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Oral History Project
Interview with Howard Johnson

This is an interview with Howard Johnson conducted by Janice Custer for the Westchester Public Library Oral History Project. The interview is being conducted at his home at 402 E. Indiana Avenue on Friday, August 13, 1999. The interview is being conducted for the Oral History Project and the Duneland Historical Society and this interview is in regard to aviation in this area. Howard, do we have your permission to use this information.

You certainly do.

Okay, tell me what you remember about aviation in this area.

My first recollection goes back probably even before my time. Already I'm relying on other sources when I said I wouldn't, but probably the first indication of any aviation activity in the area would be the work of Octave Chanute, the engineer who preceded the Wright Brothers. He did much of his experimenting at Miller Beach and I understand that he also did some closer to Chesterton, closer to Waverly Beach. He tried various hills because he was taking advantage of the wind coming off the lake; and, of course, his experiments were all gliding, being ahead of the Wright Brothers. No one had come up with a good power source. It had been dreamed about steam engines but that, of course, was just out of the question He was quite successful. The relationship to myself or my family would be-- I can recall my grandfather, who was an excellent cabinet maker or wood worker, telling me that at one time way back in the past some crazy fool from Chicago thought he could fly. Apparently he came to my grandfather on several occasions to either repair parts of his glider or make new pieces. That I do remember very distinctly. I remember my grandfather talking about that crazy nut that thought he could fly.

Then to advance a little father into my own life-- about the first opportunity that I had, and I was a very young kid to associate with anything in the aviation field, was when the Army, the government flew the mail. That was an experiment and they used old World War I surplus airplanes. They had a plane that was called the de Havilland. It was an English built airplane, but it was a big powerful airplane that had a Liberty engine which was built in the United States. They had tried it with the old Jenny, which was a World War I trainer built in the United States. J-E-N-N-Y? Yeah. That was JN4, Curtiss JN4 and they called them Jennies. They were probably the most prevalent airplane in the early twenties and prior to the twenties. Charles Lindberg flew the mail from Chicago to St. Louis and then a man by the name of Jack Knight who lived in Dune Acres-- As a matter of fact, I think the owned the house that Margaret Doyle now lives in. Jack flew the mail from Chicago to Omaha and Jack was supposed to have been the first man to fly the mail at night. They did that by having farmers build bonfires along the way so that they could more or less go from bonfire to bonfire to follow their way.

And later on they came up with a system of beacons, rotating beacons. The biggest one was on the top of the Palmolive Building on Michigan Avenue. That was a powerful thing. We could see it when the weather was right. You could see it sweep across the sky way out here in Chesterton, and on the lake beach it was very, very evident. One of the smaller beacons was located on what is now US 6. Perhaps you are familiar with a road called Airport Road in Portage. Yes. Well, the reason that's called Airport Road is because at the corner of that road and 6 there was an emergency landing field that was maintained by the government and they had a rotating beacon there. And they had, I think at night only, they had a man on duty there. Every once in a while a plane would land at that field. They were the old surplus Army planes that they were flying the mail with at the time.

My recollection of the mail planes was always at noon, exactly at noon, there would be a plane drone over here, and it was the airmail plane going into Chicago. And people would run out in the streets. I remember a couple of doors from where I lived on Fourth Street there was a young woman. She would be so excited; every day she would run out yelling "Aeroplane! Aeroplane!" And they had a dog that would bark and the dog would recognize that airplane. He would hear it before anyone else would. So that is a memory of early aviation.

At the time a girl that lived next door to me-- She was a few years older than I and she was sort of like a big sister and I can remember her telling me that airplanes were made of cotton. (Laughter) This absolutely puzzled me. I just couldn't imagine how a thing like that could be made of cotton. Of course, she had heard about the linen that they covered the planes with at that time and she thought it was cotton and so airplanes were made of cotton. To allay that belief my grandfather, with whom I lived, took me to Chicago one day and on the lake front at-- Oh, it would have been along about just off the loop. That was a dump and that was where they put the cinders from the big buildings, from the heating of all the big buildings in Chicago. They just hauled them out and kept dumping them in the lake until they built Jackson Park. During World War I there was an Army flying field out on the lake front. My grandfather took me one day. We went in on the New York Central, got off at the LaSalle Street station, and walked over to the lake front. They let us in. I can remember him asking the guards if he could take me in to see the airplanes. They said "Certainly" and so we went in. The hangers were very crude things. They were just big wooden frameworks covered with canvas. That was the Chicago Army Airfield at the time.

We had a few planes land here before there were any local planes. In this book, I couldn't find the picture. I saw it this morning, I'll be darned. There is a picture of a plane. It was an itinerant barnstormer who was flying cross country and I guess he ran out of fuel and he landed out there where Jack Connors' Pontiac Sales is now located. That field belonged to the Smith family. He stayed for a few days and he started taking up passengers. I know they charged three dollars for five minutes or something. It was a standard rate. In trade for the use of the field he took Dick Smith and his father-- The

plane was a three passenger-- Two sat in the front cockpit and, of course, they were open planes. He took them up for a ride and in landing he became entangled in the (yeah, here it is) in the telephone wires that ran along Porter Avenue. Of course, in those days telephones-- Every message had a pair of wires and so there were just spider webs of wires on the poles. He got tangled up in that and got his wheels caught in it and the thing flipped over and it was hanging upside down on the telephone wires with Dick and his dad in it and they couldn't figure-- They were right out between the poles. They couldn't figure out how in the world to get them down because we had no fire department with equipment then, and so they sawed the telephone poles off and let the thing fall. (Laughter) It fell upside down and luckily they weren't hurt. Let me say this (picture) is on page 119 of the *Westchester Township Images of America*. That is the plane that landed on the Smith farm. That was one of the first airplanes that people could get up to and actually see in this area. That was July 10, 1919. It would have been immediately postwar and, of course, every town had its enthusiasts.

Probably the most enthusiastic person in Chesterton was Carl Harvil. Carl, in the early days, ran an electrical supply house and he had come here-- I understood, at least, that he came here with the power company when they first installed electricity in the town. He was just absolutely airplane crazy. Whenever a plane would land he always was the host. He would run out and he would have the people come to his house for dinner and always made a big thing out of an airplane landing in Chesterton, although he didn't have one of his own. But he was just thoroughly interested.

So about the first actual airplane ownership in the town would have been probably the DeMass boys who lived out on Fifth Street. Their father was a farmer and a road contractor and they were a little better off financially than the average person around here and so their dad bought each of them a Jenny when they were still in high school. They were a couple of wild crazy nuts and it is a wonder they didn't kill themselves and someone else around town because they did some crazy things. But they were fortunate and they used to fly and we would see them in the air most of the time. I remember the youngest, Raymond, had his plane painted jet black with a white skull and cross bones on each side. Those old clunkers, they flew and they flew quite well because it was a well designed airplane although they were terribly underpowered. They used to fly off their farm out where the Chestnut Hills subdivision is now.

And then later barnstormers, or itinerants, started landing in the field on the corner of Fifth Street and Porter Avenue. That was a farm that was known as the Leed's farm. The field was-- I think the only thing I can remember it was used for was growing hay. These fellows would land even when the hay was tall. They would come down and crash through the hay and land; and, if they stayed around, they would make a path and that would be their runway.

One of the first permanent pilots to stay was a fellow by the name of Bill Quasi, Q-U-A-S-I, and he actually flew out of Maywood, IL. There was an Army field there called Checkerboard Field. It was quite a famous airfield in the early days. He settled on Chesterton and he came here first in the summer time, I would say about 1923, something like that. And I can remember he was good looking young guy--husky and always had a smile on his face. He started teaching people how to fly and also taking up passengers like on Sunday. Again it was at three dollars for five minutes. The first time I ever flew in an airplane I flew with Bill Quasi. And then finally I hung out there so much as a kid and I would run errands for them and do everything. I think if they had told me to jump off a cliff I would have done so because anyone that could fly an airplane was like God. He used to take me up once in a while when I was a kid, which was probably a very dangerous thing because there was no insurance. He finally set up his residence in the old Central Hotel on Second Street and Broadway. There was a man by the name of Don Redman who ran that hotel. He would have been the son-in-law of one of the Johnsons that had the Johnson store on Broadway. Bill started living in the hotel and then for his room and board he helped at the hotel. He washed dishes. We used to go there for Sunday dinner. They always had chicken dinners; and when he would wait on us, oh, I thought that was the greatest thing in the world. This airplane pilot was waiting on us at the table.

But he was a good pilot and he had been a World War I instructor and I guess one of the reasons he left Chicago and came here-- One of the things that was very common, every pilot in those old planes had a fire extinguisher that they had up-- Actually it was fastened on the outside of the plane right ahead of the pilot's cockpit. It was one of those old carbon tetrachloride, they called them Pyrene, fire extinguishers. They were a heavy thing and I think they held about two quarts of liquid. And they say, the story is that in teaching a student in Chicago in Maywood the student froze at the controls--one student did--froze at the controls and Bill took the fire extinguisher and beaned him and almost killed him. And I guess they drummed him out of the Airport and that's how he ended up in a place like Chesterton. He stayed around here for a good many years.

He came in a Jenny but then the next airplane he had was a thing called a Lincoln Standard. They were a huge airplane. They were much bigger than the Jenny, and they were also a World War I trainer plus the fact that they had been used as observation planes during the war. He had that big old Lincoln Standard and one winter he dragged it up--took the wings off and dragged it uptown and he had it in the back yard of the old Central Hotel right along Second Street. There were some billboards that shielded the back yard and so he had his airplane back in there and he worked on it. I know he re-covered it that winter, took all of the fabric off. And, of course, that was right next to the grade school and, oh man, that was great. We had an airplane, you know. That was just supernatural. He attracted a lot of other itinerant flyers and there were a lot of very interesting aircraft that stopped here.

I can remember one time Henry Ford's son was promoting a small private airplane. They called it the Ford Flivver Plane. They didn't make very many of them; but

they were a little low-winged, all-metal airplane. That was in the early days--the early twenties. A couple of them stopped here on two or three different occasions. They would be flying cross country, I suppose, on their way to Detroit, and they would land in Chesterton and, of course, immediately Carl Harvil would have them to his house for dinner. And if they needed a car he just gave them a car and he did everything that he could for these airplane people. Of course, the DeMass boys, who I mentioned earlier, when some other flyers started settling here, then of course they moved their planes into that field at Fifth and Porter.

There were quite a number of different makes of early planes. There was a plane called a Swallow which was a rather modern looking aircraft, although it was again under powered with a Curtiss OX5 engine. And then there was a plane called an American Eagle and that plane was owned by a fellow by the name of Oakley Lute. He was one of the Lutes from what is now Portage. They called it Twenty-Mile Prairie in those days. Oakley was a wild young guy. I think his father gave him that plane for high school graduation. It was a very beautiful thing. It was a silver biplane. Eventually, Mr. Harvil, who sold Dodge cars, traded this Oakley Lute for a car, plus the fact that he had to give Harvil flying lessons. He was not old, but he was probably too old to be taking something like that up and he had several near misses in trying to get the thing down. As a matter of fact, he finally totally wrecked it. There was an old fellow that raised hay on that field, and he would leave his equipment anyplace. He left his hay rake out in the middle of the field right in the grass; and Mr. Harvil came in for a landing one time and he landed right smack on top of that hay rake and, of course, that was the end of his American Eagle biplane. He just totally wrecked it.

But on that same property there was a house located right about where the modern brick house sits there now. It was an old frame farm house. A family by the name of Duffy moved in and, oh, it was just camping out because the house was just absolutely nothing. They had a couple of old airplanes. They had lived out in Liberty Township and then they moved in here to Chesterton in that building because that was close to the field where they flew their airplanes. They had two boys. One of them was about my age and, of course, again I just spent all of my time there. We built models and sat around all day long watching these, as my grandmother called them, bums and their airplanes.

As time went on there was a fellow from Porter by the name of Russell Hankforth. H-A-N-K-F-O-R-T-H? H-A-N-K-F-O-R-T-H. It was an old family in Porter, and Russell was a kind of a bum. He would come and go and there was never anything permanent about him and he finally had an airplane. He used it for just anything that anyone wanted an airplane for. He would fly them or use his plane. So he added to the number of planes.

One of the most interesting airplanes that was ever located locally-- These Duffys that I mentioned had a little French Newport fighter plane. It was from World War I and it still had the machine gun mounts. It didn't have the guns but it had the mounting. They were little single seat, cute little airplanes. They had come in possession of this thing and

they couldn't get it started. My uncle, Mr. Bradley, was very good with engines and especially with the ignition of engines, magnetos they used in those days, and so he finally got the thing started for them. It had a rather unusual power plant in it. It had what was called a rotary engine. It was a French plane and it had a French Le Rhone rotary engine. A rotary engine looked very much like the modern radial engine, except in this case the crank shaft was bolted to the airplane and then the entire engine rotated around the crank shaft. So here this great big engine was whirling at engine speed and the propeller was bolted to the engine so that whole mechanism spun and, of course, you can imagine the centrifugal force it created. They were a very tricky thing to fly because they always wanted to veer off in the direction of the rotation; and they also had another unusual feature; they didn't have a throttle. The engine ran at full speed all the time and in order to diminish the power the pilot had a little push button on top of the control stick. When he pushed his thumb on that it actually shut the engine off and so when they would come in to land, you know, it would be bursts of power until they finally got it on the ground and then they would shut it off. They did fly it a couple of times. They found a man that knew how to fly one and he took it up. He had a terrible time getting it down. As a matter of fact, I was out there as a kid. I rode out on my bicycle and I was watching all of this. When he finally got it on the ground he was as white as a sheet because he was afraid he would never get it down. Just when he almost touched the ground, the thing would want to go up again. That was rather thrilling. I don't think it was ever flown again after that.

As time went on people started getting Piper Cubs. There were some little planes that preceded the Cub. There was little airplane called the Naronca. It was a strange looking little thing. It was two places but you sat-- When the thing was on the ground and you were sitting in it you were practically sitting on the ground. There were a couple of those around. As a matter of fact, I think Mr. Harvil had one.

Then there were a number of people that tried to build airplanes. The most notable of that group was a fellow by the name of Martin Rintz. R-I-N-T-Z. Marty, was, I think, two years older than I and he was airplane crazy. He decided to build himself a plane and so he got a lot of old parts from these Duffys that were at the field and he had a motorcycle engine that someone helped him convert into an airplane engine. Oh, it was the most horrendous contraption you ever saw in your life. He had covered it with fabric that someone had taken off an airplane when they were re-covering it. Of course, he tried to patch that stuff back on his plane and it was all wrinkled and full of patches. He did finally get the thing so that he could run along the ground with it. One day he mustered his nerve and he tried to take it off and the thing went up, oh, I don't know, ten or fifteen feet and it turned over and he landed on his back and, luckily, wasn't hurt, at least seriously. But Martin, everyone remembered him. But later on he did get himself an old clunker of some kind and he finally crashed it, out in-- It would have been in Liberty Township. He landed on top of someone's chicken coop and that, of course, totally wrecked the thing.

Then there were a few events that took place, aviation wise, here. Out in Jackson Township in October of 1933 a United airliner-- In those days an airliner, their maximum capacity was probably twenty people. They were very small aircraft. This plane crashed on a rainy October night. I can remember it because I had a Model T Ford and I drove out there. And it, of course, killed everyone aboard the plane and totally destroyed the thing. It landed on the side of an embankment that had been built for that airline railroad that was planned to go from Chicago to New York by electric, more or less like the South Shore. It was found out later that a bomb had been planted on the plane and it blew the tail off and, of course, it crashed and came down and there were-- Apparently the plane was full to capacity because I can remember when I went out there was clothing hanging in the trees. I can remember distinctly a beautiful woman's fur coat hanging in a tree. Did they ever find out why the bomb was planted? No, I guess it had something to do with some labor racketeer because they said that-- It was all rather vague but they said that someone got on the plane in Cleveland and had a suitcase and then they got off and no one saw them take the suitcase off. So that's no doubt what happened. They just left the bomb on the plane.

A rather humorous side to that-- Donald Slont, who later ran Flannery's Tavern--he was the nephew of Gary Flannery--was on the local fire department. Of course, the fire truck went out there immediately when the alarm was sent out. When they picked up their stuff from the fire truck to come home after they had done everything that they could, the propeller, one of the propellers-- It was a twin-engine airplane and one of the propellers was lying on the ground. It had broken off. Don was one of these guys that just laid his hands on anything that he could see, and he grabbed it. He had a couple of fellows-- It was a big thing. It must have been like eight or ten feet in diameter and he had someone help him throw it on the top of the hose on the fire truck and they brought it home. Don lived with Flannerys on the corner of Fourth and Broadway and they dumped the thing off at his house. So he took it in his garage and for years that propeller hung on the wall of Flannery's Garage. You could see it when the door was open. One of the first suspects-- When they were investigating the thing, they couldn't find that propeller so they thought the propeller had come off and that's what made it crash. And here Donald had it all the time. Then he had it for years. As a matter of fact, I think it was still there when he died. I know it was a big three-blade propeller and it had, I think it was, red, white, and blue stripes around it so that when the propeller turned it looked like a circle of red, white and blue. So that was a mystery, although they did find later that it was the result of sabotage.

I mentioned Jack Knight before. Jack later, after his pioneering of airmail, was among the first pilots for United Airlines when that was organized in Chicago. He flew for United for many years and turned out to become the first pilot in the world to have ever flown a million miles. So he had that distinction. He was a very good pilot, although he started drinking later and they had to take him out of the cockpit. And as I remember Jack in later years he was kind of like a public relations man for United Airlines because he used to hang at Flannery's

Tavern all the time. But he had certainly made his mark in aviation.

Was the mail ever delivered here to the place at Fifth and Porter? Were there any deliveries or was that just all itinerant? No, that was just a sort of a barnstormer field. But there was a lot of activity and I often think, when I go by that corner, that if the people that live there had any inkling of all of the things that took place on that corner because when the thing was at its peak-- They had like little air shows that they would just put together with their own ingenuity, and they had wing walking. These fellows were all dare devils. They had fellows-- This Quasi would wing walk. You know, they would go from, climb from one plane to the other in flight and then hang underneath the wings because in those little bi-planes they had skids like, loops that would keep the wing from dipping in the ground in landing. They would get hold of that thing and hang on it like a trapeze and then swing up on the wing and then they would get up on the top wing and they would walk back and forth. I know he would stand on his head while the plane was flying and it was very thrilling. And they had parachute jumping and one of the things that I am sure would not be allowed any more-- They used to throw out hand bills.

Whenever a store or a business had a sale they would give them several hundred hand bills and they would go over town and just broadcast them into the--scattered to the four winds. That was a very common thing.

Floyd Frank that lived there at that corner, I remember in more recent years he built an airplane, he and Larry did, I remember that.

Yeah, he and Larry Koker built an airplane. Yeah, it had a Volkswagen engine that had been converted for aircraft. It was a kind of a coincidence that that took place there.

Same place, right?

In later years I don't know whether-- Probably Mr. Harvil had leased the place. It had an old wreck of a barn and he sawed the south side of the barn, completely removed the side of the barn from the building. And then he put some hinges on it and he had a winch and a cable where he could crank it by hand and he could raise and lower the side of that barn. They used that like a hangar, you know. They could pull airplanes in there and then close up the door to keep the weather off of them. It was a trashy thing, you know. Everything was makeshift.

How long was that field there?

Oh, I would imagine that that thing operated for about ten years. I think the thing that actually sort of ended the activity was when Mr. Harvil crashed into the hay rake. I think that was about the last major thing that took place. That would have been in the thirties.

A little later on, let's see now, there was a young fellow by the name of Sabinsky and he went with a girl by the name of Ehlers, Margaret Ehlers, from Porter and they had a little Piper Cub when they first became popular. I lived, at that time, on South Second Street. There was no school where Bailey is now and I could look across to that field and I used to see them land over there with that little Piper Cub. I don't know whether they just did it without permission or what the setup was but they were in and out of there quite a bit. That would have been in the forties because Sabinsky went into the service. He joined the Canadian Airforce and he flew in the war as a Canadian. Margaret Ehlers graduated in 1935, I think, from high school here. And she continued with her flying.

What about the Bodines?

Well, they came along as a result of the Waite brothers. W-A-I-T-E? Yeah. Well, Sears just died a year or so ago and then he had a brother Horatio. We called him Bud. (Laughter) I can appreciate that. They lived in that big house on Waverly Road just north of Porter right next to the old school house, you know, that old brick school. Well, just south is that great big house, kind of on a hill like, and that was the Waite home. Their mother published a Christian Science book which Sears, up until the time he died, was still publishing that book. Mrs. Waite's father was a man by the name of Henry Kimball and they were from the Kimball Piano Company in Chicago, that family. They took his notes because he was a contemporary of Mary Baker Eddy, who was the founder of the church in the United States, although the church originally was British. He was a lecturer and the Waite's were publishing his notes. Kimball's? Yeah, and it was a very popular book in Christian Science circles. The Waite boys started flying when they were very young. I don't know which one flew first. They were a couple of years apart. During the war they both had airplanes, little planes, and they used to fly out of, oh, gosh, you know where that Zephyr awning, I think it's Gerometta on-- They've got an architectural office there now. Well, that farm belonged to the Waite's and there was a very small field there alongside what is now the 49 bypass and they used to fly their airplanes out of there. They each had a little Cub and then when the war came along they both became civilian instructors. Bud, Horatio, flew for the Navy and he used his own airplane for instruction. It was basic instruction. And Sears flew for an Army program. Sears later on quit and just joined the Army. I never could figure why he didn't get into flying, but he didn't want to. He just wanted to be a buck private and he served quite a long time during the war as an infantryman. But Bud kept on with his flying up in Michigan until the end of the war.

Then the Bodines, they came into it by way of the Waites. They were friends. The Waites taught them how to fly. They had a couple of fairly decent airplanes. I know the first plane that they had was called a Luska. That was a little two place plane. Then they finally got a four place, and then they got a bigger four place plane.

Where were they located then?

Well, the airfield is still functional. It is out on the Pine Township Road. When you leave 20 on a tangent, the Pine Township Road runs straight east and 20 makes a turn to the northeast.

That's where Troy's Pizza used to be.

Yeah, that's right. You cross the railroad tracks and then it is just a quarter of a mile to the east. They had a hangar and had a fairly decent field. They had lights for landing at night. Now Bethlehem Steel still operates that field for their own business planes.

Oh, they do? I didn't know that? I didn't realize that was still in operation.

Although I think they fly mostly out of Porter County. But I know they do still maintain that field because they had a set of lights that, if you came in at night and buzzed the field and just hit your microphone switch, which would automatically turn the lights on.

Hum, I didn't realize that was still in operation.

Yeah, Bodine, of course, he was quite a humorist and he always called that the Mosquito Town International Airport. (Laughter) They were a couple of characters around here.

What were their first names?

Sieberd and Sylvan. They were twins. S-I-E-B-E-R-D, I think it was. It wasn't "T"; it was "D." Sieberd.

Sylvan?

Sylvan.

Were they from around here originally?

Oh yeah, yeah. They lived on that farm out on, well right across from the South Shore Electric, Dickey's place. That was the Plagaman farm and the Bodines were right directly across. I think this kid that has the-- Andershock. I think he owns it now. No, they used to do a lot of flying. I know they would fly down to Cuba quite a bit. That was before Castro, and then they also flew to South America quite a bit. They had friends in South America and they would fly down there. And they would fly to Mexico and pretty much all over the United States. I used to fly-- I never went out on any long trips with them, but I used to fly with Sieberd here and there quite a bit.

Was their business farming?

Well, I don't know. They were traders. You never really knew what they were doing. (Laughter) They were pretty sharp characters. They were both funny and life was just a ball to them. They saw the humor in everything. I remember one time I flew down to Purdue with Sieberd. They belonged to an organization called the Flying Farmers and it was sponsored by the Prairie Farmer Newspaper in Chicago when WLS was the Prairie Farmer station. They would have big get-togethers, big fly-ins. I know they had this one at the Purdue Airport in Lafayette. Bodine asked me if I would like to go down. They were going to have a fish fry. So I went with him. There was another farmer by the name of Kenny Kohler that was a friend of theirs who used to work farming with them and so the four of us went down, or the three of us. It was a very hot day in August and, of course, on an asphalt runway it is very difficult to get an airplane down, a light plane, because they want to do what they call ballooning. You know, the air is coming up off the hot runway. We landed and, oh gosh, we must have bounced fifty feet because it went up and came down again and up and down and, finally, he got it down. As we were taxiing to the parking area, he says, "Time of arrival: 12:00, 12:01, 12:02." (Laughter) Because everything looked funny to him, you know. Nothing was ever serious.

I had a pilot's license for quite a long time. We had a little flying club. I did quite a bit.

Was it just a local flying club?

Yeah, we had our plane over at Porter County Airport. It was okay, although it's a tough way to go anyplace because you are so confined and then you're a slave to the weather. You might fly from here to, say, Indianapolis and the weather turns bad and there you are.

Can't get back.

Of course, some of these people that have big aircraft and all the navigational equipment, they can get by with it, although they don't always get by with it.

I think our town has had its share, you know, and has contributed its share to-- Now my brother-in-law, Vivian's husband, his name was Carl Clett. C-L-E-T-T? Yeah, and they built the house on Calumet Road, well let's see, there is a street that goes back in called Marloo Loop, or something like that. They lived on the corner of Marloo and Calumet Road. Kasmatka lives there now, the fellow that was on the Town Board. Carl finished that house just before he went into the service. He had known how to fly even when he was in high school. He was from Fort Worth, Texas. I know he first came here and lived with his sister in Gary and he used to fly out of the Gary airport. Some fellows by the name of Yankovich were very well known in aviation circles and they ran that airport over there. Carl was a good friend of theirs. So then he worked in the mill; and

when the war came along, boy I tell you, he just salivated about getting into the service and he did. He just made it age wise. He just slipped under the-- I think the maximum limit then was twenty-six and he just had his twenty-sixth birthday after he got in. Carl was a real laid-back, cool fellow, just a lovely guy. Everybody liked him. He was top man in his class all the way through his training and then he spent, I think he spent, almost a year in this country as an instructor before he went overseas.

Then he became involved in a group called the Combat Cargo Squadron. It was not air transport command; it was sort of a separate renegade outfit and it was run by a Colonel from Chicago by the name of Philip Cochran. And Philip Cochran was a counterpart of a cartoon character in *Terry and the Pirates* called Flip Corcan. That cartoon strip was a very popular strip at the time and it was based around this Combat Cargo Squadron. They flew these C47's and they just flew in and out of anyplace. They would go where a Piper Cub wouldn't go. I remember one of the last requirements that Carl had to meet. They were down in Kentucky at-- It's not Bowling Field in Louisville-- Yeah, I guess it is Bowling Field in Louisville. They had to crash a plane before they could get into the outfit and he crashed his plane down in the hills in Kentucky. He flew overseas and he flew his seventy-five missions. That was their limit. When they flew seventy-five missions in the Cargo division then they were ready to come back state side and become instructors again. On the last day they asked for volunteers for a flight. And, of course, Carl being Good Old Joe that he was, he volunteered and he got killed on that flight. He was shot down, that is one engine of his plane was shot out and he tried to land in a little narrow jungle strip and he skidded into the trees. The sad part of it was the plane was full of people. It was a field hospital that they were moving, and everyone escaped except Carl and he broke his neck.

Just a couple of, oh, about three weeks ago on this Antique Road Show which was being broadcast in Milwaukee, there was a fellow came with some stuff, some artifacts from Japan, I guess; and he had a newspaper that was among these war souvenirs that had been given to him by his uncle. By gosh, here this uncle, when they showed his picture, it was Carl's co-pilot.

My heavens!

He had given-- He didn't say whether he was alive anymore or not, but I know he stopped at our house when he was finally separated from the service. It was on the Sunday that our daughter Carolyn was baptized. He came by on his way from Washington, I guess, to Wisconsin where he was home; and he stopped. At first he was reluctant but then he wanted to be sure and see Carl's widow. Right. He stopped to visit Carl's grave. He's buried now-- First they buried him in Burma where he was killed and then they moved him and he's buried at the Punch Bowl in Honolulu, that big cemetery up on the mountain overlooking Honolulu.

Oh, yes.

And the unusual part of what we found there, he's buried-- Actually he was a Texan but he's buried with the Indiana fellows and on one side of him is Ernie Pyle, right next to him. And then on the other side is a brother-in-law of Jack Doler. Now, I can't remember what that family's name was, what Mrs. Doler's name was. They were Liberty Township farmers and this kid had been killed in the, not necessarily, I don't think he was in the Airforce but he was killed in action over there. But I thought it was kind of nice that Carl was next to Ernie Pyle.

Right.

Ernie, he didn't want to, you know, have any special recognition; he just wanted to be with the boys.

Are there any other people around? I know Jane had said to ask if you knew any other people around who have had any recollections of air travel in this area or airplanes in this area.

Well, oh now, there are all kinds of people because everybody flies all the time.

But the early days.

But at the times that I was talking about it was really unusual. Oh, I was trying to think who-- She said Bill Robertson. Oh, yeah, Bill had a plane. That is, he and Walter Bower senior and Doc Cassidy. Do you remember Doc Cassidy? Well, his name was Hugh but he was an optometrist and he had been a B24 pilot in New Guinea in the South Pacific. And he and Bower and Robertson had what was called a Piper Tri-pacer. They did a lot flying. I think that probably Bower flew more than any of them because he was in that thing all the time. Then something happened. I guess that he was frightened. He used to fly down to St. Louis to see his father all the time and I understand that he ground looped it one day landing. And I guess it scared him.

It would! (Laughter)

A ground loop really isn't all that serious. What it does, it spins around on one wheel, you know, just like a cartwheel.

I didn't have any exciting experiences in my flying. (Laughter) We had that little Aeronca two place, side-by-side. It was a kind of a cute little airplane.

Aeronca?

Let's see A-E-R-O-N-C-A. I don't think they're made any more. Most of those light planes went out of business. Cessna is about the only one left, and Piper. But it's a

marginal thing unless you can get into it big time because you're really asking for trouble. You are at the mercy of so many things.

Right.

But somebody has got to be the pioneer, and we had our share of them.

Yeah, as you say, it all has to start somewhere.

Oh, yeah.

You don't start out with the big transports and commercial planes. You have to start with something.

But that's just about what I remember about flying.

You remember an awful lot, that's for sure.

I remember more of the very early days because I was a kid and I was impressionistic.

Yeah.

What I say is true. I remember this stuff very vividly.

Oh, I know, you have an excellent memory.

Boy, I tell you I got hell so many nights coming home after dark, you know. I'd forget about my supper and I'd hang out there.

One of the most memorable moments, and I think we all have moments that are just almost like a photograph that impresses on your mind. One evening I was on Fifth Street, I suppose leaving the air field. It was getting dark. It was late dusk and this Russell Hankfort came in from the east landing in a kind of southwesterly direction. And as he slipped over probably about where the park ball park is now, I can remember that silhouette of him and that big old plane. He always wore a helmet with a thing on, you know, that was like a scarf tied to the top of the helmet and I can remember the silhouette of him and that plane in landing. It was backfiring, you know, and there were blue flames banging out of the exhaust and that thing whistling in there with that. I can remember that scene just as vividly as if it were yesterday.

As I say, you have some marvelous memories.

That Hankfort, I don't know if his family is left around here but he was a devil. It seemed like every time Russell came to town there would be a robbery and you would always hear him taking off at night. He was one of these guys that-- He flew by the seat of his pants. He didn't need lights or anything. And that was as sure as clock work; when there would be a robbery, that night you would hear Russell taking off, you know. And then he wouldn't show up around here for maybe a year or six months and there was no doubt that he had something to do with the robbery. (Laughter) Then he made quite a name for himself during the war as a ferry pilot. He ferried new airplanes.

Well, this Margaret Ehlers--they called them WASPS--and she was one of them.

Yes.

I saw her on television one night. They were having some kind of a reunion and Margaret was in the crowd. Is that E-H-L-E-R-S? Yeah, they lived in Porter. I think there are still some of them around.

Yes, there are I think.

But Russell, he made quite a name for himself as a ferry pilot. He flew big aircraft, you know, like bombers and stuff like that. After the war he disappeared and they said that he was picked up flying illegal immigrants across the Mexican border and I guess that was the end of Russell Hughes. They did away with him.

They caught up with him, huh?

Yeah.

Well, I thank you for all your memories. They are always interesting.
Now this Lute. I think-- I know that he is a member of that family that has the gas station.

L-U-T-E?

L-U-T-E, yes. They are from what is now Portage. We used to call that Twenty Mile Prairie out between here and Hobart. I know they called him Wild Lute and he was a loony Lute.

What did he do?

Well, first he was just a kid and his father had given him that airplane. Oh, I guess maybe he gave people lessons and took people up for rides. But then finally I know he was married and the facts of life kind of bore down on him and that's when he traded

his airplane for a car because he had to have his car for transportation and a job. The last I heard of him he was a salesman of some kind on the road. He sure a good time for a while.

And then these DeMass boys, they were nutty. It is very fortunate that they didn't hurt themselves or somebody else. I know, Henry, the older boy, his father tried to send him to Culver Military Academy and, of course, he was flying even then. I guess he had some flying exploits down there. Then what finally ended his Culver career-- They had quite a bit of World War I surplus military equipment and they had a tank. And Henry and some other kid got in this tank and, of course, once you are locked in a tank nobody can get at you. They just tore the campus all to pieces. I guess they drove it up the library steps and just raised havoc. That's a shame because that's a beautiful place down there.

Right, right.

Except that didn't mean anything to Henry DeMass. I suppose the old man had to pay for all of it.

Probably. Which may have been the problem in the first place, the trouble.

No, they had those two old junk airplanes and they sure made themselves known.

Well thank you again for your time.

This is sort of a sidelight. Milan Morgan. Do you remember Milan? Well, he had-- His last venture was Morgan Supply, that was out where that carpet place is.

Oh, okay, yes.

Well, he built that building.

Yeah, okay. And he was a member of this Morgan family in the area here. And he was considerably older than I and he and his brother built an airplane in their barn. They lived out just across from the toll road entrance. That was the Morgan farm and, I know, Milan told me that that airplane, they couldn't get it out of the barn and, of course, they outgrew the desire and so they just left it there. He said when the tore that barn down they took that airplane and destroyed it.

Oh, my.

There were quite a few people that tried to build airplanes. I think the most successful was Floyd Frank and, of course, they had much better material and opportunities then.

That's been what, in the sixties?

Oh, yeah. The plane flew okay. I remember Jim Read test flew it. Of course, Jim would do anything. (Laughter) Jim was a fighter pilot during the Korean war.

Oh, I didn't know that.

He flew shipboard fighters. He had quite a record. I know they kept telling me that, of course, they were used to flying off paved fields and shipboard decks. You know everything was hard. When they were over in the South Pacific, they were invited officially, I guess, to come and stay at a place in Singapore called Raffle's Hotel. How he happened to tell me about it, Max and I had stayed at Raffle's several times. And when they landed at Singapore with his big heavy airplane and it was a mud field, I know, he said that the plane just sank right down to the hubs, you know, and they couldn't move it. So they had to get a lot of help, people to get that airplane up on solid ground so they could get out of there again.

But, of course, John Read, John Sr., flew.

Oh, did he?

He had his own plane. Dr. John started flying with his dad. I think that was even before Jim flew.

Well, I knew they used to fly something. They used to fly mail or they flew something for a while.

Well, yeah, John has a charter service and what they fly is bank checks and bank material.

They still have that then?

I think he still does.

I knew they had some kind of thing they did..

Yeah, and then there's their charter flying too. They had the money. I don't think they ever had to make any money at it because Jim has had so many airplanes.

Oh, I know he has, yeah.

Oh, my God. He had a seaplane. They had the place up in Michigan on the Upper Peninsula at Curtis and they had a house on a lake and so he bought the seaplane so they could fly up. But I don't think Evelyn was ever too keen about it. Although Evelyn I think, is in a rest home now, isn't she. Doesn't she have Alzheimer's?

Yes, I think she does but I don't believe she is. I've seen her in church up until recently, so—

Well, I feel bad about that because I always liked Evelyn.

I think she has at least the beginning of it.

I know Jim told me years ago when he first got out of the bank. I said, "Gee, Jim, how come you quit?" and he said, "Well, it interferes with my flying." (Laughter)

And hunting and fishing and other things.

They were, of course, that family was pretty well-- And then their mother, my God-- Her dad started buying her NIPSCO stock when she was a kid. She had some of the first issues of NIPSCO and I know John, her husband, used to kid about it. He said, "I wouldn't take any of their God damned money." (Laughter) He was independent.

Well thanks again.

Typed by Beverly Hubbs