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Sig Wien

1963

Fairbanks, Alaska

Tanana Yukon Historical Society meeting

Sig Wien was born in Wisconsin in 1903. His dad moved up to Minnesota where he took a homestead when Sig was two years old. His brother, Noel learned to fly in 1921 and went barnstorming. In 1923 he brought one of the planes to the farm. Sig taxied the plane up and down the farm fields. Noel taught him to fly in 1925. Sig later soloed in 1930. Noel bought a plane and decided to fly it to Nome, Alaska. The trip took sixteen days. They landed in Fairbanks on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December. They landed in Nome on Christmas Eve. Sig worked as a mechanic at Weeks Field for many years. He obtained his licenses in Oakland, California. In 1937 he had his commercial pilot's license. He flew out of Nome and Barrow. The business continued to grow. He had to give up his flying and took on an office job.

There were many pilots and firms that had operations in Alaska. His brother, Noel, decided to go into the flying business. In 1924 he decided to go to Alaska to fly. Noel was asked to come to Alaska to fly a plane for Jimmy Rotabaugh. The following year it was proved that there were great possibilities in aviation. The miners and trappers saw it was easier to get around by air rather than by dog team. A group of people in Fairbanks organized to buy a larger airplane. There was only one cabin airplane available. It was a Fokker. Noel went back to New York to negotiate for the plane. It was shipped to Fairbanks and assembled in Fairbanks. Noel did a great deal of flying with the Fokker. It was a plywood covered wing. After the first year it was in bad shape. In 1925 Noel asked another brother Ralph to maintain the airplane. Fritz came up a couple of years later to join his brothers. They bought a Stinson biplane and placed it into service. It was the first cabin plane to be built in the U.S. The business continued to grow. In 1928 they purchased a Hamilton metal plane. This was a new production and considered a luxury aircraft in its day. Noel taught Ralph to fly. In 1927 the Wien brothers obtained a mail contract from the government. It was the first mail contract held by a carrier in Alaska. Eielson had carried the mail as a post office employee.

In 1930 his brother, Ralph, died in an airplane aircraft in Kotzebue. He was in a diesel powered aircraft. The cause of the accident was never determined. The airplane was owned by the Catholic missionaries of Alaska. Two priests also died in the accident. [comments from someone in the audience that cannot be understood, Robert Sheldon?] Sig came to Alaska after Ralph died in Kotzebue.

His brothers had sold their concern to a firm headed by Ben Eielson before Sig came to Alaska. The large corporation was American Airlines which was later taken over by Pan American. Noel started another organization. He purchased Blanca aircraft from the Catholic missionary society in Alaska. He merged with another firm in Nome. He established an office in Fairbanks called the Northern Air Transport. The merged company later became the Wien Alaska Airlines.

Sig was the mechanic for the airline. Later he took on active flying duty. In 1940 Noel asked Sig to take over the position of president of the company. Since 1940 their company has continued to grow. They have been affected by problems. They never had

aircraft specifically for Alaska use. They used many types of aircraft. Through the years they looked for aircraft to use in the Bush. Sig went to look at a Swiss aircraft. He saw the possibilities. It was designed to land on glaciers at high elevation. It had ample wing area. They installed a large door on it. Andy Anderson (one of the airline pilots that flew for the Wiens) wondered how the people in Switzerland knew what he needed in Alaska. The later runs had turbine engines. It was the first turbine single engine aircraft in the United States. Sig thought American manufactures didn't produce a product that they could use in Alaska so they had to go elsewhere. [long comment from someone in the audience again that cannot be understood]

Sig said there were many different pilots and airplanes in those days. They didn't have radio in the aircraft and there were very few prepared airfields. Pilots used river bars, mountain tops and beaches.

He talks about the airplane that made the first trip between the eastern and the western world. Noel had made a run to Siberia to pick up a load of furs. Eielson later lost his life on this route.

He told a story about one of his flights. After the war he was flying out of Barrow for the Navy. His company had a contract with the Navy. They were helping to establish the Barter Island Base. The Navy wasn't sure about the area so they wanted radar screens established. They faced the ocean. They were to be every fifty miles along the coast between Barrow and Barter Island. They wanted one on Cross Island. A crescent shaped sandbar. He landed on the island and checked out the area to see if it was suitable for take off. The plane was stuck on a soft spot when they took off and was damaged. They returned the next day. The float plane that brought them back was beached but it drifted out to sea. Phil St. Clair tried jumping into the freezing water but couldn't stay in for very long. Sig ran out to the other end of the island, jumped on a barrel and used driftwood and a shovel to paddle out to the airplane. He made it back to shore and they repaired the damaged aircraft.

Sig said he thought their flying record was pretty good. Bush flying introduces a lot of hazards. There aren't many fields to land on. They were using skis and floats. In the bush aircraft field there were casualties.

Sig talked about carrying dog teams. The first rates were a thousand dollars and gradually they kept getting lower and lower.

The first aircraft were open. It wasn't a very comfortable ride for the pilot. They didn't have brakes. The pilot was handicapped on short runways.

The first commercial flight between Fairbanks and Nome was in 1925. They couldn't get through because of the weather and they landed at Ruby. It was during the breakup period and the field was soft. The plane ended up on its nose with a broken propeller. They passengers hired a boat to finish their trip to Nome. Noel phoned back to Fairbanks and a propeller was brought to Ruby by Ralph. They fixed the plane and landed in Nome before the passengers came in on the boat.

[another comment from the audience]

On Noel's first flight to Wiseman on the return trip he encountered strong winds on the return trip. He was drifting off course and he ended up landing on the Kantishna River outside of Nenana. He started walking the forty miles to Nenana. He was soaking wet and had to build a fire from time to time to dry out. He hiked for three days and lost twenty or

thirty pounds. [comments from the audience that can not be understood, Robert Sheldon?]

Sig said routine flights weren't very interesting. He was flying out to Diomed Island during the war. They landed on the ice between the islands. On one trip they had Gruening, Muktuk Marston and others. He picked them up as usual and took off for the mainland. As always he was concerned about the functioning of the engine. Just at the half-way point his oil pressure gauge started going down. He decided to return to Diomed Island. The pressure kept going down and down. When they got to the island he cut the engine and glided in for a landing. His oil cooler had busted, but he had pressure when he took off.

Questions from the audience, most of the questions can not be heard:

Sig said bush pilots have the habit of looking for possible places to land in an emergency. Someone asked about Will Rogers's crash. Sig said it was established that they had flown for quite a while and their fuel was low. When they left the water they made a steep climb and the gas was not able to get to the carburetor. It came down quite steeply. Sig said the weather was poor but they did a good job of navigation. The maps weren't very dependable so they were traveling by compass. [long comment from the audience about the accident]

Question about what types of airplanes they operate. Sig described the types of aircraft they currently have in their inventory. They have thirty-five airplanes total.

A question from the audience that can't be heard. Sig talked about making note of topographical details for navigation such as rivers and mountains. The compass was always used, too.

They never had a service to Juneau. Noel had made a number of trips to Juneau. They do run charter runs and are hopeful to have a deal with Pan-American.

Sig talked about the prices of flights. They did not have intention of raising flight prices. They have about 330 people on the payroll.

Sig said one of the LSTs was left at Barter Island. He said there weren't any other bases between Barter Island and Barrow at the time he worked there.

Sig talked about the decision to approve a new air route. Since Whitehorse is on the proposed route it needs presidential decision. The Alaska delegation has done a great deal to help it along.

Possibly talked about his brother's crash in Kotzebue. Weather was not a factor in the crash.

Sig talks about the function of the flaps on the plane. Nowadays most of the airplanes have a smaller wing for the airplane so they use flaps for landing and takeoff.

[comments from the audience that can not be understood]

Question about the first flight from Fairbanks to Seattle in a small plane. He wasn't sure which flight that was. Chester Baring took off from Nome to Barrow. They flew up the coast and took some photos. Noel instructed Sig to prepare a Blanca plane for the flight to Seattle. They were carrying extra fuel in the cabin which was connected to the tank. He landed in Whitehorse and received word that the other aircraft was leaving Juneau for Seattle. Noel took off from Whitehorse and Noel landed six hours before the Juneau plane. Noel was flying a single-engine Blanca.