

Ozark Air Lines – in many forms



BOB FRAKES

I received the picture above from my friend Marty a few days ago. I get items now and then from here or there. You notice two things right away, the Ozark Air Lines and the DC-3 plane. In fact, it was the original usage plane out of the “old terminal” (more on that down the road) and Marty noted that he flew one out of here (Mount Vernon) in November, 1969, on his way to basic training.

IT CAUGHT MY EYE

The DC-3 could easily be nominated as the most iconic plane of all time. It was, and actually still is, a propeller-driven plane developed by Douglas Aircraft Company and would evolve into larger and stretched versions that had a lasting impact on the airline industry and the military in World War II — and beyond. It featured a low wing with a conventional landing gear powered by two radial piston engines. These were originally very similar (except two and not four) to the engines on the B-17 “Yankee Lady” that recently visited our airport here. It cruised at over 200 mph and had a capacity of 21 to 32 passengers, or 6,000 pounds of cargo, with a range of 1,500 miles. It could cross the United States in 18 hours with only three stops. It could turn a profit without the usual mail subsidies. It is estimated that several hundred are STILL flying.

Ozark Air Lines had a long history and served Mt. Vernon from 1962-1980. It was bought by TWA and that was bought by American. It “hubbed” out of Lambert/

St. Louis. In that opening year of 1962 for Mt. Vernon, Ozark had overall revenues of \$14 million with a \$4.5 million federal subsidy. The airline was famous for its dark green Ozark Air Lines logo. The three swallows on the Ozark fins represented on-time flights, referring to the legend of the swallows that return to Mission San Juan Capistrano, in California each year, right on the 19th of March.

Ozark ended its DC-3 service in 1968 with Fairchild F-27s “turbo-props” or later variations now carting a bulk of the service, Mt. Vernon included. The turbo-prop generated power through a turbine, which was then transferred to a prop for power. This prop was constant speed and changed the prop angle for adjustment. It could carry 50 or so at 230 mph and up to 28,000 feet.

Ozark would eventually buy several DC-9 planes — these were “true jets.” Although these were never much a part of the regular Mt. Vernon service, they did fly in and out on “charter” flights, like to Las Vegas. As airport director Chris Collins noted, the DC-9 had a certain runway “mandate” which was instrumental in the 6496’ by 150’ main runway at the airport today. Chris noted the Directors and Boards at that time that played a big part in making that happen.

By comparison, the Mt. Vernon main runway is the same as Chicago Midway and also the same as Lihue, Kauai, which now handles 757 flights from the mainland. Been there, done that! Believe me after four hours to L.A. and five or so more out to Lihue, seeing the lights of the airport there and Lihue look re-



ally good! Cold here, need to stop talking about Kauai!

I know, you are thinking he always has a story. Well not always, but often it seems.

It was the early 1970's and my mom had gone to Bloomington to a nurses convention. She stayed at her friend's, Jean and Rex. At the banquet that night she had a medical event, passed out and ended up in the hospital. We needed to get her, and her car, home. Dad was very much a "homing pigeon" so I volunteered for duty - Ozark to Coles County and on to Bloomington and not sure where they went from there - on to Chicago, I think.

Well, as we got close to Coles County (between Mattoon and Charleston) the pilot announced that they were not sure the front landing gear was down and somebody would be coming back to check. Check, I thought - how can you see the front landing gear from here? Well, the co-pilot came back with a long "pole" and unscrewed a cap in the floor. We were now circling and he stuck this pole through the hole in the floor and periscoped it around. He had no reaction and said nothing. He replaced the cap and returned to the front.

We now began to drop down as I looked out the window - not a word. We were all looking around - are they trying to keep us calm or forgot or what? Then - we landed normally. The gear was down and I guess the need to communicate never dawned on anyone.

We next landed at Bloomington and I was greeted by Rex. Mom, the car and I all got back to Mt. Vernon. Maybe somebody can school me on how that pole/periscope thing is possible? Thought I would have heard a whoosh or something. Guess we were low enough? Another chapter in the Bob Frakes book of odd occurrences. Yes, it is a big book!

The airport has lots of Ozark history on the west wall in the dining area - check it out!

Questions, comments or answers?
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