

While Queen City Dawdled, NKY Took Action

By Howard McEwen
For The Sunday Challenger
feedback@challengernky.com

How the 'Cincinnati' Airport Wound Up in Boone County

BURLINGTON - Six-year old Alex Lapin is an airplane nut. He can identify different planes and reviews flight paths from around the world. He's ridden in his grandfather's Cessna and when he plays on the computer he visits delta.com where he looks over schedules and seating.

Alex knows airplanes as well as any 6-year old, but he has a hard time telling anyone why the airport 10 minutes from his Burlington home - the "Cincinnati" airport - is located in Boone County on land owned by Kenton County.

This story is for Alex.

It Started With a Flood

In 1937 when the historic flooding deluged Lunken Airport, Cincinnati was cut off from commercial air traffic. With the airport so close to the river, the threat of flooding was always present. Also, because of Lunken's proximity to the low-lying ground near the Ohio River, it was often socked in with fog. Since much of flying in those days was done by sight, this was another strike against Lunken. Finally, by the late 1930s, airplanes were increasing in size and the hills surrounding Lunken made the longer glide paths of these newer planes more difficult.

By 1941, war clouds were looming for the United States, and the Federal Civil Aeronautics Agency (CAA) was assigned to find suitable airfields for the Army Air Corps. Members of the Covington-Kenton County Industrial Association, a group of Covington businessmen, saw their opportunity. They enlisted O.G. Loomis, a civil engineer, to scour Northern Kentucky and review contour plates and maps to find an ideal landing strip location. He found the perfect site for the Covington-Kenton County organization on a large flat-topped bluff - in Boone County.

Nevertheless, the Kenton County leaders, as well as those from Boone and Campbell, agreed on the site. At the time, Boone County was a rural county with no money to build an airport. So a special measure was taken by the state legislature that allowed Kenton County to buy the 930 acres of Boone County that became the nucleus of the today's airport.

That original purchase of land was the last time taxpayer money was used to support the airport. Unlike most airports, a municipality does not own the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport. The independent Kenton County Airport Board does.

"If you don't fly, you don't pay any taxes whatsoever to support the airport," said Ted Bushelman, the airport's director of communications. The city or county does not own the airport and all of its operating revenue comes from ticket charges, landing fees charged to the airlines, and tenant rents.

"In fact," Bushelman continued, "the airport pays over \$1 million dollars a year in payroll taxes to Boone County."

Regional Economic Engine Wasn't Foreseen

The thought of the airport becoming a regional economic engine hadn't occurred to anyone involved with landing the airport. They were just trying to get approval to build runways. To accomplish this, they enlisted the help of other Northern Kentucky city and county officials and, most importantly, U.S. Congressman Brent Spence. Each politician championed the Boone County site with the CAA.

Cincinnati and Hamilton County were also trying to put together their own airport plan. However, several problems presented themselves. First, many didn't see the need to replace the 20-year old Lunken Field. Those who did see the need couldn't agree on another suitable site. A Blue Ash airport was championed as well as sites on the west side and the eastern edge of town. In the confusion, the Hamilton County voters shot down a bond measure that was aimed at constructing any new airport. In subsequent



Submitted photo

CONTACT: Aviation enthusiast Alex Lapin, 6, learning to "fly" at the controls of his grandfather's airplane.

years, two more bond measures would also be turned down.

With war on and confusion in Cincinnati, the CAA abandoned the idea of a Cincinnati airport and focused on what was then being called the Boone County Airport, still just 12.5 miles from Fountain Square.

However, there was still a wartime bureaucracy to navigate and political skirmishes to fight. After much negotiation with the federal government and numerous trips to Washington, Northern Kentucky won final approval for its airport from the CAA with a \$2 million budget to build four runways 5,500 feet long. In mid-August 1944, B-17 "Flying Fortresses" four-engine bombers began making practice landings and takeoffs from the airport in Boone County.

Here Come the Airlines

With the war winding down, airport officials began courting commercial airlines. American, Delta and TWA signed leases to use the airport after the war. In 1946, the three airlines advanced \$225,000 to the airport to complete construction of a terminal and all the amenities that the passengers would expect.

Over the years the small Boone County Airport became the Greater Cincinnati Airport. In the late 1980s, then-Gov. Martha Layne Collins flew direct to London on Delta and the airport officially became the Greater Cincinnati International Airport. In the early 1990s, then-Gov. Wallace Wilkinson began to pressure the airport board to include Kentucky in its name.

"He pointed out that all the board members are Kentuckians, the Kentucky Revised Statutes governs the airport, and Kenton County money built the airport," said lifetime airport board member Bill Whitson.

Bowing to the governor's wishes, the board changed the name to the Cincinnati / Northern Kentucky International Airport.

Today, the airport has expanded to three main runways at 12,000, 11,000 and 10,000 feet long and handles over 22.5 million passengers a year. Lunken Airport remains a vital airport and is one of the country's busiest jetports. Cincinnati leaders continued to push for expansion of the airport in Blue Ash, but that site's own space limitations, the concerns of Blue Ash residents and the momentum of the old Boone County Airport kept it at its present smaller size.

Alex Lapin's fascination with airplanes started when he first spotted them flying over his home. They make him happy. He can't quite understand the history yet, but he will learn that that joy is because of the determination, persistence, and vision of past community leaders who dared to think that the "Cincinnati" airport should be in Kentucky.

Copyright © 2004, Challenger Communications, LLC, Covington, KY, USA
One of the Corporex Family of Companies