

Reid Bissen from the Pioneer Air Museum in Fairbanks, Alaska, interviews Richard Wein about Sam O. White (1891-1976), the well known Alaska bush pilot and game warden. Richard is the son of Noel Wein, aviation pioneer, and a key player in Alaska aviation history in his own right. Richard knew Sam White very well throughout his life and is familiar not only with his exploits as an aviator and game warden, but as a person as well. They discuss White's relationship with Richard and the Wein family, his personality, philosophy, and importance to the enforcement of game laws in territorial Alaska.

[Begin Recording]

0:02 Reid Bissen

Okay, so today is June fifteenth, 2022. We are at Richard Wein's hangar in his office. He is being interviewed, so he will be the narrator of this tape. My name is Reid Bissen and I will be the interviewer. Nobody else is present, and this tape will be used for research purposes at the Pioneer Air Museum, as well as it will be stored at the Rasmussen Library at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks for research purposes there as well.

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Okay, so let's get started. So why don't to start off, you can just introduce yourself for any future listeners, and as well as just tell me about your first experience flying.

0:59 Richard Wein

Okay, my name is Richard Wein. I'm the youngest son of Noel Wein, aviation pioneer.

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He was preceded only by Ben Eielson in Alaska.

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And for a while I was the only one in the Northern part of the territory at that time. So, did a lot of pioneering flight. I grew up;

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our house in Fairbanks was about a little over a block from Weeks Field, which was the early airport in Fairbanks long before the international here was opened. And basically hung out there after school and all summer;

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infatuated with airplanes and the early pilots coming and going. I was born in '35. And so

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in the 40s, I was pretty active at the airport, and learned to fly off the airport in 1951. When I soloed I got my pilot's license in the morning, my driver's license in the afternoon. And

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shot landings and so forth in that Week's Field. They had closed the tower because they moved it out here, but they hadn't opened up the airport yet. So, that was kind of an adventure to fly with other airplanes with no control tower. I feel very fortunate to have had the childhood I had and grow up around aviation.

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We, this was an interview I understand about Sam White. And He lived in a little house across the street from our house. So, our family spent a lot of time together. Sam was, as we called him uncle Sam,

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He was probably as close to being a brother of my dad and my uncle as anybody. Super respected by just about everybody. Young men like me would go to see him and hear stories and influenced them in

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not only flying but his philosophy on things and what's right and what's wrong. So I felt very, very close to Sam and as my brother did.

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And it's been a privilege to have known him.

3:29 Reid Bissen

All right.

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So yeah, like Richard said, This interview is going to be about Sam White. And so

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that's what the exhibit that we're going to be making this for. So why don't you tell me about the first time you met Sam?

3:48 Richard Wein

I really can't remember like I said, I grew up across the street from him. So I was pretty small.

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I think I don't remember when we moved to that house. But I was probably

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four or five years old and it just, Sam was always there. So I really can't focus on, you know, when I met him.

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When I was a little guy sometimes I'd get up in the morning before everybody else did. Sam was an early riser and I'd go knock on the door. He'd invite me in and sometimes feed me breakfast even though my mom was upset over that because she'd get breakfast ready and I said well I'd already eaten at Sam's. But, just early childhood memories and as I got older and

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got to know him more and better and appreciate him.

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And, a lot of flying experiences that he had and heard the stories

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and he had a lot of them. He's a good storyteller. Had a big booming voice. And I think in the book I wrote the preface to his book by Jim Rearden and I think that they used the term Sam was a giant of a man. I think both my brother and I kind of referred to him as that. He was giant

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in size, in voice and principles.

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Probably the most principled person that both my brother and I ever had the pleasure of getting to know. And we learned to live by a lot of his; he's a World War I vet, among other things, and didn't talk about that too much. He did talk about his early days in Maine

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and driving a lombard log hauler, which was quite a story.

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So you know, many, many stories that he told us that we're familiar with.

6:02 Reid Bissen

So what was that like getting to know him a little bit better when you were older? How did how did your relationship-

6:09 Richard Wein

Well, ironically,

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in 1955, I started commercial flying at a place called Bettles on the Koyukuk River, right, just the south part of the Brooks Range. And, going to school in the summer times I would fly the bush, what we called the bush, which was

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an airline, Wein airlines which I grew up in, they had the main line they called it, which was the larger airplanes, DC-3, C-46. Later F-27s.

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And over time,

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probably too young, I will made chief bush pilot

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and one of my pilots was Sam White, that worked for me. And I would give him his check rides and that was kinda awkward, I guess, because I was just a kid on his knee when he was flying but I tried to treat him with respect. And we kept him on, on the airline until he was in his seventies. And the place we had him based, we, they changed that so he retired

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from the airline at that time, which was hard on him he,

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he was, it gave a purpose in life, I guess.

7:45 Reid Bissen

So you said that he was a pretty good storyteller. What was your favorite story that he'd tell?

Richard Wein

Oh, there was so many. There are a lot of bear stories. You know, he he was a guy who

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my brother Merrill and I would call him the Daniel Boone of Alaska. You know, he grew up in Maine and as a teenager he was a big game guide.

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And you know, fought in World War One, he didn't want to talk about it much. And then he came to Alaska and worked for the Boundary Commission. You know, surveying the boundary and also he worked for US Geological Survey

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for many years before he started flying, doing triangulation around the state, in fact I've got some of his old maps, triangulation maps. And I haven't figured out a place to give them to. But, you know, when they're surveying they'd get basic places and then they'd shoot off of there when they need to survey something. So he walked all over Alaska and canoed, and then later he became a US Fish and Wildlife agent and traveled all over the interior.

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He was the only game management in the whole interior for many years and he had to cover that and try to convince, well not only the white people but the natives on how to conserve the game.

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If you kill off all the beaver in an area, you're not gonna get any more and that type of thing. And he, he was very good at,

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I think the Natives respected him and he treated them well. So the stories were just never ending.

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Bear or Wolves or childhood,

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being a steersman on the log, Lombard log hauler, people don't know what that is, but basically it was like a train engine with a big ski in front

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that you steered it with. And it would haul I don't know how many cars of, or flat cars on sleds,

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of lumber, you'll look at pictures of it, this little thing can pull all that. And what was amazing about it is there's no brakes on it. And so when you went over, when you went down a hill, they would put hay on the

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on the track. And the steersman, they had to negotiate that thing when it was kind of out of control. And he said they lost a lot of steersmen and

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they got paid very well. That's why he did it. Because the mortality rate was pretty high. Those are the kinds of stories we heard but but a lot of animals and hunting and, and flying stories he got a lot of them.

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I can tell you about a couple of them that were very significant to both my brother and I, because we loved him so much. And we were concerned about him. You wanna get into that now or later, whatever you want to do.

11:10 Reid Bissen

Ok. So yeah, one of those you said, one of those stories. One or two stories.

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Well, they're all in his book there's one that, early one that

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was of concern. He was flying for the Wein Airlines then and he was flying a Stinson and the rigging wasn't right on the skis. And when he got in a turbulence the skis, one ski went straight up and down and put the airplane in a spiral and he was gonna crash. Except in the process the other ski went down and now he could keep it straight but he was losing altitude rapidly so he was able to make it to a place called Circle City up by the Yukon and crashed wide open with the skis down on this runway and it broke him up pretty bad. He survived it but he had broken hips and one thing and another.

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And my dad flew up, bring him home and he wouldn't have anybody but my dad fly him home.

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So we remember seeing him in his bed and worried about him. The worst one was

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he went on his own as a bush pilot and based out of Ruby and he had an L-5

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there, the museum now has the fuselage of that airplane and he had

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a Stinson L-5.

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It was a base that was built for the military for the liaison aircraft. But it worked pretty good as a bush plane. And he had a cabin in Ruby and

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it was about 40 Below I guess and he was flying and he, came home and had a Coleman Lantern and he pumped it up, probably too much pressure and then hung it up

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in a little cabin with a stove going.

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It heated that gas to the point where it exploded. And fortunately he had long wool underwear on.

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But he was burned very seriously, mostly in his hands. And above the neck and everything.

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Pretty bad shape. And we got the word and my dad again went and picked him up and flew him to town and it made Merrill and I just sick to look at him. He was very badly burned. He over time recovered from that and worked his hands which were very stiff and was able to fly again.

Those were two very significant events

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that I remember and and that upset my older brother and me a lot.

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So those were a couple of bad ones. He had other kind of, like all pilots, other experiences, you know, just in the days of

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no airports and float flying and ski flying, there was always a lot of adventures. I even, I came later

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You know, he was flying in the 30s and 40s and I started flying in 1955. Bush flying. But I was still flying the Norsemen and Beavers and the early 180s and all that. So I experienced scud running and then I'd run mail. When, the early days we served I think it was a hundred and thirty five communities. Anywhere from larger ones to very small villages and I think less than half

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of those places had a runway. So we had to find a lake or a river, gravel bar or land on a river, on skis,

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or something like that. So there was even when I did it, it was an adventure, but I had better equipment more modern. And Sam and particularly my dad had

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very early biplanes with earlier engines that weren't reliable. And Sam came a little bit later and had better engines, but still biplanes, open cockpit. And I think what was significant about Sam

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and even while he learned to fly, he became very good friends with my dad and, and my uncle Ralph. And he would

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you know, he traveled all over the interior in dog teams and snowshoes and Fort Yukon was one place that he'd go in a lot because it was a central point for that upper upper Yukon. And the trappers had to get their beavers tagged and that type of thing. So he would trek up to Fort

Yukon, which was above 140 miles. And he'd hear this noise and here an airplane would go and pretty soon it would come back. And he got to thinking about that and that he, you know, how much more area he could cover. And kind of the rest was history.

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And he couldn't he couldn't get the US Fish and Wildlife. Everything was Federal then. There was no state. It was a territory. So it was the US Fish and Wildlife that he worked for.

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And he kind of proposed to them that they buy him an airplane and he learn to fly so that he could cover more ground faster. And they didn't see the feasibility of it at that time and so on his own time with his own money he bought an airplane. And it wasn't the Swallow that he bought, it was a, I'm trying to think of the name of it. It was a parasol, in other words it had an upper wing. It's in the book, the name of the airplane. But it didn't work out very well. And he

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he sold that and bought the Swallow, which did work out. I think my dad

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went to Valdez where it came in and flew back with him. But basically my, mostly my uncle and my dad taught him how to fly. And he was always very beholding to him.

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And I think the other thing that was so significant, I think about it a lot was the bond between Sam and the Wein family was just unbreakable. He would do anything for the family and we would do anything for him.

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The other thing about Sam was

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worldly things didn't mean a thing to him.

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People from Maine, he was very popular in Maine. Kind of a legend there too. And they would send him things that he, they

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knew he liked. He loved ginger ale. And he always had ginger ale. And he liked the maple syrup from Maine. So they would ship up gallons. And, and he would just give a lot of it to other people. And

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his wife Mary was just a wonderful gal. He met her in Fort Yukon, she was a nurse.

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And they were just a great couple, she, you know she was, she was not an outgoing person or an outdoors person at all. But she dearly loved Sam and kept the home fires burning and

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very active in her church, just a wonderful lady. And she was the same way. If somebody gave her a Christmas present, and she didn't need it, she would give somebody else. And I was the executor of his estate when he died.

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And there just wasn't much there at all. He didn't have a lot of savings or anything. He was one of those, kind of the old school of

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I don't need any more than I need to live on. And just an extremely generous person on top of everything else.

19:30 Reid Bissen

Alright, so moving to Well, you mentioned his philosophy on things.

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In Jim Rearden's book that we've been referencing about Sam white, you mentioned in the preface you wrote that he had a philosophy about the law that maybe made him unpopular to some when he was enforcing the game laws. Could you maybe explain or expand on what you mean by that?

Richard Wein

Yeah, he, that was one of his principles. Where he got in trouble

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and when he left fish and game was when the military came up here. They expected to not to have to adhere to federal laws and Sam got crosswise with them

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and he was not supported by his superior in enforcing the law.

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So that was one issue. And then you had trappers, early trappers, white people, and you had the natives. But

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he was the first one to enforce it. And they didn't like it. He did the best he could to convince people it was for their own good.

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Because you wipe out the moose in the valley or with a beaver muskrats, or whatever you do

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they're not going to come back. And so I think he was dearly loved by,

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for what he was and who he was, by many people. But, but a lot of people didn't like him because he

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enforced the law.

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He would never be subject to bribes or anything. He did, though. I will say this he did when people needed the meat, natives and so forth. living off the land. He'd recognize that, and they've been doing it for centuries. That

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you know, I guess you can say he turned his head but he basically understood

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what the laws and rules were about. And they weren't about those people, you know. They were more about, with those people, don't kill the game until there's no more.

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It's just like having a cattle ranch, you know, you gotta, you gotta keep improving the herd and all that. So yeah, there were, I've known trappers and people that hated the ground he walked on.

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But I also know that they were not used to abiding by anybody's rules.

22:15 Reid Bissen

And then in terms of Sam as a person over the time, you know, the decades maybe that you knew him? How did you see him change as a person over time?

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I think that's one thing about Sam, there was no change. You couldn't change him.

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He, right was right and wrong was wrong, period.

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I don't think today with the way the world is now with our youth and what's happening, it would be very hard for Sam to survive in it.

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He had a code, you know, and, and it was what he was taught and, and lived by.

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He wasn't a hypocrite in any way, like I said he was extremely generous and

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loved nothing better than for my dad and my brother and I to go hunting with him, which we did a few times.

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But he,

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there was a lot of young people in town, some of them, most of them would be pilots that view Sam the way I do. He was extremely influential to them and their life.

23:23 Reid Bissen

Alright, and then we mentioned some of his plans earlier, the Stinson L-5 as well as the Swallow TP.

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Did Sam ever talk about the planes? Or, relate to me how Sam would talk about the different planes that he owned.

23:46 Richard Wein

Yeah, he, you know, one of the airplanes that we got early on was a Cessna 170.

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And one thing about Sam as he carried enough emergency gear that he could land anywhere, and put up a tent, a stove and be very comfortable. He'd be more happy there than if you had him in the finest hotel in New York. Lots of times he'd be flying instead of bucking the snow or whatever he called in on the radio. I'm sitting down at this fork of the river, and be in tomorrow. So he, these little airplanes like we had,

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the Cessna 170s didn't have a very big payload.

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He complained about them. He said it sounded like a sewing machine when he'd open the throttle because it didn't make enough noise and vibration. And he liked the airplanes like the Fairchild 71 and the Bellanca, Traveler. The bigger airplanes with more skookum

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fit him.

24:43 Reid Bissen

Alright. Did he ever mention the Swallow very much?

Richard Wein

Not too much. We didn't talk about the Swallow much other than I knew about it, and he and I think my dad talked about it. My dad talked a lot about it. My dad was a great storyteller

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and had so many of them and wrote up, did a lot of writing about his adventures and stories. And I don't know if you've read his book.

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It's a very well written book, written by a guy by the name of Ira Harkey. He was a Pulitzer Prize winner, and was a visiting professor at the University.

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And the folks got a contract with him to write a book. I think he did, he was very good at capturing the essence of my dad. And there's a lot in there about Sam White

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and the mutual respect they had,

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stories.

25:43 Reid Bissen

So tell me one thing that you would want the public or really just the everyday person here in Fairbanks, one thing that you would want them to know about who Sam White was?

25:57 Richard Wein

Well, I guess you know, there are, there are legends and icons, early pioneers that came,

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and rightly so, people like Joe Crossen, Harold Gillam.

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I knew both of them at Weeks Field, I didn't know Eielson, he died before I was born

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Bob Reeve, you know, pioneered the Aleutians.

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You had the boys in the southeast, Shell Simmons and Bob Ellis formed airlines.

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And, you know, there you had the swashbuckling

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bush pilots. To me, Sam was a legend and an icon. Not so much of what he did but who he was and what he was about. In addition to being a very good pilot, and a lot of aviation experiences.

27:01 Reich Bissen

And then, in terms of

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not just Alaska aviation, but maybe just Alaska, history or industry, maybe hunting in general, in your opinion, where would Alaskan aviation be without Sam White? Where, would maybe in terms of hunting, since that was more of his specialty, but what was his biggest contribution?

Richard Wein

Definitely, I would say that it was, he was the first person ever to

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manage fish and game with an airplane. We don't know of anybody, even in Canada.

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He did it on his own on his own fuel. Later on, they started to see the significance of it and financed some of it.

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As far as a pioneering person, that's what he pioneered.

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And so if you had to look at one thing that, that he stood out to the public would be the first person, at least in Alaska and we think anywhere in the world

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to use the airplane in game management. Big deal.

28:15 Reid Bissen

Do you think that, or maybe what do you think,

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the wildlife, where would wildlife be at this point without and without the regulation and enforcement that he brought? What do you think might have happened?

28:29 Richard Wein

Well, it really covers a pretty broad area.

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He loved moose, didn't like wolves.

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And the whole wolf, moose, caribou issue has always been controversial. There are wolf lovers, because they're a very keen, smart animal.

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And

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nobody wants to wipe them out. But, but, you know, through the hundreds of thousands of years, I guess, that the wolf provide, provided a

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balance in nature. But you interject man into it. When a wolf pack would move into an area and wipe out all the game and a village was living there depending on it

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they don't like the wolves. And there was a period in the 50s, I remember it, when aerial wolf hunting was very, very prominent. I mean, a good pilot and gunner could take a hundred wolves out of an area.

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And in fact, the lower Koyukuk had been decimated for game.

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There's books about how the natives starved because the wolves just wiped them out. You know, the problem with a wolf is there's a,

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I guess a misconception that they want to kill the weak and the wounded or something like that but they're very efficient killers,

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especially with a pack and they're very smart. And when they set out to kill a moose, they did.

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And in a lot of cases they killed the caribou or the reindeer herds just for fun, that's just what they did. They were bred to do it.

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And they would eat the tongue and a few other important parts and leave the rest of the animal there. Of course other animals and birds, you know, lived off of them

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but like I said it's a very controversial thing. I think what is attempting, that they're attempting to do and I think a pretty good job of helping the balance.

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There's no, they do aerial surveys with the wolves and I know some pilots that do that for fish and wildlife, fish and game,

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and when it gets to be too much and they can see an area adversely affected by them then they authorize some killing of them. They are a magnificent animal.

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I've seen them from the air and watched them work. They're very smart.

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And so I'd say as far as Sam is concerned he helped set the standards, a lot of the standards, on game management and balance.

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He was big on that, you know for a guy that, no college education or didn't study, you know, fish and wildlife in college. He was just out there in it all the time and could see it.

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Another good book that deals with that would be, there was a guy, Jim Rearden wrote the book again, it's about they called him wolf man of Alaska.

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I'll think of his name in a minute. I met him when I was young. But he really lived out with them and did a lot of predator control.

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Glasser I think is his name. I'll think about it. If you want an interesting book about that subject it's probably the best. There's a lot of books written, some of them like Never Cry Wolf was just fiction but it became the Bible of wolf lovers.

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And I know that because I interviewed some Canadian biologists about the book and they know about him and when I asked what they thought about him they said well it's okay if you like fiction.

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I said, no I read the book and it sounded good to me. And he said you know, no, he just spent a couple weeks and wrote this thing.

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But Frank Glasser is the guy's name. Wolf man of Alaska. And he watched and observed so much of the interface between the game.

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Like I said, it's very controversial. There are people who don't want any wolves killed and others do for different reasons.

33:34 Reid Bissen

Alright. So back in the early days, you know, 20s, 30s, navigation without instruments was a must for flying. So, tell me a little bit about Sam's navigation skills. How was he as a navigator?

33:50 Richard Wein

I think he was alright. I never heard of him getting lost. Now when my dad first came there were no maps.

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It was in '24. There were no airports and there were no maps. Fortunately even though he was not highly educated, I think he made it through the eighth grade before he started flying and came up here.

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He had a photographic mind, memory, on terrain. I've never seen anybody like it. And he said if I ever went anywhere I always knew what it was about.

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He just seemed to have a, okay there's a mountain here, there's a river there and I'll remember that. I was not that way at all, I got lost all the time, you know, because the maps weren't accurate.

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Sam, back to Sam, had some advantage of some maps and he'd walked all over so he had pretty good knowledge of the terrain and everything.

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I don't think Sam had ever that I know . He might have struggled with navigation. You know you get in a snowstorm you can't see very far, pretty easy to get lost. Sam, if he didn't know where he was he would just land and pitch his tent.

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I'll could tell you when I started flying in the Brooks Range, I just, I could fly the airplane, but it was the navigating. Even in the fifties it was my nemesis because the maps, a lot of them were not accurate.

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And when I started flying up in north of the Brooks Range in the fifties, late fifties, they were just started aerial photo mapping of the Brooks Range.

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Like a map of the Brooks Range was just blank. You had maps of the Brooks Range and then when you got to the north slope it was uncharted, they say. So you just didn't know, and you know so I did experience flying without a map

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and I can only appreciate what my dad and others had to go through. But I've never heard of Sam getting lost or going down because he didn't know where he was.

36:15 Reid Bissen

Is there anything else you would want to share about Sam White?

36:20 Richard Wein

No, just, there's so many things I could talk about but I tend to get going on subjects too much.

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Just, I think, I'd like to go by my initial statement that both my brother and I characterized him as a giant of a man. And in our view he's an icon.

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You know, more than Wiley Post or famous fliers. Of course people like Jimmy Dolittle, they're icons too and in some certain way Post was.

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But in a different way we see Sam as a true icon, and a man of absolute integrity.

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And for his period fit the profile of what it took to survive and be respected.

37:32 Reid Bissen

Ok. Well that's all the questions I had for today,

37:37 Richard Wein

Okay.

Reid Bissen

So, thank you for your time, thank you for your knowledge about Sam. So yeah, there's nothing else

37:46 Richard Wein

Well he's a fun guy to talk about and I enjoy telling stories. My wife, you know, has characterized me as a bridge between the old and the current because I grew up around the guys

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and I wasn't a pioneer in any way. It had all been done before but I knew those that did pioneer. And so I'm gonna write my, I'm doing memoirs now.

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I'm not very good at it, but working on it. Some stories that I dealt with and knew of others and so forth. So, doesn't come easy for me but working on it.

38:30 Reid Bissen

Alright, we'll look forward to those in the future then.

Richard Wein

We'll see.

38:35 Reid Bissen

We'll see. Perfect. Okay.

[38:38 End Recording]