



July 28, 2010

Selection Committee  
Colorado Aviation Hall of Fame 2010  
Colorado Aviation Historical Society  
7711 East Academy Building  
Denver, CO 80203-6929

Dear Committee Members:

It is my great pleasure to nominate Gordon F. Autry to the Colorado Aviation Hall of Fame.

Mr. Autry learned to fly at Sky Ranch Aviation, which was owned by Don Vest. He became a flight instructor at age 21 and was hired by Ken R. White Engineering Company because of his skills in Photogrammetry. Gordon flew extensive photogrammetric missions including the international boundary of Mexico, dams and lakes for the Bureau of Reclamation, and the survey of Colorado's mountainous section of the I-70 Federal Highway Project. Gordon credits his ten years with Ken R. White for his practical business management experience.

Mr. Autry founded Vail Airways after gaining non-stop route authority; Denver-Eagle (DEN-EGE), from the Colorado Public Utilities Commission in 1965, and service was inaugurated February 1966 with two round trips daily utilizing a Cessna 185 and twin-engine Aero Commander. Gordon installed an NDB for a non-precision approach to the airport, installed runway lights, and constructed a modular building designed as a passenger terminal. By the end of the first year the airline had transported 240 passengers over its first mountain route.

With the first route in place, Gordon sought a second route to Aspen (ASE), and with his attorney, Robert Wham, began the regulatory process with the Colorado Public Utilities Commission. Aspen Airways fought the fledgling airline with everything in its tool box. A strategy was devised whereby in addition to the DEN-ASE non-stop route that was desired, Vail Airways would ask for two one-stop routes: DEN-EGE-ASE and DEN-Leadville (LXV)-ASE in hopes they would get one route. The Colorado P.U.C. awarded all three routes in 1968, and the airline's name was changed to Rocky Mountain Airways (RMA).

RMA constructed a larger modular building at ASE for its passenger terminal and installed an NDB for non-precision approaches.

The Leadville route began June 1969 after RMA installed an NDB. LXV was flown as a 'flag-stop.' The 'flag-stop' procedure consisted of a reservation and a phone booth that sat next to a hangar on the airport. A passenger that had a reservation would go to the airport 15-20 minutes before scheduled arrival time of the aircraft and call the RMA toll free reservation number from the phone booth. Upon verification that the passenger was at the airport, reservations would call dispatch and the enroute aircraft would be instructed to make a LXV stop.

Leading edge technology characterized RMA from its inception. While most carriers relied on federal navigation aids, RMA consistently bought, installed and operated its own equipment whenever those devices could contribute to the safety, expansion of services and schedule reliability. Gordon coupled leading edge technology with his unique gift of boot-strap ingenuity and brought a level of service to the Colorado mountain resorts that has yet to be equaled.

Rocky Mountain's most significant contributions to Colorado aviation was the development of all-weather, day/night service to mountain airports by making full use of STOL technology. The program required a unique aircraft and unique ground-based navigational aids. RMA purchased the de Havilland Twin Otter and de Havilland Dash-7. Both aircraft were selected for their unique qualities as descendants of bush country airplanes designed to operate off short landing strips in geographically confined areas. Rocky Mountain Airways was the first airline in the world to introduce the Dash-7, which was particularly suited to the mountains because of its outstanding takeoff and landing performance and unique environmental characteristics.

Non-precision approaches allowed the airline all-weather capability, but better approaches were desired, and in 1972 RMA entered into a joint study program with Singer Kearfott to evaluate and provide the necessary documentation for a microwave landing system (MLS), a full-precision approach called "TALAR" A system that had been developed for military use in Southeast Asia to permit precision landing approaches in terrain and weather conditions that would distort conventional radio beam Instrument Landing Systems (ILS).

Company-owned MLS were installed in SBS and ASE in 1973. In addition to TALAR, RMA installed electronic aids at SBS and ASE including strobes, obstruction lights, Visual Approach (VASI) lights and runway lights. RMA established Supplementary Aviation Weather Reporting Stations (SAWRS) for its own use in SBS and WHR, which were approved by the National Weather Service.

RMA carried over a million people to the ski areas in its fleet of unpressurized, 19-passenger de Havilland Twin Otter. Passengers often imitated the two-man crew by removing the oxygen mask and sucking on the tube.

Because de Havilland Aircraft of Canada had such a high level of respect for Gordon, a number of modifications were made to the Dash-7 based on his input. RMA was the first operator in the world to operate the Dash-7, beginning 1978. The 50-passenger aircraft was modified to a 48-passenger configuration for RMA to accommodate more baggage. The Dash-7 was particularly suited for mountain airports because of its outstanding takeoff and landing performance and unique environmental characteristics. The Dash-7 could make the highest approach angle of any commercial aircraft in service, at 8 degrees. It could also operate on runways as short as 2000 feet at sea level. The four--engine aircraft was very quiet with minimum atmospheric impacts. An air-conditioned and pressurized cabin with lavatory and beverage galley brought a significant upgrade to the service offered.

Gordon's pioneering spirit led the way for RMA to be first Airline to be approved for high angle approaches using airline funded and installed microwave landing systems (MLS),- the first

airline to operate Part 135 drift down (engine out), the first airline to rewrite regulations for 'required de-icing equipment, and the first airline to operate a Transport Category STOL aircraft.

Fall of 1971 RMA began preparations for Steamboat service with the Twin Otter by installing an NDB in the valley southeast of town and constructing the company's third passenger terminal on the Steamboat Airport. The FBO had all land on the airport locked up and was unwilling to work with RMA. Gordon convinced the Routt County Commissioners to lease the dirt cross-wind runway to the airline. Using the same plans as the ASE terminal a modular was ordered for SBS and the site was prepared by pouring a stem wall foundation, drilling a well for potable water and installing a holding tank for sewage. The drillers hit brackish looking water that smelled like sulfur and could only be used for hand washing and flushing. Winter set in before the ramp and parking lot could be paved. Nevertheless, service began January 1, 1972, and RMA had its third ski destination. The end of winter brought the 'mud season' and RMA personnel had new challenges. The twin otter could taxi through the mud to the terminal but passengers were not eager to wade through the mud to get to the terminal. The solution was the construction of wooden boardwalks to get passengers to the terminal and then part way to the parking lot. It was not uncommon for the Station Manager to use his jeep to pull passenger vehicles to the highway so they could begin their trip to town. After the passengers were gone, the mud in the terminal was cleaned with a snow shovel. Gordon's pioneering spirit encouraged employees in every aspect of their responsibilities.

The three resort destinations were beginning to develop a year-round market by selling summer activities as well as winter which would help the seasonal airline balance its personnel and equipment. During 1972 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Twin Otter was acquired, establishing a one-a- year program, and annual boarding's exceeded 73,000 passengers.

The airline continued to grow reaching the 124,000+ mark in 1976. Then during the winter of 76/77, the ski areas experienced a disaster in the form of a snow drought. The importance of service to the new route of Colorado Springs (COS), a non-ski market, made an impact on the heretofore recreational carrier. COS manifested itself as a business market, yet it also drew a summer recreational market, adding to RMA's year-round demand.

The year 1978 was a milestone year. The fleet of Twin Otters now numbering 6 gave way to the most sophisticated short-haul airliner in the world, the Dash-7. RMA was not only the first carrier in the United States, but also the first in the world to put the Dash-7 into service in January 1978. The Dash-7 came into service as the second generation STOL aircraft, having all of the short field takeoff and landing abilities of the Otter, yet adding full creature comforts within its spacious pressurized cabin. To those neighbors on the ground, the Dash-7 was the most environmentally perfect airline in use. In laymen's terms, its footprint on landing didn't leave the airport property; in fact, the Dash-7 with four engines, was quieter than the two-engine Twin Otter. On the Dash-7', one flight attendant provided passenger amenities with on-board beverage service.

October 1978, Deregulation changed the airline industry dramatically. Overnight, airlines lost millions of dollars of value in their route authorities, and small communities began losing service. RMA notified the Colorado Public Utilities Commission that it would no longer file

schedules and fares with the state and it would drop service to Leadville. The P.U.C. notified RMA that it planned to continue the regulation of intrastate airline service. RMA pushed back and the P.U.C. agreed that Deregulation preempted state's rights to regulate intrastate transportation. Service to Leadville, Granby and Craig were discontinued during 1978.

During 1978 new service began to CYS, PUB, DRO and ALS, and annual passenger boarding exceeded 240,000.

January 1979, Air Transport World named Rocky Mountain Airways as "Commuter Airline of the Year."

Service to the Vail ski area required overflying the destination by 35 miles to EGE and then back-hauling passengers in RMA's limo service to the Vail Transportation Center. Flights to EGE were discontinued in 1979, and service began to RMA's privately funded and operated Avon STOLPORT which was only 7 miles from Vail and just across the road from Beaver Creek. The airline constructed the runway, ramp and terminal building. Strobes, obstruction lights, Visual Approach (VASI) lights and runway lights were installed as part of the TALAR microwave instrument landing system. The STOLPORT was dedicated by President Gerald Ford at an outside ceremony.

October 19, 1982, Mr. Autry was presented the Roderick L. Downing Award by Mr. Elery B. Jeppesen at the 55<sup>th</sup> Annual Colorado Transportation Conference held at the University of Denver.

Gordon gained nationwide attention from his peers after an article written by Hobart Rowen appeared in The Washington Post, Sunday, October 31, 1982. "*Airline Deregulation Tosses Baby Out With Bath.*" Mr. Autry was elected Chairman of the Regional Airline Association for 1983.

Out of 45 regional carriers nationwide, in 1982 RMA was ranked number #13. That same year RMA was listed as the 10<sup>th</sup> largest carrier at Stapleton International Airport, out-boarding Eastern, Ozark, Piedmont, Braniff, Aspen Airways, US Air, Mexicana, Northwest and Wien.

By 1982 the effects of deregulation were felt throughout the airline industry and the old way of doing business by the major, regional and commuter carriers was changing. Seventy percent of the traffic at Stapleton was divided evenly between United, Continental and Frontier Airlines. Frontier, a regional airline, had grown feeding UA and CO, but it began looking at long-haul routes and going to an all jet fleet. FL began service withdrawal to small communities throughout Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska. RMA expanded its routes, developing the "Wyoming Connection" and "River Run." New route opportunities allowed the airline to better balance its seasonal demand, but the post deregulation days brought demands from the major carriers to form alliances, effectively putting RMA in a position of feeding just one carrier, United Airlines.

Reservation systems were one of the primary tools for controlling competition, and United and American Airlines had developed the two dominating systems. RMA, at its inception, developed

its own reservation system using a card bin (visafile) to store 8 1/2" x 5 1/2" cards. Each card represented a flight and had 20 lines (one seat was overbooked). Names were entered onto the cards in pencil along with a call back number and reservation was confirmed. One hour before flight the name list was telexed to the boarding counter. RMA's first move into an automated system was the Braniff "Cowboy," an offshoot of its reservation system developed for commuter air carriers. The day Braniff shut down, RMA was in final negotiations to go onto the "Saber System", a move the airline was making to try to remain neutral in the Denver market. UA did not buy the 'neutral' position and RMA eventually became a United Partner, switching to the "Apollo" reservation system.

By 1983 Rocky Mountain airways was transporting just under 400,000 annual passengers and was ranked #11 among the large regional carriers operating in the United States, and #7 among air carriers operating at Stapleton International. By 1985 RMA was carrying more than 500,000 passengers.

Gordon is quick to give credit to RMA employees for the airline's success and growth. RMA employees were highly trained professionals. Their dedication to Gordon was displayed in sharing his pioneering spirit and following his lead of personal accountability and a tireless work ethic. The RMA family was close knit and the employees understood that success or failure was up to them.

The post-deregulation era was extremely unstable with the complete collapse of Braniff in 1982. Continental and Eastern Airlines suffered through severe financial crises and ended up bankrupt by 1989. Pan American suffered the same fate as it suddenly had to compete with new entrants such as Laker and People's Express. The number of major carriers in the United States fell from six in 1978—United, American, Delta, Eastern, TWA, and Pan Am—to three by 1991—United, American, and Delta. Ultimately, most of the big airlines suffered some sort of loss in the 1980s, either facing complete bankruptcy or less financial growth than hoped. Likewise, carriers serving small communities under the "Local Service Airline Experiment" like Frontier, Ozark, North Central, etc disappeared. Commuter air carriers that once numbered close to three hundred, merged or vanished.

Rocky Mountain Airways was sold to Texas Air and began operating as Continental Express in 1986 . There is no physical evidence of RMA today; however, the airline continues to live in the hearts and minds of its employees and the communities that fondly called it Rocky Mountain "Scareways"

Please give careful consideration to this nomination, and accept Gordon F. Autry into the Colorado Aviation Hall of Fame.

Sincerely,



Dennis R. Heap  
Executive Director