for each additional hundred miles." The Omaha Chamber of Commerce realized that if they wanted the airmail to land within the confines of Omaha in the future they would have to develop a working relationship with one of those four companies. Consequently, the Aerial Transportation Committee decided to "write each one of these bidders, offering the co-operation of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce in case they were awarded the contract."<sup>9</sup> This marked Omaha's first official correspondence with the Boeing Airplane Company.

Omaha's initial contact with Boeing came in 1927 but the importance of the Boeing Company to American aviation had been apparent for many years. In 1914 William E. Boeing took up flying at the age of thirty-four "for his own amusement." Convinced that he could manufacture better aircraft than he had seen up to that time, Boeing and C. Conrad Westervelt, an officer in the Navy, began to build a pair of seaplanes in a Seattle, Washington, shipyard.<sup>10</sup> Early in 1916 Boeing completed construction of two B & W Seaplanes, each of which had a length of 27 feet, 6 inches, weighed 2,800 pounds, and had a top speed of 75 miles per hour. The "U.S. Army and Navy ordered derivations" of this seaplane which proved the quality of Boeing's first effort at aircraft construction.<sup>11</sup> On July 15, 1916, William Boeing founded the

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<sup>9</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Aerial Transportation Committee Minutes, January 21, 1927, 15. Hereafter cited as ATC Minutes.

<sup>10</sup> Tweney, "Air Transportation," 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> Pedigree of Champions, Boeing Since 1916 (Seattle: The Boeing Company c. May 1977), 7. Hereafter cited as Pedigree.



Pacific Aero Products Company and on April 18, 1917, changed its name to the Boeing Airplane Company.<sup>12</sup>

Boeing produced several models of aircraft by 1919 but began to be concerned whether there "was any future in the aircraft business." Although Boeing and an associate, former Army pilot Edward Hubbard, decided that the aircraft industry had a bright future, they thought the formulation of a "commercial airmail contract" necessary to "keep the company going." On October 20, 1920, Hubbard used Boeing C-700 Seaplanes to begin the first contract international airmail route, linking Seattle and Victoria, British Columbia. The Hubbard-Boeing coalition did not operate the route "on a scheduled daily basis." Still, they averaged 100 flights and carried an average 400,000 pounds of mail per year until the route dissolved in 1937.<sup>13</sup> From 1920 to 1927 the Boeing Airplane Company also continued the construction of aircraft and became the "leading U.S. supplier of single-seat fighting planes." Through the success of the Seattle to Victoria airmail contract and the "technological leadership" shown by the manufacture of quality aircraft, the Boeing-Hubbard organization achieved "preeminence in the transport field" by the time it bid for the western leg of the Trans-continental Airmail.<sup>14</sup>

This preeminence contrasted sharply with the inexperience of Omaha officials regarding aviation matters. Because the Omaha Chamber

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 5; Tweney, "Air Transportation," 71.

<sup>13</sup>Tweney, "Air Transportation," 72.

<sup>14</sup>Pedrigree, 5.

of Commerce sponsored the Ak-Sar-Ben Field and hangar, municipal authorities had little opportunity to gain experience in aviation prior to 1924. Regardless of this lack of aviation knowledge, the removal of the airmail to Fort Crook prompted the call for a municipal landing field--one that the city owned and controlled. After the acquisition of the property east of Carter Lake the city's aviation leaders wanted to improve the landing area very quickly because "promises were made by air mail officials, as well as army officials, that the government mail hangars would be moved to the municipal field for the reason that it was much closer to the Omaha Post Office."<sup>15</sup> Realistically, the 'promises' of the government to return the airmail could not have been given in earnest. The newly-acquired property was in deplorable condition, totally undeveloped, and as late as August, 1926, "still classed unfit for landing by national aviation authorities."<sup>16</sup> Amazingly, the Aerial Transportation Committee seemed generally convinced that the Post Office planned to abandon a well equipped landing facility at Fort Crook for 198 acres of farm land and cow pasture in Omaha. The city became aware of the actual intention of the Airmail Service in December, 1925, when the Post Office informed the Aerial Transportation Committee that

no steps could be taken to move any of the post office hangars to the municipal field, owing to lack of funds and that no steps of this kind could be considered until further appropriation was made.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>ATC Minutes, October 28, 1925, 65. These promises were vague and the Aerial Transportation Committee did not specify who made them.

<sup>16</sup>Omaha World-Herald, August 20, 1926, 3.

<sup>17</sup>ATC Minutes, December 15, 1925, 70.

Considering the quality of the city's airport, the aviation leadership in Omaha was fortunate that the government even discussed the transfer of the airmail to the Municipal Field. The refusal of the Airmail Service to leave Fort Crook marked the final attempt of the city to acquire the airmail landing franchise before Boeing took over from the Post Office in June, 1927.

In January of that year, after the transcontinental airmail bids were publicized, little doubt remained that the government would award William Boeing and Edward Hubbard the contract. The Boeing bid "was half of what the Post Office was prepared to pay" and considerably lower than their competition.<sup>18</sup> Boeing planned to conduct the route with twenty-five 40-A and 40-B airplanes, all equipped with facilities for carrying two to four passengers and 1,000 pounds of mail.<sup>19</sup> The success of the Boeing Air Transport Company, which was formed to handle the transcontinental service, amazed government authorities. In 1926, C.S. Cisler, General Superintendent of the United States Airmail Service, told the Omaha Chamber of Commerce Aerial Transportation Committee that the "service west of Chicago was not profitable."<sup>20</sup> The Boeing people began the service on July 1, 1927, and proved the experts mistaken. During the initial two years of operation Boeing "carried 1,300 tons of mail . . . 6,000 passengers," and "set new records in reliability and regularity, particularly with regard to minimizing

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<sup>18</sup> Tweney, "Air Transportation," 74.

<sup>19</sup> Pedigree, 18; Tweney, "Air Transportation," 74.

<sup>20</sup> ATC Minutes, February 23, 1926, 43.

engine failures." Through efficient management and the ability to carry passengers safely, William Boeing, "to the astonishment of his critics and competitors, did not lose money on the operation."<sup>21</sup>

Immediately after Boeing received the transcontinental contract, authorities in Omaha began trying to convince them to move their headquarters to the city's municipal field. The Aerial Transportation Committee realized that the landing area must be developed before the Boeing Air Transport Company would consider a transfer to the Omaha location. In an obvious expression of confidence, the committee decided to secure proper lighting for the Municipal Field. Due to the "expected transfer of the landing of mail from Fort Crook to the Omaha Field," thought the committee members, an arrangement had to be negotiated regarding the Fort Crook field lights. The committee wrote to Assistant Secretary of Commerce William McCracken relative to Omaha "using the present lighting equipment" at Fort Crook.<sup>22</sup> In reply, Secretary McCracken urged the Omaha Chamber of Commerce to contact postal authorities and suggest the transfer of the lease from Fort Crook to Omaha. At the same time, thought McCracken, there must be "the understanding that within a reasonable time effort to transfer the lease would be surrendered and the lighting equipment moved to the Municipal Air Field." The Secretary seemed misinformed and the Aerial Transportation Committee explained to McCracken that Fort Crook "was an army field and was not under lease by the Postal Department." They

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<sup>21</sup>Tweney, "Air Transportation," 74.

<sup>22</sup>ATC Minutes, February 4, 1927, 22.

also told McCracken that they had just learned that the lighting facilities at Fort Crook belonged to the Army and were not capable of transfer.<sup>23</sup>

Another opportunity to achieve the airmail occurred in March, 1927, when Edward Hubbard, now a Vice-President of the Boeing Airplane Company, visited Omaha and met with the Executive Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce. The way Hubbard handled the pressure to transfer the Boeing airmail planes to Omaha exemplified the wide crevice between the city's enthusiasm for the advancement of aviation and its actual accomplishments along aviation lines. Hubbard began his talk before the Executive Committee with idealistic rhetoric concerning the advances in American aviation and the hopes his company possessed regarding the newly-acquired airmail contract. On the subject of the Municipal Field Hubbard's words were honest and to the point.

Omaha's efforts to establish an airport pleased Hubbard and he stated that his trip to the city "was . . . for the purpose of arranging with the city for the use of the field . . . ." After inspecting the field Hubbard found that Omaha "was not behind other cities" but thought the field could hardly "be considered an airport without hangars, lighting facilities, shops, etc." In a statement that certainly bordered upon sarcasm, Hubbard did not rule out Boeing's use of the Omaha airport. His company would greatly appreciate, said Hubbard, if Omaha had the airfield "in readiness by July 1, at which time their contract be-

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, March 18, 1927, 27.

came effective."<sup>24</sup> Obviously, the city could not obtain the needed improvements in four months and, although the Hubbard visit could be labelled a failure for the city, his statements pointed out the importance of a suitably equipped landing field.

After the embarrassing meeting with Edward Hubbard, most aviation leaders in Omaha admitted the need for concrete improvement and took steps to achieve the development of the airport. Starting in 1927, Omaha's aspirations to provide a home for the Boeing Air Transport Company and the airmail contract took on greater proportions. Aviation advocates reacted to every effort at the advancement of aviation in or around Omaha with the opinion of the Boeing Company in mind. One of the objectives of the American Legion when it conducted the successful \$30,000 hangar drive that summer was to convince Boeing officials that the city planned to move ahead in aviation. Hubbard announced during his visit to Omaha in March that his firm would "not build a hangar here but [expected] to lease from the city or whoever erects a hangar on a basis of 6 per cent of the costs" and the Legion wanted such a structure available at the field.<sup>25</sup> Rumors in July, 1927, that Boeing planned to move its airmail headquarters to Lincoln, Nebraska, served as an impetus for the hangar drive. Edward Hubbard denied that Boeing considered the Lincoln location seriously but admitted that his company possessed only "temporary permission to use the government field

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<sup>24</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, March 29, 1927, 94-95. Hereafter cited as Executive Minutes; ATC Minutes, April 8, 1927, 29-30.

<sup>25</sup> ATC Minutes, April 8, 1927, 29.

at Fort Crook'" and planned to search for a new location in the future. Hubbard thought a move to Omaha possible, but described Omaha's field as "'in pretty bad shape right now . . .'" and stated that if it was "'not to be improved'" his company would make other arrangements.<sup>26</sup>

Aviation authorities in Omaha feared that one of these 'other arrangements' might be a move to a proposed airfield near Bellevue, Nebraska, south of Omaha. Announcement of the planned Bellevue airport came at an inopportune time for Omaha's aviation leaders and promised to hinder the American Legion drive to secure funds for the construction of a hangar at the Omaha Municipal Airfield. According to Thomas Shea, President of the South Omaha Merchant's Association, the only group that publicly supported this plan, his Association conducted the Bellevue project in earnest and "'the Boeing people would definitely be interested in a South Omaha field.'"<sup>27</sup> Apparently, Edward Hubbard agreed and, on behalf of the Boeing Air Transport Company, decided "to lease for 10 years a proposed 160 acre field near Bellevue for use by the company's air-mail planes . . . ." As an explanation, Hubbard told Omaha officials that these actions were necessary due to the "'indefinite'" nature of the improvements to the Municipal Field. R.C. Biart, a spokesman for the South Omaha Merchant's Association, said that the slow improvement of the Carter Lake site did not constitute the only reason for Boeing's actions. In conversations with Boeing officials Biart learned that the Omaha field did "'not meet their requirements:'"

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<sup>26</sup> Omaha World-Herald, July 17, 1927, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, July 25, 1927, 1.

The muny field is situated on bottom land about 10 feet above water level and there are certain air conditions such as a low hanging layer of fog and the presence of a smoke hazard that cannot be overcome.

In contrast, the proposed Bellevue site was a perfect location for the needs of the Boeing Air Transport Company.<sup>28</sup>

William A. Ellis of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce characterized the position of Omaha. Ellis thought the Municipal Field considerably more convenient than the Bellevue site: "'Locating a commercial air-field at Bellevue would be like building the new Union [railroad] Station the same distance from the city.'" In spite of the Bellevue situation, Ellis and others interested in aviation thought that efforts at the Omaha field must "not slack off."<sup>29</sup> Fortunately for Omaha, the Bellevue sponsors could not raise the necessary \$50,000 and abandoned the South Omaha plan.<sup>30</sup>

The debate over the possible utilization of the Bellevue location, however, brought to the attention of Omaha aviation leaders the factors that Boeing considered unacceptable about the Municipal Field. The fog threat was primary in their objections and a matter that haunted the Omaha field from 1927 to 1930. This controversy received much publicity in the fall of 1927 after the success of the Legion Hangar drive and caused some authorities to question whether the field should be retained. No effort should be made to develop the location, thought the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, July 26, 1927, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, July 25, 1927, 1.



Aerial Transportation Committee, without assurances that "the airmail service would be transferred to the new field upon the completion of the new hangar." To the committee the threat of fog posed a definite barrier to Boeing's use of the Municipal Airfield and its members decided to be cautious and investigate the fog allegations.<sup>31</sup>

Edward Hubbard approved of "a thorough test . . . as to fog conditions" and told the Chamber's aerial committee that his company "was very much in favor of moving" to the Omaha field. The Weather Bureau informed the Chamber of Commerce that the greatest danger of fog occurred "between 4:00 and 7:00 AM." Other than this information, the fog study in the fall of 1927 "was rather indefinite." The Aerial Transportation Committee decided, then, that in order "to satisfy the Boeing-Hubbard Company it would be necessary to make an extended test over several months."<sup>32</sup> Although these fog tests were authorized primarily for the sake of the Boeing officials, William Ellis expressed the view of the Chamber of Commerce when he stated that, whether or not the fog investigation showed a problem, the city "'should go ahead and equip the Municipal Field . . . .'" Ellis argued that Omaha must do what other cities did and develop a separate field for early morning and night flying.<sup>33</sup>

In the midst of their attempts to discover the validity of

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<sup>31</sup>ATC Minutes, October 7, 1927, 56.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, November 5, 1927, 58.

<sup>33</sup>Omaha World-Herald, December 2, 1927, 10; Executive Minutes, December 6, 1927, 332-335.

Boeing's charges against the Omaha Municipal Field, the Aerial Transportation Committee learned that the airmail would not land at Omaha in the near future. Boeing had operated at Fort Crook from July 1 without a formal agreement but on November 28, 1927, Boeing announced that it had been "granted a revokable license to use the army landing field at Fort Crook . . . ." Now, according to John S. McGurk, Chairman of the Omaha-Bellevue Airport movement, Boeing possessed a definite base of operations and the license with the government meant "that the muny landing field at Carter Lake [would] not be used by the Boeing people . . . ." The government agreed to allow Boeing to use Fort Crook for airmail and passenger service and Boeing officials seemed very pleased with this agreement. This situation also satisfied Boeing's airmail pilots, some of whom contended "that a landing field at Fort Crook . . . would be far superior to the Omaha muny field because of better visibility, particularly in foggy weather."<sup>34</sup>

The actions of the Boeing Air Transport Company and the accusations it levied against the Municipal Airfield greatly upset Omaha aviation advocates. A full page editorial in the Omaha Bee-News on December 1, 1927, exemplified this frustration. Although the government could cancel the agreement with Boeing at any time, the Bee-News feared that it amounted to a "permanent license" to operate from Fort Crook. According to the editorial this agreement, combined with the statements of Boeing officials that "the Muny field [was] not

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<sup>34</sup> Omaha Bee-News, November 29, 1927, 5.

attractive as a landing place," marked a "severe indictment of the Municipal field." The Bee-News considered the views of the Boeing Company definitive and believed that if its officials refused to use the airfield "the entire question of the municipal field should be reviewed." The editorial declared that Omaha authorities chose the Carter Lake site because it was supposedly the "most acceptable" location. Obviously, argued the Bee-News, these authorities were mistaken and an array of experts should be consulted as to the suitability of the current airport site.<sup>35</sup> The Chamber of Commerce Aerial Transportation Committee reacted negatively to the Bee-News editorial. The members of the committee labelled the publicity "unfortunate," bound to have an improper effect upon the test case to decide the propriety of utilizing the property east of Carter Lake for aviation purposes, and "wholly uncalled for at [that] time."<sup>36</sup>

The position of the Bee-News did not gain support and for much of 1928 the prevalent view remained that of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber was convinced that the Boeing Air Transport Company would eventually leave Fort Crook and move to another field.<sup>37</sup> Full of confidence, the Chamber of Commerce expected that upon the completion of the Carter Lake site the new Boeing landing field would be in Omaha. Consequently, the Aerial Transportation Committee concentrated most of its efforts during 1928 on the development of the Municipal Field.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, December 1, 1927, 24.

<sup>36</sup> ATC Minutes, December 2, 1927, 65.

<sup>37</sup> Executive Minutes, December 6, 1927, 333.

While the Chamber of Commerce marked time with minor improvement of the airfield, Boeing's most important objection to the port, the fog threat, remained fairly submerged throughout most of 1928. The decision to relegate the fog matter to a secondary status came from the Aerial Transportation Committee on January 6. The committee decided "not to make further investigations until after the [American Legion] hangar was completed." The reason for the postponement of further fog studies came from a report that, since December 2, 1927, there had been only one "light fog of about an hours duration" at the Municipal Field.<sup>38</sup> The Fort Crook Field, however, endured at least one serious fog during that period. On December 12 a Boeing Air Transport Company pilot "was forced down at dawn by fog . . ." on the way from Fort Crook to Des Moines, Iowa,<sup>39</sup> The reports of serious fog along the transcontinental route did little to gain complete Boeing support for the Omaha airport but seemed to add credence to the view that "while there had been some fog [in Omaha] it was invariably foggy over a wide territory and the conditions were no worse at the Municipal Field than other places."<sup>40</sup> The Aerial Transportation Committee expressed this view in February which served as their only word on the subject until November.

Near the end of the year Omaha aviation leaders found themselves in a better position to battle the criticism of the Boeing Air Transport Company. The efforts of the Chamber of Commerce to formulate an Omaha to Winnipeg air service, the success of the International Air Race recep-

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<sup>38</sup> ATC Minutes, January 6, 1928, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Omaha World-Herald, December 12, 1927, 1.

<sup>40</sup> ATC Minutes, February 12, 1928, 14.

tion, and the passage of the Aviation Bond Charter Amendment proved that Omaha's leaders were determined to seek aviation superiority for their community. The charter amendment, especially, promised to enhance Omaha's chances to secure Boeing and the airmail headquarters. Amos Thomas, Chairman of the Aerial Transportation Committee, believed the success of the bond issue fundamental to Boeing's transfer to the Municipal Field. Due to the "glaring lack of equipment at the muny field," argued Thomas, no one should be surprised that Boeing officials disliked the Omaha airport. Thomas expected Boeing "'to make its mail contract only a side line'" and eventually "'gain its chief revenue from commerce and passenger traffic.'" Consequently, Boeing must locate this service "'from . . . an accessible field . . . .'" Situated a mere "10 minutes from the Post Office," Thomas thought the Municipal Field the perfect answer to Boeing's expected needs. The Charter Amendment, argued Thomas, provided funds to begin improvements to the airfield in anticipation of Boeing's arrival.<sup>41</sup>

The success of the aviation amendment, to the dismay of the Aerial Transportation Committee, did not impress Boeing officials to a great extent. After the election, Frank Caldwell, head of Boeing's Omaha offices, said his company "would not use the Carter Lake site because it [was] 'in the lowlands near the river susceptible to fog conditions.'"<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Sunday World-Herald, August 5, 1928, 3A; H.W. Peterson, Chicago Traffic Manager of the Boeing Air Transport Company, seemed to agree. Peterson thought Omaha would succeed as a commercial aviation center as it had succeeded as a railroad center. See Omaha World-Herald, September 6, 1928, 10.

<sup>42</sup>Sunday World-Herald, November 11, 1928, 13A; Omaha World-Herald, November 13, 1928, 2.

The renewal of the fog controversy prompted further discussion on the subject by the Aerial Transportation Committee during November, 1928. The members of the committee discussed the extremely negative position of the Boeing Company regarding the Municipal Field. Boeing officials did not have a fog investigation upon which to base its criticism and committee member Lawrence Tholecke thought it unfair that they accepted rumors of fog without proof. The committee agreed that such proof was needed and decided to ask Boeing to assist in the tests.<sup>43</sup> W.J. Herron, a Boeing Vice President, announced that his company consented to such a survey and

would be more than glad to cooperate with Omaha in making investigation of the present field, and in all other matters that would be to their mutual interest in the development of a satisfactory airport in Omaha.<sup>44</sup>

Although Herron's words were very non-committal, they tended to encourage the members of the Aerial Transportation Committee.

The feeling of mutual cooperation imbued by Herron had not characterized the attitude of his company up to that time. The fluctuating positions of the Boeing Air Transport Company and their well known dissatisfaction with the Omaha airport prompted the cautious attitude adopted by Omaha aviation leaders during 1929. The desire to investigate the charges of Boeing officials and determine whether the development of the Carter Lake site was advisable served as a primary reason for the consultation of expert advice. The inconsistencies of the Boeing

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<sup>43</sup> ATC Minutes November 22, 1928, 77-78.

<sup>44</sup> Executive Minutes, December 18, 1928, 285.

Air Transport Company concerning the Omaha Municipal Airfield became discernable by the end of 1928. As 1929 proceeded they became obvious and aviation leaders in Omaha had little difficulty countering Boeing's accusations.

The entrance of the Commerce Department into the controversy countered the charges of the Boeing Company very well. One of the reasons the Airport Advisory Board requested the assistance of airport specialist William Centner was to advise as to the seriousness of the fog conditions.<sup>45</sup> Because the Municipal Field "was being delayed in its development owing to doubt as to whether it was a suitable field, due to . . . fog conditions," Centner informed the Aerial Transportation Committee that his department intended to cooperate in any fog survey.<sup>46</sup> The members of the Chamber's aviation committee generally felt that the fog investigation should be conducted with representatives of the Boeing Air Transport Company. Although Boeing informed Omaha that the Municipal Field "had been condemned" by their experts, they agreed to send William P. Hoare, Superintendent of Boeing's eastern division, to Omaha.<sup>47</sup>

Regardless of the impending official judgement on the suitability of the airfield, the Aerial Transportation Committee began to debate a hard line position. Amos Thomas argued that "the development of the field should proceed and if the Boeing Company thought it advisable to

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<sup>45</sup> Omaha World-Herald, February 21, 1929, 10.

<sup>46</sup> ATC Minutes, February 8, 1929, 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, February, 15, 1929, 9.

move their headquarters" to Lincoln or somewhere else "to let them do so."<sup>48</sup> The members of the committee seemed to agree, which represented a significant alteration in opinion. From the determination to acquire Boeing at all costs, by early 1929, the Aerial Transportation Committee hesitated to allow the whims of the Boeing Air Transport Company to influence their actions.

William Hoare continued the controversy between his company and Omaha's aviation leaders. On March 5, 1929, Hoare told the Council Bluffs, Iowa, Kiwanis Club that Boeing "would not use the Omaha Municipal Airport 'under any circumstances.'" Hoare left the impression that his company considered the blossoming Council Bluffs airport as a potential future base of operations.<sup>49</sup> The following day he backed away from this harsh stance and explained that he had misunderstood the position of his company. Supposedly, Boeing's actual position was that they "would not use the munny field 'under present circumstances.'"<sup>50</sup> Hoare's words fit in well with the train of confusing and fluctuating statements of Boeing people concerning Omaha aviation. The Aerial Transportation Committee desired to eliminate the delays that occurred from this inconsistency by ignoring Boeing to a certain extent and urging the development of the Municipal Field.

The report of William Centner concerning the suitability of the Omaha Airport did much to strengthen the newly-acquired independence of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>49</sup> Omaha World-Herald, March 5, 1929, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, March 6, 1929, 1.



the Aerial Transportation Committee. According to the Centner report, the fog threat did not present a major problem:

The general opinion of those with whom I [Centner] discussed this matter, (and in which I am inclined to concur) is that fog conditions when they do occur, are general throughout this section of the country and not localized . . . .<sup>51</sup>

Centner found no reason why the Omaha field should not be developed as quickly as possible. The Chamber's aerial committee discovered that certain airmail pilots also approved of the Omaha airfield. Upon consultation with "two of the very best flyers in the air mail service," the members of the committee learned that "the objections based on fog conditions was 'bugaboo' and was purely selfish propaganda and that they themselves would have no hesitancy in flying to and from this field." These revelations did much to advance the position of the Aerial Transportation Committee "that the development of the present field should be carried out [and] if the Boeing Company [made] a thorough investigation they [would] change their attitude as to its usage."<sup>52</sup>

The decision of the Airport Advisory Board to move ahead with the development of the field and place its trust in the Austin Company marked a major breakthrough in the Boeing matter. William Arthur of the Austin Company told Amos Thomas that Boeing approved of his planned airfield improvements. If Omaha followed the blueprints of the Austin engineers closely, argued Thomas, "the Boeing Company would be glad to move its Omaha operations from Fort Crook to the Muny Field, and

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid, March 7, 1929, 1, 11; Mr. Milton Wuerth, Chief of Operations, Omaha Airport Authority, to author, October 20, 1928.

<sup>52</sup>ATC Minutes, February 15, 1929, 9.

build its own hangar at the muny airport . . ."<sup>53</sup>

Near the end of June, 1929, the Boeing Company became concerned about the security of its license to operate from Fort Cook. Boeing already deemed the field at Fort Crook "too small for the larger type planes" and they expected the movement of some United States Army Air Corps planes to Fort Crook from Fort Riley, Kansas, in July to initiate the possibility of very cramped quarters in the near future. Rumors were rampant that Boeing planned to move to the Omaha field very soon.<sup>54</sup> In July, Commissioner Dean Noyes confirmed these rumors after a conversation with Frank Caldwell of Boeing. Caldwell was very encouraging and announced that D.D. Colyer, a Vice President of the Boeing Air Transport Company, would travel to Omaha within a week to "look the situation over."<sup>55</sup> That summer it seemed merely a matter of time until Boeing transferred to Omaha and "the indefiniteness that . . . befogged the airport" came to an end. For the first time Omaha had Boeing 'over a barrel.' Boeing's arguments against the Municipal Field were successfully minimized, and the utilization and improvement of the field seemed a certainty. The fact that the Army was "anxious to have the Fort Crook Field vacated, and would probably require this if another field were available for the airmail," further undermined the position of Boeing. Omaha aviation leaders realized that speedy development remained the only obstacle to Boeing's appearance and the certain transformation of Omaha

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<sup>53</sup>Omaha World-Herald, June 5, 1929, 7.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid, June 26, 1929, 1.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, July 9, 1929, 1.

into a key aviation center.<sup>56</sup>

On July 24, 1929, eleven days after the Airport Advisory Board finally granted the Austin Company complete control over airfield improvements, the Boeing Air Transport Company gave "Definite assurance" that they planned "to move [their] local operations to the municipal field" that fall. President Phillip Johnson of the Boeing Company said the move was conditional upon the field being in readiness "for day and night flying and equipped against adverse weather conditions." Johnson told Dean Noyes that Boeing watched Omaha's progress in aviation with much interest and said that his company was "anxious to move" to Omaha. The announcement of Boeing was directly related to the acceptance of the improvement plans of the Austin Company. Johnson remained concerned about the low level of the field, its location between two bodies of water, and the absence of lighting and runways, but had great confidence that these facilities would be forthcoming due to the organizational ability of the Austin Company.<sup>57</sup>

Although the controversy over the transfer of Boeing to the Omaha Municipal Field continued into 1930, little doubt remained by August, 1929, that the airmail would land at Omaha in the future. Aviation leaders in Omaha had tried since 1924 to achieve the return of the airmail planes to their city and since 1927 to convince Boeing to move its operations to the Municipal Field. Negotiations with Boeing were often difficult and frustrating. At every turn Boeing

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, June 10, 1929, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, July 24, 1929, 1 & 2.

officials belittled and criticized Omaha's airfield. After the acquisition of the airmail contract Boeing disapproved, rightfully, of the Omaha Municipal Field due to its lack of facilities. When the successful Legion-Airport Hangar drive and the passage of the Aviation Bond Charter Amendment promised to solve the facility problem, Boeing turned to the fog situation as their primary reason for refusing to move to the Municipal Field. Boeing also frequently threatened to move to a variety of fields around Omaha, hampering the city's ability to move ahead with improvements to the Carter Lake site. Only after the Army considered requesting their removal from Fort Crook did Boeing officials take the Omaha field seriously.<sup>58</sup>

The often vacillating statements of Boeing officials hurt the company's credibility and by the middle of 1929 aviation leaders in Omaha paid little attention to their statements. Instead, Omaha aviation enthusiasts decided to ignore the views of the Boeing Company and concentrate upon field development. This decision brought assurance of Boeing's transfer to Omaha and began the events which led to substantial

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<sup>58</sup> Sources explaining the Boeing side in this matter were unavailable. The Omaha Airport Authority suggested that the Boeing office in Bellevue, Nebraska, might have the proper materials. Boeing officials there, however, stated that the Boeing Commercial Airplane Company in Seattle, Washington, would have sources relating to Boeing's initial contracts with Omaha. Gordon S. Williams, Public Relations Director for the Boeing Commercial Airplane Company, was encouraging but claimed that his office did not have these sources and that United Airline's headquarters in Chicago, Illinois, "could be of assistance in this matter." James A. Kennedy, Vice-President, Corporate Communications, United Airlines, was also unable to provide any materials and suggested that the airport in Omaha be contacted, where the search for these materials began. It is unfortunate that the Boeing position cannot be explored because the actions and statements of their officials, from 1927 to 1929, surely were not as spiteful and unorganized as herein portrayed.

improvement of the Municipal Airfield.

## CHAPTER VI

### FINAL IMPROVEMENTS 1929-1930

By August, 1929, the Omaha Airport Advisory Board had finally accepted the complete plans of the Austin Company and received verbal agreement from Boeing to station their operation at the Municipal Field. The events of the next sixteen months culminated in a vastly improved airfield and the dedication of a huge airport hangar-terminal by the Boeing Air Transport Company. The problems encountered by Omaha aviation leaders did not lessen during this period but, in contrast to previous months, these difficulties failed to stagnate aviation improvements in the city. The plans of improvement were too organized and the impetus for development remained too strong during 1930 for controversy to hinder the quest of the city for aviation superiority.

Work proceeded rapidly at the Omaha field after the Airport Advisory Board agreed to abide by the specifications of the Austin Company. The city spent \$28,000 preparing a proper drainage system for the airport during the summer and fall of 1929. Commissioner Dean Noyes still considered the thirty-six inch piping specified by Austin engineers overly expensive and much larger than needed.<sup>1</sup> Although at this time nothing could be accomplished by complaining, Noyes spoke out against the piping and said "if any rain occurred to fill it, the field would

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Omaha Chamber of Commerce. Executive Committee Minutes, December 17, 1929, 209. Hereafter cited as Executive Minutes.

all be under water."<sup>2</sup> The engineers of the Austin Company explained that they had specified this type of piping so that the drainage system could "carry the heaviest rainfall of record for the locality" and Noyes' criticism of the drainage system did not gain support.<sup>3</sup> Commissioner Noyes had been justifiably concerned over the expense of the drainage materials because the \$28,000 spent on drainage during the summer and fall took the greatest proportion of the \$50,000 allotted in 1929. Of the \$22,000 balance, the city spent \$14,000 on grading and resurfacing the runways which had consisted of grass and dirt since the purchase of the field, \$3,600 on the construction of a switch house, and \$4,400 on engineering and miscellaneous services.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the rapid expenditure of the 1929 bond funds, the city found itself seriously short of money. Still, the Airport Advisory Board advertised for lighting bids in August and the LeBron Electrical Company submitted the low bid of \$26,352.87, an amount the city could not afford at that time. Omaha needed this lighting equipment badly because the Boeing Air Transport Company had announced in their verbal agreement to transfer to the Omaha Municipal Airfield that the airport must be "available for night flying" before they moved.<sup>5</sup> To insure a proper lighting system and as an encouragement to Boeing three members of the Airport Advisory Board, James E. Davidson, Gould Dietz, and A.H.

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<sup>2</sup>Sunday World-Herald, August 4, 1929, 3A.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Executive Minutes, December 17, 1929, 209.

<sup>5</sup>Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal, XVIII (September 7, 1929), 13.  
Hereafter cited as Chamber Journal.

Fetters volunteered to "finance the lighting on a five hundred dollar monthly rental" until the following year.<sup>6</sup> As September approached, aviation leaders in Omaha seemed confident that lighting would be installed.<sup>7</sup>

Another event that proved Omaha's promising future as an aviation center came in September when Rapid Air Lines Corporation began negotiations to purchase the American Legion Airplane Hangar. The Legion workers had conducted the hangar drive during the summer of 1927 under the premise that they planned to return all subscriptions in the future. Walter F. Halley, president of Halley Aviation which controlled Rapid Air Lines, offered the Legion \$20,000 for the hangar. If the Legion-Airport Corporation accepted that figure, the city would be "morally, though not legally committed" to repay the remaining \$8,000 of the structure's original cost to the stockholders.<sup>8</sup> Some aviation enthusiasts in the American Legion did not want to return the money and had other hopes for the \$20,000. Since "those who subscribed stock really regarded that money as a gift," many Legionnaires thought that nothing prevented "those stockholders from returning their stock to the American Legion . . .with the understanding that the money be used at Munny field." The Omaha World-Herald also felt this way and expressed confidence that "This large group of good citizens who wanted to see Munny field a success probably to the last man, would agree to any business-like proposition to further avia-

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<sup>6</sup> Omaha World-Herald, August 6, 1929, 1; Sunday World-Herald, August 4, 1929, 3A.

<sup>7</sup> Omaha World-Herald, August 7, 1929, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, September 17, 1929, 3.



tion in Omaha."<sup>9</sup>

The American Legion decided to accept the proposal of Rapid Air Lines and turned the hangar over to Rapid Aviation in November after the City Council approved a long term lease.<sup>10</sup> Stockholder Henry Doorly, Vice President of The World Publishing Company, remained very adamant on the future of the \$20,000 and expressed the view of many in the Legion-Airport Corporation:

In my opinion it would be a great pity to return this money to the stockholders. It was given for a project that is by no means finished and should be kept intact for further airport development.<sup>11</sup>

The hangar subscribers were not as civic-minded as the World-Herald and Henry Doorly hoped and on January 14, 1930, the Legion-Airport stockholders voted to distribute the proceeds of the sale back to the contributors.<sup>12</sup>

While the final outcome of the Legion-Hangar settlement could be described as a disappointment to those who advocated rapid expansion of aviation in Omaha, an event had occurred in September, 1929, that prompted much air-mindedness in the city. On September 9 the first All-Nebraska Air Tour began from the Municipal Field in Omaha. The Chamber of Commerce Aerial Transportation Committee organized the six day tour to prompt "a greater interest in air transportation and to encourage various

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, September 18, 1929, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Sunday World-Herald, November 24, 1929, 7C; Omaha World-Herald, November 19, 1929, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Omaha World-Herald, October 28, 1929, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, January 15, 1930, 11.

cities to develop their air terminals."<sup>13</sup> The members of the Aerial Transportation Committee approached this tour in a serious, methodical, manner, reminiscent of the effort placed into the passage of the November, 1928, Aviation Bond Charter Amendment.

Contrary to the polarized response on that issue, the Chamber of Commerce received wide support for this event. There was cooperation in Omaha and every city along the route, including Lincoln, McCook, Grand Island, and North Platte, Nebraska--all of which volunteered to absorb the cost for the "meals and hotel bills" of those taking part in the tour.<sup>14</sup> The Skelly Oil Company cooperated by providing "all the oil and gas for the entire tour." Skelly had taken part in air tours in Kansas and Oklahoma and was very happy "to continue this procedure in Nebraska." The Aerial Transportation Committee limited the number of planes to thirty and offered rides at every stop because that "was the best selling argument for aviation."<sup>15</sup> Impressed with the interest it generated, the members of the Aerial Transportation Committee expected the tour to "have a lasting result and undoubtedly bring about improved airports, not only in the cities visited, but in other cities" as well. This tour fulfilled the hopes of the committee members and they expressed their warm appreciation to Skelly who "furnished over 8,500 gallons of gas and several hundred gallons of oil." The Aerial Transportation

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<sup>13</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Aerial Transportation Committee Minutes, August 1, 1929, 13. Hereafter cited as ATC Minutes,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Special Air Tour Committee Minutes, August 19, 1929, 16.

<sup>15</sup> ATC Minutes, August 1, 1929, 14.

Committee felt they had accomplished a great deal--over 2,500 persons throughout the state had received airplane rides, the cities in Nebraska seemed closer together, and public spiritedness in favor of Omaha aviation was at a peak.<sup>16</sup>

The high tide of aviation awareness in Omaha became very obvious during the fall of 1929. Various leaders in the community called for an increased civic-mindedness along aviation lines. James E. Davidson of the Airport Advisory Board advocated that Omaha must be made "'air-minded,'" and take advantage of its natural location, to achieve aviation supremacy. A.H. Fetters, also of the Airport Advisory Board, renewed the story of Guiseppi Belanca and the lack of support he received from Omaha in 1921. Fetters urged the city not to lose another great opportunity for aviation advancement. Roy Page, Chairman of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce Industrial Committee and Assistant General Manager of the Nebraska Power Company, argued that Omaha was "'ideally located'" and had "'many other advantages from the standpoint of transportation facilities, labor and living conditions, climate'" and other factors sure to prompt the growth of the aviation industry.<sup>17</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce Journal also contributed to the accolades concerning the future of Omaha aviation. The Journal received much encouragement from the successful Nebraska Air Tour and the apparently good relations with the Boeing Air Transport Company. The idealistic rhetoric

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, September 27, 1929, 17-18; Omaha World-Herald, September 10, 1929, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Omaha World-Herald, October 9, 1929 1, 2. Guiseppi Belanca was a well known airplane designer and manufacturer. Belanca did not receive enough financial support in Omaha and had to leave the city in 1921.

expressed in an October Journal editorial exemplified the Chamber's optimism:

. . . we must be preparing for transportation of another sort--aerial transportation, that knows no rails nor channels nor highways, but cuts a straight and swift path from point to point.<sup>18</sup>

The fervor for the growth of aviation seemed contagious. On October 10, 1929, the Omaha World-Herald announced that it approved of the sudden rebirth of support for the Omaha Municipal Field. The World-Herald called for city wide acceptance of the necessity for airfield improvement and said:

Men must be daring if they are to build a city. They must have a bold spirit that is never content with letting well enough alone. They must be driven by some gallant energy that never lets them rest when opportunity is near. They must be inspired by a community feeling which enables them to forget self and work shoulder to shoulder for the common good.<sup>19</sup>

Support also came from outside the city. Harry H. Culver, President of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, visited Omaha on October 26, 1929, and his statements fit in well with publicity the airport received that fall. Culver was convinced of the importance that a well equipped airport would have to a community: "'After covering some 86 thousand miles in the last 18 months we've found that in a city with a dumpy airport, new buildings are conspicuous by their absence . . . .'" Culver favorably compared the blossoming airfield in Omaha with any in the country and thought that the city was destined to become a "cultural, educational, financial, commercial, industrial, and

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<sup>18</sup>Chamber Journal, XVIII (October 10, 1929), 8,

<sup>19</sup>Omaha World-Herald, October 10, 1929, 14.

agricultural" center. At times Culver's enthusiasm for aviation overflowed the realms of logic. He thought that in a very few years trips around the world would "'be as common as a Sunday school picnic,'" and also predicted the demise of the parachute. Rather than wearing a parachute, thought Culver, pilots of the future could soon "pull a lever and a chute [would] take the whole ship down . . . ."20

Although the calls for aviation advancement and the satisfaction over the field's development sometimes seemed idealistic, leaders in Omaha were justified in their expressions of optimism. Proof that the Omaha airport was improving rapidly came in November when the city tested the newly-financed lighting system at the Municipal Field. On November 4, 1929, City Commissioner Dean Noyes threw the switch "that bathed the Municipal airport in the glare of six five thousand watt lamps . . . ." Along with the huge flood lights, the city equipped the field with complete boundary lighting and a "one thousand candle power beacon" which rotated on top of a one hundred foot tower. This demonstration proved the adequacy of the lighting system because "At nearly any part of the field, one could read a newspaper with ease when all the lights were on,"21

Rather than opening the door for Boeing's movement to the Municipal Field, the installation of lighting equipment only forced the long sought after company to develop another excuse for not favoring the Carter Lake location. Frustration appeared frequently among Omaha

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<sup>20</sup> Sunday World-Herald, October 27, 1929, 2A.

<sup>21</sup> Omaha World-Herald, November 5, 1929, 3.

aviation leaders due to the ongoing difficulties with Boeing. The attitude of Hird Stryker, a member of the American Legion-Airport Corporation and an associate in the law firm of Crofoot, Fraser, Connolly, and Stryker, toward Boeing gained followers in the fall of 1929. As he said, "'The city must treat this company like any other organization. It has waited upon it long enough.'"<sup>22</sup> The view of Stryker seemed tempting because in October, after the rapid installation of lighting was a virtual certainty, Boeing officials changed their position once again. Now the absence of night flying facilities no longer formed Boeing's main objection to the field. Early in the month, officials of the Boeing Air Transport Company "requested the Airport Commission to give consideration to the removal of trees . . . near the airfield" which promised to obstruct flying, especially at night.<sup>23</sup> Boeing sources offered no explanation as to why they had not mentioned the tree problem years earlier, or at least that summer when they gave the city verbal assurance of their eventual transfer. The opening of the 'cottonwood controversy' began a six-month quest by the city to secure the removal of the offending trees and satisfy still another objection of Boeing.

Despite their new objections, the Boeing Air Transport Company requested information on the cost of leasing space at the Municipal Airfield. Boeing officials were interested in a fifty-year lease but made

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, October 7, 1929, 2,

<sup>23</sup> ATC Minutes, October 11, 1929, 12; December 27, 1929, 27.

it clear that their request was "for information only."<sup>24</sup> Boeing's request encouraged the members of the Airport Advisory Board and the City Council. Instead of ignoring the tree controversy each group sought the rapid removal of any airfield obstruction.

Most of the offending trees were on private property to the north and south of the field but some were in Carter Lake Park on the west side of the airport. Discussion of the destruction or topping of trees on park property brought Park Commissioner Joseph Hummel into the spotlight. Hummel explained that "he was powerless to take any action" regarding the trees on park property. The Commissioner pointed out that "the ground for Carter park . . . was deeded to the city with a reversion clause that would give it back to the owners if not used for park purposes."<sup>25</sup> With this knowledge in hand the city embarked upon a plan to pressure the donors into agreeing to the tree removal. The decision of the city to seek the removal of the trees met with the approval of William Arthur of the Austin Company. Arthur claimed that the "removal of the trees would enlarge the usability of the runways 20 to 25 percent," and urged Omaha to eliminate these obstructions so it could come to terms with Boeing as soon as possible.<sup>26</sup>

The property that constituted Carter Lake Park was donated to Omaha by Mrs. Edward Cornish. She and her husband, who was a former Omaha Park Commissioner and currently served as President of the National Lead Company, resided in New York City and consistently refused to allow

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<sup>24</sup>Omaha World-Herald, November 12, 1929, 1.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, December 21, 1929, 2.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 7.

Omaha to cut any trees on Carter Lake Park property. After unofficial attempts in December failed to persuade the Cornishes, on January 7, 1930, the City Council "decided to send an official resolution citing the need for removal of the cottonwoods bordering Carter Lake as a safeguard for flyers." The Council sent Airport Advisory Board member James E. Davidson to New York City to present this resolution to Mr. and Mrs. Cornish. City Commissioner John Hopkins reflected very evident displeasure on this issue, and although he supported the Davidson journey, he did not care if the city lost the park property as long as the trees were removed. Hopkins thought "'It would be a great help to the city'" if the property reverted back to the owners and the commissioner felt that "the city had expended more with less return on the place than on any other project . . . ." <sup>27</sup>

Dean Noyes agreed with John Hopkins on the necessity of the proposed tree removal. D.D. Colyer, a Vice President of the Boeing Company, had informed Noyes that the obstructing trees were the only barrier prohibiting his company from moving its planes to Omaha; "' . . . we cannot consider moving to the Municipal Airport until the trees are removed, nor can we sign a lease unless it carries a guarantee that the trees will be removed.'" <sup>28</sup> Noyes did not think forty cottonwood and willow trees should prevent Omaha from expanding in aviation. He received permission to cut down certain trees on the north end of the airport but thought that if all the trees obstructing the Municipal Air-

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, January 7, 1930, 1; January 8, 1930, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, January 10, 1930, 30.



field could not be eliminated, "the city might as well pick up its lights and hunt another airport."<sup>29</sup>

Dean Noyes received little comfort from the visit J.E. Davidson made to New York City. E.J. Cornish had earlier claimed that the Omaha airfield represented purely a "business venture" and not worth the sacrifice of a beautiful park. The destruction of these trees would be a "calamity," thought Cornish: "To sacrifice them to the airport is to recognize aviation . . . but defaces what in time will be the most sightly varied and beautiful park possible in any of the western cities." Cornish also threatened that further donations of land would not be forthcoming if any of the park property was subjected to such "vandalism."<sup>30</sup> In the meeting with Davidson he stated that he and his wife planned no concessions at all concerning the trees along the west side of the airfield. Cornish felt that the area east of Carter Lake represented a terrible choice for an airport. Why should the city spend great amounts of money toward the development of the current site, thought Cornish, when "Across the river in [Council Bluffs] Iowa there is available an excellent and an adequate site for an airfield." Labelling the airfield a "cheap proposition," Cornish absolutely refused any cooperation whatsoever.<sup>31</sup> Many aviation enthusiasts in Omaha viewed the Cornish stance as arbitrary and ridiculous. Upon his return to Omaha, J.E. Davidson still possessed some hope that Mr. Cornish would change his

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<sup>29</sup> Sunday World-Herald, January 19, 1930, 3A.

<sup>30</sup> Omaha World-Herald, January 18, 1930, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, February 4, 1930, 9.

mind about the trees.<sup>32</sup> City Commissioner John Hopkins did not want to wait and became very bitter about the whole subject. Hopkins did not consider it fair that "a few scraggly old cottonwoods should stand in the way of Omaha's Municipal airport'" and said that he "'would vote to cut them down, suffer the consequences, and pay any damages that might result.'"<sup>33</sup>

At a time when the situation seemed hopeless, Dean Noyes began to advocate a method by which the city could avoid the destruction of park property. Noyes suggested that Omaha enlarge the "Municipal air field [sic.] to the east, taking in all the land in Douglas County between the field and the river . . . ." The Commissioner felt that this was "a way out of the difficulty" over the cottonwood trees in Carter Lake Park and an excellent opportunity to improve the airport:

This will make the Omaha airport one of the best in the country . . . besides removing the danger that exists now to fliers, it will afford ground for construction of a great northwest to southeast runway of suitable length for the largest ships which may easily be connected up to the present runway system.<sup>34</sup>

Commissioner Noyes' proposition would have solved the problems encountered by the obstructing trees in Carter Lake Park. The entire Airport Advisory Board, though, did not favor the purchase and most members felt that the field should be improved first.<sup>35</sup> The city did not act upon the Noyes proposal and the Municipal Airfield grew only twenty acres in

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, February 7, 1930, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Omaha Bee-News, February 7, 1930, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Omaha World-Herald, February 17, 1930, 1.

<sup>35</sup> ATC Minutes, February 27, 1930, 9.

size from 1925 to 1931.<sup>36</sup>

As the situation developed, the trees on park property were not as potentially dangerous as officials of Boeing and the Austin Company first believed. Upon further investigation, the Aerial Transportation Committee proved that these trees did not pose a severe problem and most of the danger to flying came from the trees north and south of the field. The removal of these obstructions promised to "reduce the hazard very materially" and Dean Noyes agreed to secure their destruction.<sup>37</sup>

As soon as weather permitted, Commissioner Noyes led a "force of workmen from the Street Cleaning and Maintenance department" to a site north of the airfield and chopped down over eighty willow trees.<sup>38</sup> The willows were eliminated with the permission of Randall Brown, who owned the property, and their removal provided "an additional 500 feet of open field," ending the problem of an obstructed northern approach to the Municipal Airport.<sup>39</sup> Despite the added safety factor this brought to the airport, the actions of the Commissioner enveloped him in great controversy. Rumors began that Dean Noyes and his crew had chopped down trees on park property and the Commissioner "received many letters of protest." The possibility that the city took it upon itself to chop

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<sup>36</sup>Dean Noyes, "The City of Omaha and Aviation," Official Souvenir Program of the Omaha Air Races, May 15-18, 1931, 25. There seemed to be some confusion as to the actual size of the airfield. In his annual report to the Executive Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, Amos Thomas gave the size of the airport as 230 acres. See ATC Minutes, December 27, 1929, 29.

<sup>37</sup>ATC Minutes, February 27, 1930, 8.

<sup>38</sup>Omaha Bee-News, March 20, 1930, 3; Omaha World-Herald, March 20, 1930, 8.

<sup>39</sup>Omaha Bee-News, March 20, 1930, 3.

down the trees on park property caused quite a stir and Noyes emphatically denied that any park property was destroyed: "'I haven't touched any trees in the park--not even to top them . . . the only trees that have been chopped or topped were on private property, and it was done with the consent of the owners.'"<sup>40</sup>

Noyes became highly upset during the 'cottonwood controversy' and threatened to resign as Chairman of the Airport Advisory Board, claiming that the tree situation "caused more trouble" than any other problem.<sup>41</sup> Commissioner Noyes' biggest objection was with the Omaha Chamber of Commerce which had written him a letter urging immediate removal of all obstructing trees. According to the Chamber, this letter "had evidently been misconstrued as a criticism" and the Aerial Transportation Committee denied that they made any attempt to criticize Noyes or the way he handled airfield improvement.<sup>42</sup> Noyes no longer wished the removal of the cottonwoods on park property and agreed with Edward Cornish that their destruction was unnecessary. This altered stance, however, had not changed his feelings toward rapid elimination of the primary airfield obstructions. By May, all offending trees to the north and south of the airport were gone and the city met the last important objection of the Boeing Air Transport Company.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Sunday World-Herald, March 23, 1930, 1A; September 3, 1961, 4J; Omaha Bee-News, March 20, 1930, 1; William Dean Noyes, private interview held in Omaha, Nebraska, April 3, 1979.

<sup>41</sup>Sunday World-Herald, March 23, 1930, 1A.

<sup>42</sup>ATC Minutes, March 28, 1930, 14; Sunday World-Herald, March 23, 1930, 1A.

<sup>43</sup>ATC Minutes, April 10, 1930, 21; Sunday World-Herald, March 23, 1930, 1A.

The ability of the city to avoid the removal of trees on park property pleased Edward Cornish. On April 8, 1930, Cornish showed this pleasure by donating "a 23-acre tract lying between Sixteenth street" and Carter Lake Park to the Omaha park system. This deed carried a reversion clause similar to the other donation of acreage in the park and could "never be diverted from park purposes." Cornish made his offer due to the controversy over "his refusal to permit the cutting of trees in the park adjacent to the Omaha Municipal airport . . . ." He thought it important that no "personal reason . . . be attributed" to him for his refusal to cooperate on the tree issue and he felt his donation proved that his desire to beautify Omaha was genuine.<sup>44</sup>

The 'cottonwood controversy' was by no means the most important difficulty to beset Omaha aviation in the first months of 1930. During the summer of 1929 Commissioner Dean Noyes forecasted financial disaster if the entire drainage specifications of the Austin engineers were accepted. Near the end of that year, after Omaha borrowed money to install a lighting system, aviation leaders in the city found the Noyes warning prophetic. The monetary requirements of the Omaha Municipal Airport in 1930 promised to exceed the \$50,000 allotment by a considerable extent. The city was obligated to pay back the money it borrowed from private sources to secure lighting--an amount that eventually reached \$30,000 and aviation authorities saw no possibility of suitably improving the field with the remaining \$20,000, which could not be carried over to the following year. According to Amos Thomas of the Aerial

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<sup>44</sup> Omaha Bee-News, April 8, 1930, 4; April 9, 1930, 11; Omaha World-Herald, April 7, 1930, 1.

Transportation Committee the runways needed complete resurfacing with a "six inch oil-plastic surface" and there were "a number of holes and low areas on the field that should be filled to proper grade . . . ." Thomas thought that "The minimum program for 1930 should be three completely drained, graded, and surfaced runways" and saw no chance of their completion if the city could not alter the money situation.<sup>45</sup>

In the annual report of the Aerial Transportation Committee submitted to the Omaha Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee at the end of December, 1929, Amos Thomas explained why the airfield improvements had not proceeded as rapidly as expected. Thomas argued that Omaha tried to achieve a series of improvements with \$50,000 that "could not be accomplished with less than \$150,000" and airport development should not suffer likewise in 1930. In his report Thomas suggested three methods of obtaining field improvements in excess of the \$50,000 limit. Under the first possibility the city could acquire adjoining land on its own without reference to aviation bonds. A second suggestion involved the leasing of the airport to a private party "on condition that he would finance and make certain improvements during 1930." The city would pay the operator \$50,000 annually for the four remaining years of the bond issue in compensation for continuing the program of improvements. A third plan necessitated an amendment to the present provision to allow the expenditure of the fourth and fifth years' allotment of bonds during 1930 to facilitate development.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>ATC Minutes, December 27, 1929, 30.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, 29-30; Chamber Journal, XVIII (December 28, 1929), 4; Omaha World-Herald, December 17, 1929, 4.

Viable suggestions were needed at this time because the good feelings toward aviation in Omaha after the All-Nebraska Air Tour had deteriorated greatly during December. The primary group criticizing the Municipal Airfield were pilots and some saw no reason why the airport was not completely improved. Lawrence Enzminger, president of Mid-West Aviation, criticized the Airport Advisory Board and thought that the airport should be under the control of one person: "'One man in charge would have accomplished as much with half the money . . . .'" Frank Grace, President of Pioneer Aviation, a group that considered stationing itself at the Municipal Field, agreed with Enzminger and stated that ". . . fliers who would be expected to stop there [were] studiously avoiding Omaha because of lack of facilities."<sup>47</sup> Led by Amos Thomas and Dean Noyes, aviation authorities in Omaha were determined to find a solution to the financial problems that threatened to hinder further improvement of the Omaha airport.

The proposal to alter the terms of the 1928 bond issue received support from the Airport Advisory Board and the Aerial Transportation Committee. The City Council, then, decided to ask the voters at the May 6 election for permission to sell the 1932 and 1933 aviation bonds in 1930. If passed, this measure would provide an additional \$100,000 for field improvement and the Chamber's aviation committee thought that Omaha could accomplish very much with these funds. With this money the city could grade, surface, and drain three runways, fill in low areas in the southern part of the field, eliminate all offending trees north and

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<sup>47</sup> Omaha World-Herald, December 16, 1929, 4.

south of the field, and begin construction of an administration building. The committee members remained highly optimistic and believed that the approval of this measure would assure the development of the Omaha Municipal Airfield into "first class condition."<sup>48</sup> On March 28, 1930, Amos Thomas appointed a special election committee and the campaign that it launched to pass this amendment proved the seriousness with which its members approached this issue.<sup>49</sup>

The Omaha World-Herald supported this charter amendment as it had in 1928 and agreed that its passage was closely linked to Omaha's future in aviation. The World-Herald thought that the city had

everything to gain and nothing to lose by expending this money now. To string it out over a period of years will only mean continued delay in making the airport efficient and practical for the great commercial passenger and air mail companies whose planes are winging through the air in increasing numbers each day.<sup>50</sup>

The newspaper left no doubt as to the importance of this issue and thought the voters must realize that this amendment did not provide new bonds, merely the early expenditure of already authorized funds. This measure represented an important step toward the development of aviation in

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<sup>48</sup>ATC Minutes February 27, 1930, 7-8; Omaha World-Herald, February 19, 1930, 1-2, 4.

<sup>49</sup>ATC Minutes, March 28, 1930, 17-18. Not everyone at the Chamber of Commerce agreed that a bond issue was the best solution. On January 10, 1930, the Public Finance Committee decided that "greater progress could be made in the development of Omaha as an air center if the field was leased to private interests." See Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Public Finance Committee Minutes, January 10, 1930, 2. Hereafter cited as Public Finance Committee Minutes.

<sup>50</sup>Sunday World-Herald, February 23, 1930, 6E.



Omaha, said the World-Herald, a step that ought to be taken without delay.<sup>51</sup>

Through the auspices of their special election committee, the Aerial Transportation Committee rapidly formulated plans to see that the amendment passed. As they had in 1928, the special committee organized a speaker's bureau headed by committee member Vern Vance. Vance provided speakers for luncheon clubs, political meetings, schools, and on radio stations WOW, WAAW, and KOIL. The committee also mounted a training plane on a motor-operated swivel and charged twenty-five cents per ride. Pro-amendment efforts also included announcements in theaters and a continuously running "talking mailbox" in front of the County Courthouse.<sup>52</sup>

Along with these attempts at public persuasion, the Aerial Transportation Committee members tried to convince "the voters that this was not a new bond issue, but one that had already been approved at the election in November, 1928 . . . ."<sup>53</sup> One of the speaker's bureau objectives was to point out this difference and Vern Vance remained very concerned that the message would not reach the electorate:

Frankly, we fear for the airport proposal, not because we suspect its soundness, but because of the misunderstanding of its provisions. If the voters all realized that it is not a tax levy or bond issue, if they realized that they can have their airport immediately and by a painless method, the proposal would carry unanimously.

The fact that this misunderstanding existed made the role of Vance's

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<sup>51</sup> Omaha World-Herald, March 19, 1930, 10.

<sup>52</sup> ATC Minutes, April 10, 1930, 21; April 15, 1930, 22-23; April 23, 1930, 25; Sunday Bee-News, May 4, 1930, 14B.

<sup>53</sup> ATC Minutes, April 15, 1930, 22.

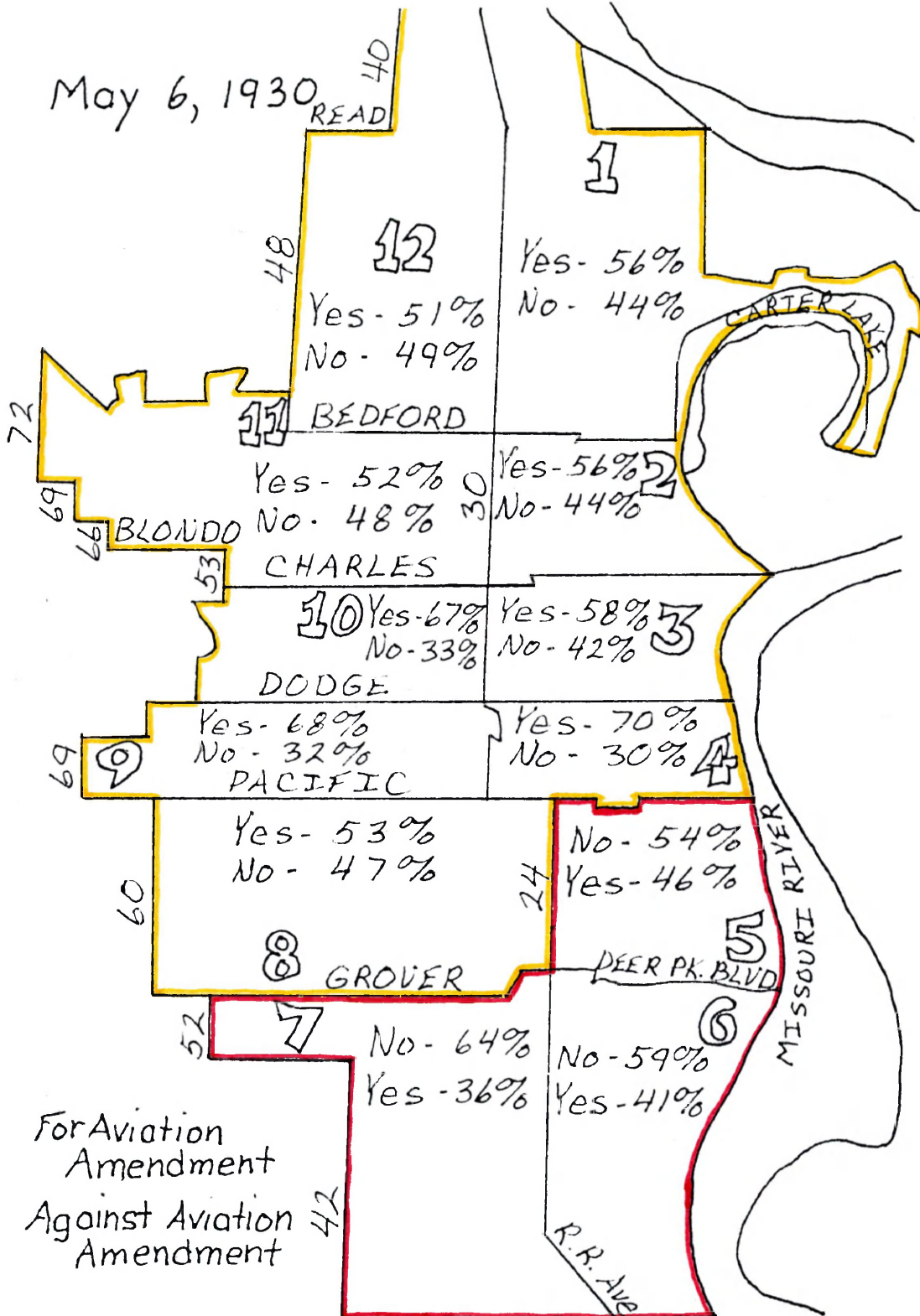
speaker's bureau highly important and it was very busy gathering support during the week prior to the election.<sup>54</sup>

Regardless of the apparent misunderstanding, the May 6 aviation charter amendment passed by a 55% to 45% majority--31,329 to 25,511. The total amount of votes cast on this issue, 56,840, was considerably lower than the 74,473 cast on the 1928 proposition. The most obvious possible reason for the decline was that the 1930 election may have lacked the interest that the presidential election had prompted in 1928. Despite the lessened electorate, the geographic breakdown of votes was vaguely reminiscent of the initial charter amendment (see map on following page). South Omaha remained the base of anti-aviation sentiment in the city. In wards 5, 6, and 7 the measure failed by 59% to 41%--7,972 to 5,479. As in 1928, the precinct vote was one-sided, 38 out of the 43 precincts in wards 5, 6, and 7 voted against the aviation amendment. Ward 8, a section where the bonds had barely failed in 1928, supported the May, 1930, issue by a 53% to 47% margin--2,888 to 2,533. In this election every ward north of Pacific Street joined ward 8 in support of the aviation amendment. The strong base of support for the 1928 measure, wards 2, 3, 4, 9 and 10, in central and west central Omaha, continued and the issue passed by a 64% to 36% margin--14,169 to 7,682. The precinct vote in these five wards was an astounding 86 to 4 in favor of the aviation measure. Wards 1, 11, and 12, in the north and northwestern part of the city, which as a unit had voted against the 1928 amendment, joined ward 8 in approving this aviation issue. These wards passed the

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<sup>54</sup>Omaha Bee-News, May 3, 1930, 22.

May 6, 1930



measure by 55% to 45%--8,377 to 6,708, and with a 40 to 13 precinct margin. The newly-found support for the aviation issue undoubtedly resulted from the realization that the May amendment did not authorize new bonds, but merely changed the status of bonds already accepted.<sup>55</sup>

The lack of presidential election-year interest was obvious by these election returns. Of the 92,512 registered voters in Omaha in November, 1928, 80% of them, or 74,473, voted on the charter amendment. In May, 1930, only 67% or 56,840 of the 84,029 registered voters cast a ballot on the aviation question. In South Omaha, wards 5, 6, 7, and 8, all of which voted against the aviation amendment in 1928, the percentage of registered voters casting ballots dropped from 78% in 1928 to 69% in May, 1930. In wards 2, 3, 4, 9, and 10, which strongly supported aviation in both elections, this percentage dropped from 75% in 1928 to 63% in May, 1930. In wards 1, 11, and 12, which also voted against the aviation issue in 1928, there was a drop from 83% to 67% in eligible voters casting ballots in May, 1930. The lessened voter interest had little importance to the May aviation issue because all sections of the city experienced similar responses.<sup>56</sup>

Aviation advocates were pleased with the immediate \$100,000 provided by the amendment but the additional money failed to solve all their problems. Improvements to the Omaha field were very expensive and by

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<sup>55</sup> Map taken from Omaha World-Herald, April 9, 1928, 10; Results taken from official Douglas County Election Returns, May 6, 1930, Douglas County Election Commissioner's Office, Omaha-Douglas Civic Center, Omaha, Nebraska. Hereafter cited as Douglas County Election Returns.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas County Election Returns, Registration Statistics to July, 1936.

October, 1930, the city had budgeted the entire \$250,000 allowed by the 1928 bond issue. In this budget the city could not plan for an administration building, additional runways, fencing, a depot, or a passenger "comfort station." The failure of the city to budget these improvements reflected the lack of planning common throughout Omaha's struggle to establish an aviation field and the City Council decided to submit a third aviation bond measure to the electorate on November 4. This would further amend the city charter to permit an additional \$100,000 worth of bonds to be sold annually for the next five years with the funds designated for aviation development.<sup>57</sup> Once again the Aerial Transportation Committee and the Executive Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce felt that they could put the \$500,000 provided by this amendment to very good use and strongly endorsed the proposal.<sup>58</sup>

On October 14, 1930, the Aerial Transportation Committee formed another special election committee to take charge of the amendment's passage. This committee divided into three subcommittees, a publicity committee, a speaker's bureau, and a stunts committee. The publicity committee handled newspaper coverage and printed and distributed over 60,000 pamphlets "urging [a] favorable vote on the amendment and giving information as to . . . what improvements were necessary in Omaha."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>ATC Minutes, October 3, 1930, 44.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, September 15, 1930, 39; Executive Minutes, September 16, 1930, 139-140.

<sup>59</sup>ATC Minutes, October 14, 1930, 48.

The subcommittee on publicity also saw that addresses were given in support of the amendment on radio stations WOW and KOIL up until the election. WOW also ran a daily radio program about the airfield and its potentials to the community.<sup>60</sup> The duties of the speaker's bureau were very similar to those during the previous bond elections and its members appeared before clubs, luncheons, and political gatherings urging support for the aviation measure.<sup>61</sup> The committee on special stunts organized a series of aviation maneuvers and stunts to take place on Sunday, November 2, 1930, two days before the election. Included in the show were airplane races, "dead stick landings," bag drop contests, and parachute jumps.<sup>62</sup>

The members of the Aerial Transportation Committee seemed to possess a greater amount of confidence about the outcome of this election than they had prior to the passage of the other two aviation bond issues. Still, the subcommittee was very concerned over the attitude in South Omaha because "most of the opposition at the last election [November, 1928]" came from that area. Unlike their counterparts in Dundee, Benson, and Florence, many businessmen in South Omaha were against the aviation amendment and refused to allow the committee to place pro-aviation stickers in their windows. The Chamber's aviation committee spent much time trying to convince them to support this issue.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, October 23, 1930, 52; October 31, 1930, 56-57.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, October 14, 1930, 48.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, October 23, 1930, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, October 31, 1930, 55-56.

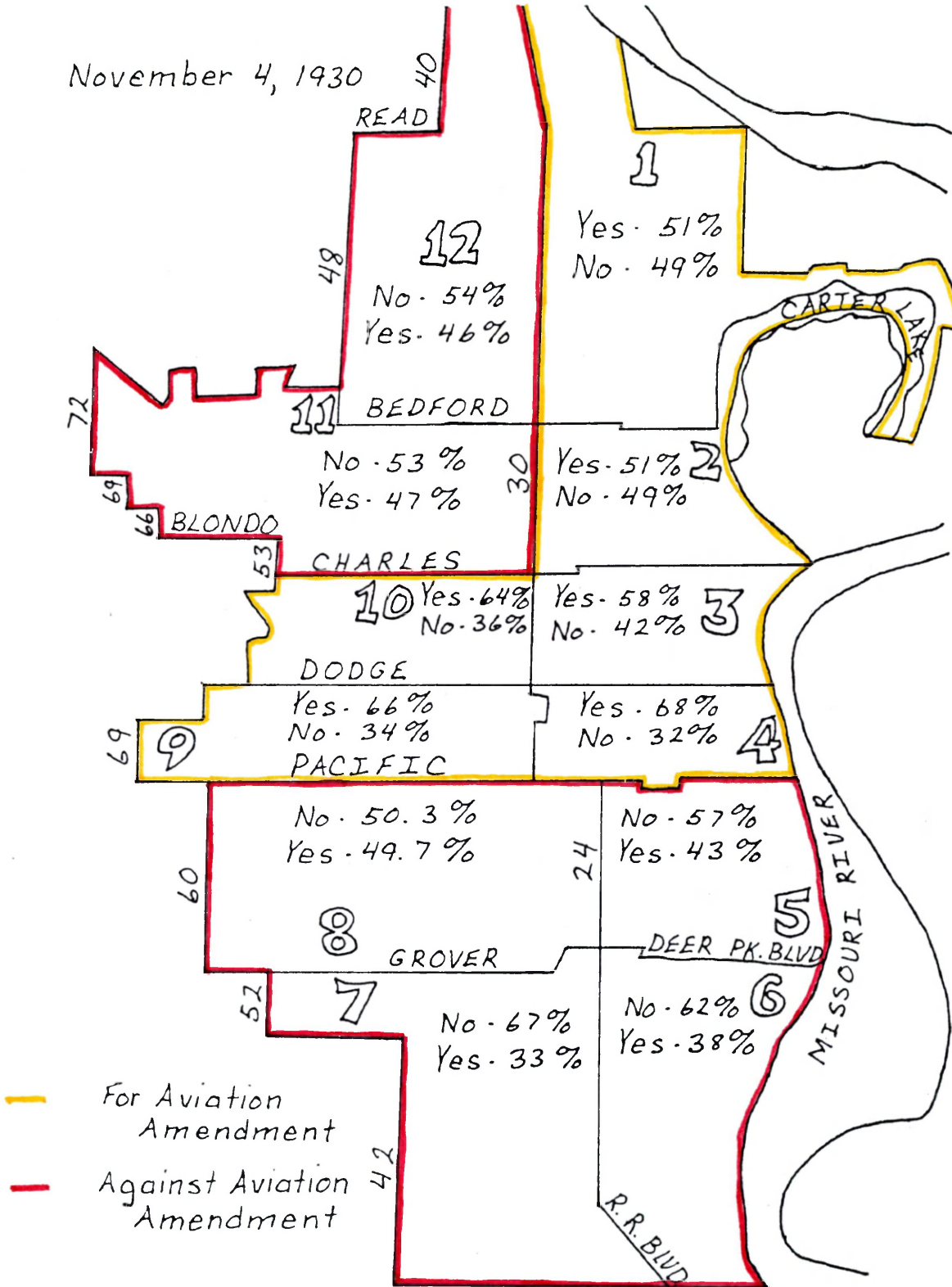
The members of this committee were correct both in their expectations of a wider victory margin and in the fear of South Omaha opposition. The amendment passed with a 52% to 48% majority--27,162 to 25,051, not an overwhelming margin but considerably larger than the 1928 election. Although the 52,213 vote tally in November, 1930, was quite a bit less than the 74,473 votes cast in November, 1928, and even lower than the 56,840 total in May, 1930, the geographical distribution was very similar to the initial aviation measure (see map on following page). This similarity was very obvious in the ward returns. Ward 8 barely rejoined the anti-aviation block in South Omaha and the issue generally failed badly south of Pacific Street. Wards 5, 6, 7, and 8 defeated these new aviation bonds by 58% to 42%--9,744 to 6,945. The precinct vote again was clear as 48 out of 61 southern precincts voted against this measure. As ward 8 had done in May, ward 1 in the north switched sides from its November, 1928, stand and joined the pro-aviation central and west central section consisting of wards 2, 3, 4, 9, and 10. These six wards passed the aviation issue by a 60% to 40% margin--15,933 to 10,461 and with the support of 92 out of 108 precincts. Wards 11 and 12 in the northwest returned to the anti-aviation sentiment they had shown in 1928 and the bonds failed there by 53% to 47%--4,670 to 3,999 and with 26 out of 31 precincts voting against the issue.<sup>64</sup>

The drop in voter interest reflected in May continued in November as only 62%, or 52,213, of the 84,029 registered electorate cast ballots

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<sup>64</sup>Map taken from Omaha World-Herald, April 9, 1928, 10; Douglas County Election Returns, November 4, 1930.

November 4, 1930





on the aviation bonds. In South Omaha, wards 5, 6, 7, and 8 experienced a rise in the percentage of the electorate that voted. South of Pacific Street, 76% of the registered voters went to the polls compared with 69% in May. In wards 2, 3, 4, 9, and 10 the percentage dropped from the May figure of 63% to 60% of the total electorate in November, 1930. This trend continued to wards 1, 11, and 12 where 63% of the registered voters cast ballots compared with 67% in the May election. These figures marked a significant drop in the percentage of voting electorate of from 80% in November, 1928, to 62% in November, 1930. Obviously the success of the aviation issues in 1930 despite the continued geographic polarization of the city, proved that this disinterest was common throughout Omaha and did not have an adverse affect upon the quest for airfield improvement.<sup>65</sup>

The two Aviation Bond Charter Amendments occupied most of the time and discussion of the Aerial Transportation Committee and the Airport Advisory Board during 1930. The second All-Nebraska Air Tour also required the attention of Omaha aviation leaders and took place from June 23 to June 28. The committee created a special air tour subcommittee on March 15 and, along with the Lincoln, Nebraska, air tour committee, its members organized the event.<sup>66</sup> At first there appeared little chance that the 1930 tour would be as successful as the initial tour in 1929. The members of the Chamber's aviation committee learned

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<sup>65</sup> Douglas County Election Returns, Registration Statistics to July, 1936. The records at the Election Commissioner's office do not mention any change in the total registered electorate from May to November, 1930.

<sup>66</sup> ATC Minutes, March 15, 1930, 12.

that the "Skelly Oil Company and other large distributors, had signed a joint agreement not to furnish free gas and oil for State Air Tours . . . ." <sup>67</sup> The biggest commitment air tour officials received from any oil company was to offer 6 per cent off the regular price of oil and gas. The Omaha and Lincoln committees, then, decided to investigate further to see if the air tour was still feasible. <sup>68</sup> Tour officials found that the event still had much support and they decided to require all towns along the route to "guarantee a fund of from \$1.75 to \$5.00 per plane." With the cost of the tour underwritten in such a manner, the second All-Nebraska Air Tour began in Lincoln and ended in Omaha as another huge success. <sup>69</sup>

The rebirth of a Bellevue airport plan also captured the attention of Omaha aviation leaders during 1930. Labelled "Port of Omaha" by its Bellevue sponsors, the projected multi-million dollar field was "south of Bellevue and east of Fort Crook . . . ." Immediate plans for the 400 acre tract amounted to \$977,442 and its future improvements included an administration building housing dining rooms, a first aid room, and "a lounging room equipped with showers for the pilots." Proponents of the airfield said that the location had a record of good weather that was unmatched anywhere in the United States: "Three hundred and nine of the past 365 days here have been suitable for flying, accord-

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, April 10, 1930, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, April 24, 1930, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, June 5, 1930, 30-31.

ing to . . . engineers reports."<sup>70</sup> The Bellevue project, however, did not progress "as rapidly as had been expected . . . due to lack of financial backing."<sup>71</sup>

As they had since 1927, Boeing officials closely watched the actions of Omaha throughout 1930. In contrast to other years, Omaha leaders often seemed not to care about Boeing's response to their actions and concentrated fully upon their plans of field development. On March 17 the Airport Advisory Board appointed three of its members, John S. McGurk, Amos Thomas, and James E. Davidson, to meet with Boeing officials "on the leasing of several hundred square feet at the municipal field . . . ." By that time "both parties favored the lease" and "only minor details" stood in the way of a long term agreement.<sup>72</sup> In the meeting with D.D. Colyer of Boeing, the three Airport Advisory Board members learned that only the Cornish trees, the lack of completely surfaced runways, and the Nebraska gasoline tax stood in the way of a fifty-year Boeing lease on a 100 foot by 225 foot plot at the Omaha airfield. These complaints, especially about the gasoline tax which Boeing must have known about for quite a while, were easily refuted and Omaha officials argued that the field's many advantages outweighed these difficulties:

To counterbalance these problems the Omaha airport offers the advantages of a lighting system, drainage, partially constructed runways, accessibility to downtown Omaha, and advanced development.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Omaha World-Herald, February 18, 1930, 12; March 26, 1930, 29.

<sup>71</sup>ATC Minutes, June 5, 1930, 29.

<sup>72</sup>Omaha World-Herald, March 18, 1930, 4.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid, March 20, 1930, 8.

Indeed, the Boeing Company had no other suitable airfield available for their use and the elimination of the trees at the north and south of the airfield, the passage of the May 6 bond amendment, and the natural advantages of the field, successfully undercut Boeing's latest series of excuses. On June 5 the Aerial Transportation Committee announced that the city had reached an agreement with Boeing. The Boeing Air Transport Company immediately planned to "enter into contract for a hangar north of the Mid-West hangar, size 100 x 225 feet, . . . to be completed before September 1st." Boeing had asked and received assurance from the city that they would complete all field improvements by that date.<sup>74</sup> The Austin Company contracted for the construction of the Boeing hangar but minor delays in airfield improvements pushed the completion date back three months.

By the end of November, 1930, the Omaha field had been improved substantially. The drainage system was completed, the runways that ran northwest to southeast and north to south were surfaced "with plastic asphalt to a depth of six inches," and the city continued the process of squaring the field according to the specifications of the Austin Company. The establishment of Mid-West and Rapid Aviation Corporations had made the Omaha Municipal Airfield a very busy place and the acquisition of the Boeing Company promised to bring even more aviation activity to the city.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>ATC Minutes, July 3, 1930, 34.

<sup>75</sup>Public Finance Committee Minutes, January 10, 1930, 1-2; Dean Noyes, "The City of Omaha and Aviation," Official Souvenir Program of the Omaha Air Races, May 15-18, 1931, 25.

The official opening and dedication of the Boeing hangar-terminal building took place on November 30, 1930. The new hangar was a massive structure compared to what had been built at the field up to that time. The hangar cost \$60,000 and consisted of an administration unit, a passenger loading section, and an area for the housing of aircraft.<sup>76</sup> The open house for the Boeing terminal building took place on the same date and was a gala event under the direction of the Aerial Transportation Committee.<sup>77</sup> The main attraction at the open house was a Boeing Tri-motor that was on public display throughout the day. Another crowd pleaser came when Marcelle Folda, Queen of Ak-Sar-Ben, released four balloons, "each with a small vial of air attached." The balloons carried atmosphere from New York City, San Fransisco, California, Dallas, Texas, and Montreal, Quebec, each of which had been delivered in Omaha "within 24 hours after they were posted via 'air mail,'" signifying "Omaha's accessibility via the aerial route."<sup>78</sup> Boeing's arrival fulfilled the dreams of many aviation leaders in Omaha and marked the end of the early development of the city's airfield. The Executive Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, in their discussion of the November 30 celebration over the acquisition of Boeing and the reappearance of the airmail planes, dismissed the event with an understatement--commenting only that this "was something upon which the

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<sup>76</sup>Sunday Bee-News, November 26, 1930, 4A.

<sup>77</sup>ATC Minutes, November 29, 1930, 58.

<sup>78</sup>Omaha Bee-News, November 29, 1930, 2; Omaha World-Herald, December 1, 1930, 6.

Aerial Transportation Committee had been working for some time."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Executive Minutes, November 25, 1930, 170.

## CONCLUSION

In 1931 Commissioner Dean Noyes wrote that "Omaha was prepared for aviation" in the 1920's.<sup>1</sup> Of all people in the city, he should have realized the fallacy of that contention. Omaha began the quest for an aviation status in June, 1924, amidst the tumult that surrounded the destruction of the Chamber of Commerce Hangar by a tornado. By the end of November, 1930, much of Omaha's prestige as an aviation center had been acquired. The quest to put Omaha on the map in aviation, though, was a constant struggle, far from the impressions of public air-mindedness expressed by Noyes in 1931.

From 1927 to 1931 Commissioner Noyes was directly involved in airfield improvement and must have known his community's ambivalence toward aviation matters. Up until 1929, when the airfield had little public funding at all, Noyes continued improvements as best he could with money taken from the budget of his Street Cleaning and Maintenance Department. When progress at the field during these months did not meet the expectations of air enthusiasts in Omaha, Dean Noyes received most of the criticism. From 1929 to 1930, when the Omaha airport finally began to take shape, his position as Chairman of the Airport Advisory Board kept him in the aviation limelight. Noyes' criticism of Austin Company specifications, despite his lack of formal

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<sup>1</sup>Dean Noyes, "The City of Omaha and Aviation," Official Souvenir Program of the Omaha Air Races, May 15-17, 1931, 24.

training in airport planning, his often emotional responses to adverse publicity such as the 'cottonwood controversy,' and his many expressions of confidence in himself and those in his employ were examples of the tremendous drive and enthusiasm which the Commissioner possessed. At times this enthusiasm seemed out of place or ridiculous. In a project such as this, however, emotion and dedication were needed and Dean Noyes possessed both in great amounts.

As the personal abilities of Dean Noyes were instrumental in the formation and improvement of the Omaha Municipal Airfield, so were the organizational talents of Amos Thomas. Thomas sat on the Aerial Transportation Committee of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce throughout this period and served as its Chairman from August, 1928, to June, 1930. The time that Amos Thomas served as the Chairman of the Chamber's aviation committee was the most important period in the formation of the Omaha airport and his leadership proved fundamental to the success of his committee's goals. Indeed, Thomas served on and presided over a committee whose only objective was to establish aviation in the city and its many successes proved the dedication of its members.

When the loss of the Ak-Sar-Ben Field and the withdrawal of the airmail planes left Omaha devoid of any significant aviation facilities, members of the Aerial Transportation Committee, aided by the City Council, rapidly moved to acquire the future airport site. When the proposed 1928 aviation charter amendment faced an uncertain fate at the polls, Amos Thomas and the members of the Aerial Transportation Committee organized a massive campaign and the measure passed by a margin



that represented .002 per cent of the total vote.<sup>2</sup> When serious attempts were made to discredit the Omaha field through unfavorable publicity, the members of the Aerial Transportation Committee stuck to their convictions and proved the suitability of the Municipal Airfield's location. Finally, when the vacillation and uncooperative attitude of the Boeing Air Transport Company augured to continue indefinitely, these men patiently held to their belief in the airport. Finally, Boeing recognized Omaha's aviation advances and came back to the city after a six year absence. The majority of these and other difficulties took place when Amos Thomas was at the helm of the Aerial Transportation Committee and his contributions and those of his associates to the development of the airport were immense.

The roles of Dean Noyes and Amos Thomas in the formation of Omaha's airport seem more important when one considers that public air-mindedness had not grown appreciably by 1931. More than likely, those who supported aviation, including politicians, businessmen, and the relatively affluent, did so from the realization of the benefits it could bring to themselves as well as the city. Among those who voted against or did not actively support airfield improvement, aviation was still considered an elitist, far from common, method of transportation. Heads still turned in Omaha when an airplane flew by and many times hundreds of people flocked to the airfield to watch the planes land or to see the boundary and search lighting. The elitist contention was proven

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<sup>2</sup>Results taken from official Douglas County election returns, May 8, 1928. Douglas County Election Commissioner's Office, Omaha-Douglas Civic Center, Omaha, Nebraska.

three times at the polls in Omaha from 1928 to 1930. In these years, despite the huge propaganda and publicity campaign launched by airport supporters, three aviation charter amendments barely escaped defeat. These elections showed an extremely class-structured, geographically-polarized, response of the Omaha electorate toward aviation. As late as November, 1930, this elitist notion still existed and many Omahans, perhaps understandably, could not recognize the future importance of aviation.

While public acceptance of aviation grew very slowly, the aviation industry had grown tremendously by 1931. The increased size and weight of aircraft made the complexities of airport development and planning more difficult and expensive. The Boeing Tri-Motor exemplified the new trend in airplanes. With a wingspan of 80 feet, a length of over 56 feet, a gross weight of 17,500 pounds, and facilities for the transportation of 12 passengers, the tri-motor prompted new problems in runway planning and was thought to be "the last word in luxurious air" travel.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930's public airfields would have to meet the demands of the tremendously expanding aviation industry. Many Omahans, however, were very slow in recognizing the need of public responsibility for the improvement of landing fields. The expansion of the city's aviation facilities during the next decade and beyond would remain an important challenge.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pedigree of Champions, Boeing Since 1916 (Seattle: The Boeing Company c. May, 1977), 21.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief discussion of the Omaha Municipal Airfield's development during the next three decades see section J of the Sunday World-Herald, September 3, 1961.

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