

INTERVIEW WITH LEROY WOOLRIDGE  
MAY 20, 1975  
AT THE HOME OF MR. WOOLRIDGE  
BY STEVE KOMULA

Q: Okay, tell me what kind of day it was today.

Well it was pretty cloudy and stormy.

Q: The date is May 20th, 1975. I'm research associate Steve Komula and we're in the home of Roy Woolridge in Morris, Stevens County Minnesota. Mr. Woolridge will tell us about his experiences as an early aviator in the Morris area and about his barnstorming activities throughout the Mid-West. Roy, when did you first buy your first airplane?

I bought it in the spring of April 1928.

Q: Where did you get it from?

We got it from Kansas City, Kansas. It was a Travel-Air, three place job. We flew it up from Kansas City to Morris and we landed here on April 6, 1928 about three o'clock in the afternoon.

Q: And it's you and who else?

Well It was mine at this time and then another party bought half interest in it after that.

Q: This was the first plane in Stevens County?

It was the first plane in Stevens County. It was the only one in Stevens County yes.

Q: I see. How did you happen to decide to buy an airplane?

Well when Lindberg flew the ocean that give me the inspiration. I went to Little Falls when he flew in there, that's his home town. I figured that the airplane business would be a coming thing. That's when I first got the inspiration to buy one.

Q: I see. You bought the plane new?

Brand new, yes.

Q: How much did it cost?

\$3200.00

Q: \$3200.00? What business were you in at the time you bought the plane?

I was in the pool hall business, at that time.

Q: I see. What did your family and friends say about your going off and quitting your, did you quit your business?

I sold out my business, yes.

Q: What did your family and staff say about quitting business and flying an airplane?

Well they all said I was crazy and said that was the end of Roy. But it didn't turn out that way. It turned out pretty good all the way through.

Q: So you intended to make money with it?

Yes.

Q: Right from the beginning?

By barnstorming.

Q: So what's the first, what all did you do now that you had your plane from Kansas City up here. What were some of the first things you did to get into barnstorming activities? With fairs and stuff?

Well after we landed here why we flew an awful lot of people in Morris. We give them a lot of rides and we charged them \$5 apiece at that time. We must have been here about three weeks before we started out on the tour barnstorming. Then we left here and went up in North Dakota and came down through Minnesota and made all the fairs on the way back to Morris. We got into Morris in September. Before this happened we happened to be in Minot, North Dakota and we saw Clyde Ice out there with this three motored Ford airplane. So we decided at that time, we'd try and get back to Morris and raise the money to buy one of them because he was doing such a terrific business with that plane out there when they dedicated the airport there. So we came back to Morris and started in and it wasn't long till we had enough money to make the down-payment on the airplane.

Q: You had how many people that put money into that?

There was ten of us that put the money up. It was \$20,000 we had to have. The plane cost \$49,000.

Q: So you had to put down \$20,000.

Yes. The payments were \$3400., almost \$3500. a month that we had to make. It was nothing to go out and pick up five to a thousand dollars a day with that plane.

Q: How did you go about getting this tri-motor then? After you had the money, \$20,000 raised.

We had to buy it through the Ford dealer.

Q: In town, the car dealership?

Yes. We couldn't go direct to the Ford factory. He gave us the recommendations and everything. We left Morris here and we went to Deerborn and we had the letter of recommendation. They knew we were coming so they greeted us and took us all through the factory and showed us how they built the plane and everything. They also gave us a ride in one over Deerborn.

(073-5 min.)

Q: Were they kind of surprised that a bunch of guys from Western Minnesota were coming to buy a...

They were not surprised because Ice had already bought one and they knew what he did with his airplane.

Q: I see. Clyde Ice was famous about the country?

Oh yes, all over the United States.

Q: Was he a barnstormer in smaller planes too?

Barnstormer in small planes, till he got the big one.

Q: When you went to these fairs and things in North Dakota and followed them down, were they county fairs and dedications of airports that you stopped at?

County fairs, yes.

Q: You were just on your own, you weren't affiliated with any other organization like carnivals or anything like that?

No, we always booked the affairs ahead of time and they would pay us. They paid us \$50 for doing the stunts out in front. We'd be up in the air in front of the grandstand where everybody could see us.

Q: You do the stunts with the small plane you got in Kansas City?

Little airplane, yes.

Q: You had a pilot hired that did most of the stunts?

Oh yes, we had a stunt pilot. He did all the stunts.

Q: He was with you for how many years?

He was with us about a little over a year, until we dissolved the partnership and sold it to another party.

Q: Did you sell the tri-motor the same time you sold the other one?

Yes, they both went.

Q: So you went around and went to these fairs and stuff. Most people had not seen planes close up, had they?

Very, very few planes around the country at that time.

Q: Were people scared to take rides or were they pretty...

That younger class, you know, weren't a bit afraid. They all wanted to take a ride. He was kept pretty busy.

Q: That was \$5 a ride usually? That was quite a lot of money to fork over at that time wasn't it?

Well in those days it was hard times you know. In '28, '29, and '30. It was a little tough but they'd dig up the money to get a ride.

Q: You said you did stunts in front of the grandstand and got paid \$50. What kind of stunts did you do?

Well we'd start out at a high altitude and we'd start out with loops and spins until we got down low and then I would crawl out on to the wing. We would come down to about 50 or 75 feet of the grandstand and I'd wave at the people in the grandstand.

Q: You'd be out on the wing?

Yes.

Q: Were the wings fiber or cloth?

The wings had two wooden spars that went clear out to the tip of the wing. You keep your feet on these wooden spars so you wouldn't fall through the canvas.

Q: You're not attached at all to the plane when you're doing that.

Well you hang on to the wires, sure.

Q:

Yes.

Q: And what did you say, you had some sort of trick with the lady and the stockings?

Well that was in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when we started south with the big airplane. The bankers son-in-law had us come to Tulsa, Oklahoma, and we stayed there about ten days. And on the Sunday we promoted this here, we had the girl hang by the silk stockings under the airplane. There was at least fifteen or twenty thousand people out at the airport that day and the Army Air Corp was just...wasn't over a half a mile from the missile airport. They all were over there and watched it. When they found out how we did it they were surprised.

Q: How did you do that?

All we did was put the parachute harness on her and run a steel cable and wrap the silk stockings around the steel cable.

Q: Did you have some local guy that was selling these stockings in the store or something?

Yes we went down to this store to get him to sponsor this act at the cost of \$500.00 to use his stockings, to hang her under the airplane with his stockings.

Q: And he sold stockings?

He was out of stockings in a few days.

Q: Did you have any other stunts that you did like...you didn't play tennis or badminton on the wings like I seen pictures of?

No, none of that stuff. Just common wing walking that's all. Later on they got up to where they stood on top of the thing and looped standing up and all this and that. That was all done with parachute harness, you're tied on there. You couldn't fall off there if you wanted to. It's just the matter of having the nerve to go up on the planes and loop. You just let yourself go with the plane.

(154-10 min.)

Q: And now, you were in with the planes how many years?

Two years.

Q: '29 to '31?

'28 and '29.

Q: While you were in it that short time was the aircraft industry and stuff growing quite rapidly in America?

There was new planes coming out all the time.

Q: So it was quite an exciting time to be involved.

There was new ones come out every once in a while. I know when the plane came out. It was a very good plane, very sturdy and everything. Really more well built than our airplane was. This travel air was a very fast plane. In fact, we had an air show down in Montevideo and there was a lot of planes that came out from Minneapolis at that time. We had a race and the airplanes had to come up over the field all in a line. When the fellow on the ground gave the smoke bomb that's when they opened up their airplanes. They had these pilings, three pilings to go around and I just forget how far they were apart, a couple of miles or so each way. Our pilot had experience in flying in Kansas City and when the smoke bomb went off he just pushed the stick straight forward and dove right straight to the ground wide open and he leveled off about five or six feet above the ground and he was almost a quarter a mile ahead of them in just a few minutes.

The rest of them had opened up their airplanes and flew straight ahead, they didn't get no place. He just opened her up and threw the stick ahead and away he went.

Q: Where did he get all this training, this pilot training?

Well down in Kansas City they had all that stuff.

Q: Was he a war pilot?

No, was no war pilot. These were just common guys that learned the business.

Q: Most of them were quite young, I imagine?

He was 22.

Q: How old were you at that time?

I was 28.

Q: So you were all quite young men in this new daring sport?

That's right. A...

Q: What were you going to say?

To get our route laid out we hired an advance man towards the last, because we had to stay with the airplane all the time. You know, keep it serviced, check it out and this and that. The advance man would go ahead and book the towns and he would always book through the Ford dealer. The Ford dealer would praise him up for bringing this big Ford airplane into town.

Q: So you'd do the stunts in the small plane and give rides in the big tri-motor?

We'd give rides in the little one too. Thrill rides. We'd give them cloud rides. Tell them the clouds were up there about eight or ten thousand feet and they'd only be up about two thousand feet. Then you would take them up above the clouds and bring them down into the clouds.

Q: Was it an open cockpit?

Yes.

Q: Two seater or how many seats?

Two seater and the pilot is all. The pilot set behind the passengers. Those cloud rides was really something boy. We always got extra money, \$15 we charged for that.

Q: So you made good money, you paid for your planes and made a quite good money at that business.

Yes, we made awful good money. But the money all had wings. That was the

trouble of it, it all flew away, same as the airplane.

Q: Same as the airplane. Why did you eventually get out of this flying business?

Well it was just at that time things were getting tough you know. In the '30s things were getting pretty tough.

Q: People weren't riding so much and the fairs were down and stuff?

And there were more airplanes coming in all the time. Competition was coming in. Wherever you'd go to a fair there would be three, four other planes sitting right beside you. In the '30s, they were coming in fast.

Q: And they were newer probably and from bigger cities and is quite...do tricks all the time I suppose? Do you remember any other especially good stunts that other fliers would pull?

Oh, we did about everything they could do. In the line of, I don't know of any other...oh yes, there was this guy from Iowa with this plane and he was the first one to fly on his back. He would fly her upside down, you know. I forget his name, but he was the first one in the world to fly an airplane upside down. He could do that just the same as we could fly right side up.

(234-15 min.)

Q: Was Willy Post in the aviation business at that time yet?

Post was, yes.

Q: Did he have that famous plane of his at that time? He had that beautiful plane, that whitish one.

Yes, Willy Post, we met him down in Brownsville, Texas.

Q: Oh, you met him down there?

Yes, he was there when we dedicated the airport there. That's when Lindberg flew the airmail in from Mexico City to Brownsville. He flew a Ford plane at that time.

Q: Was Ice down there too with you?

Clyde Ice was there with us and we had our plane. We had three Fords there that day.

Q: And you all flew together?

We flew in formation over Brownsville. They got some very good pictures and I wish I had one of them today. Boy, they were beautiful. Melie Erhardt was there also, and she took flying lessons on our airplane.

Q: Did you talk to these people?

Oh yes.

Q: What were they like?

We were all together.

Q: What was it like to know, to talk to these like Amelia Erhardt, and so on.

Oh, just the same as talking to you or anyone else. They were all common in those days. There was no big shots or anything, they were just common people. Very common.

Q: Did you get to know quite a few fliers while you were in this circuit like this?

Well, I got acquainted with Captain Eckert. He was the man that had his airplane there and had it roped off. He was the one that was going to fly from Brownsville to the Panama. From dawn to dusk he didn't quite make it. He had to land before he got there.

Q: Ran out of gas or something?

He didn't have enough gas to take him through.

Q: Weren't you saying something about those rich oil men down there used to hire you and...

We were at Sweet Water, Texas. We flew in that afternoon, it was kind of late and we decided not to fly that night. There was a big Cadillac pulled up out there and this guy walked over and, I forget what the fellow's name, would be here in a few minutes and he wanted to wait and have us talk to him. So it was about ten minutes and he came in another Cadillac. He said, "You're guests as long as you're in Sweet Water, Texas. That car over there and the chauffeur will take you any place you want to go. Do anything in Sweet Water while you're here." But he says, "Tomorrow morning I want to charter the plane to fly over my oil fields." We were out there the next morning and he was there with some other friends and we went out over the oil fields and he said, "If you look right ahead now, you'll see my oil wells. There was 36 of them, 36 oil wells. Oh boy, that was something to see, now don't think it wasn't. He paid us well for that trip.

Q: You took the tri-motor up?

Tri-motor, yes. We was' all in the tri-motor.

Q: Weren't you down there too when they had those roughnecks and the cops came and they tied up your plane....

At Oklahoma. When we flew in there it was like the old days, you know, gold rush or something like that you might say. The oil boom was on and the people come in there in covered wagons and any way at all to get there. When we landed the sheriff drove up alongside the airplane and he

says, "Boys you can't fly today." We asked him the reason why and he told us. He says, "We'll make arrangements at the hotel for you and we'll start flying in the morning. They put guards on the airplane overnight. The next morning we was out there and there was, well we estimated it about 15,000 at ten o'clock in the morning. We had to go to town and get a rope 200 feet long and they had to take hold of the rope and slide their hand up the rope to get into the airplane because everybody was pushing so. When we got the rope everything worked nice. We also had to put a rope around in front of the airplane because the motors were running and the people would go in every direction and we almost had 2 or 3 of them walk right into the propellers.

Q: Were they so surprised to see a plane or...?

Yes. Well that was the biggest in the country then, you know.

Q: The tri-motor was?

Yes, that was the biggest, there was nothing bigger. It would draw a crowd. We sure did draw the people.

Q: A lot of people who were with you, not necessarily your bunch, but other fliers, do you know what motivated them to get into the flying game.

Well it's about, I'd say about the same as what I got. The thrill of the thing and everything. After you had a ride and flew one of them **once** why you wanted to live in it. That's the way it was.

Q: And Lindberg's flight and promotion after it, after his flight was a...

I would say that is what set it off, right after he flew the ocean. Many, many thousand airplanes were sold after that. They had airplanes in the First World War, I was in the First World War. I've seen many dog fights. The airplanes would fly about 80, 85 miles an hour. They only carried two bombs, one under each wing, so if you seen one of them drop you knew it would be further down before the other would drop. They never dropped both of them at the same time.

(338-20 min.)

Q: Linderg did something that no man had done before, one man fly alone, non-stop. Airplaning had come quite a bit of age by Lindbergs time, hadn't it been sophisticated up? Made a...

Well he flew in '27.

Q: Was in the war. The Wright Brothers flew 26 years before that, only 22 years before that.

Yes, but to build these airplanes and the motors and everything you see, that there boomed right there.

Q: Did you have quite a bit of experience by the time you were done as an airplane mechanic?

Well I used to run a garage here in town, Buick-Chevrolet garage. I was in the battery and electrical business and so on like that. We did all kinds of mechanical work, so it was more simple for us to take care of the airplane.

Q: What happened when you decided to get out? What happened to these planes, you sold them right out?

Well a fellow by the name of Jack O'Brien here in Morris bought us all out. He paid us all out and we quit, that's all there was to it. He had a fellow fly up to Minneapolis and then he hired a pilot down there that didn't have too much experience with Ford tri-motors. There was a Canadian basketball team who wanted to go to Kansas to play basketball and they chartered this plane to fly them down. So they got down there and one motor cut out and they didn't have altitude enough, he wasn't flying high enough, he was only flying about 800 feet the way they told me and this outboard motor cut off and he got down and he couldn't get it back and it just spun right into the ground. Now if he had been an experienced pilot flying he would have shut the other outboard motor off and opened the center one up and flew it as a single engine plane. He'd have righted it before it hit the ground.

Q: So would you say that the years you were flying were some of the most exciting years that you spent?

Oh ho, exciting I'll tell you. Every day was exciting, don't think that it wasn't. Cause I'll tell you it...

Q: Did you ever have the urge to go back into it again after you sold out during the...

I never had enough money to go back into it.

Q: It got pretty expensive after those initial years to operate. Over the years I suppose it got more and more expensive to own a plane and operate one.

Well it...see we could land on any pasture field there was. Then the regulations came on and that's when it hurt. That's what hurt the flyers.

Q: Those were the golden years when you were first involved in that?

Yes, lots and lots of fun flying across the country. We could fly at any altitude we wanted to, in fact, we did a lot of hedge hopping. Up over the buildings and down. If there's any chickens in the yard they'd all go in the barn and pigs go in the barn and everything.

Q: No radios or control towers?

All we had was an altimeter.

Q: No flight plans really? You didn't make a flight plan?

No. We had a Rand-McNally map and we'd charter flight on that drawing.

Q: How did you tell exactly where you were going? Did you look at... was there names on top of the lumberyards in those days?

No there wasn't anything. But if you're up in the air here and you cross Morris you could see it right on the map. The railroad is running northwest here and southeast. You're going towards Marshall.

Q: You never had to dive down and see what the road signs said or anything?

Oh no, you could read them all up at a thousand or fifteen hundred feet easily.

Q: Have you been up in planes a lot since those days?

No, I had the opportunity to fly a helicopter out here at the airport one Sunday, two years ago. I flew that over Morris. I told him I'd go in it if he let me take hold of the controls. He says, "Okay." I flew it down around Morris and then he landed it. I didn't know much about landing a helicopter because you have to work your blades and stuff. It flies exactly like an airplane, turn it, bank it or anything you want to, very simple.

(426-25 min.)

Q: Did you ever think when you were younger...I suppose you remember planes like in the war you said and I suppose you remember when they first flew right, you remember from history and stuff like the Wright Brothers and stuff? Did you ever think you'd get involved in something as exciting as airplanes when you were younger?

No, I never did. When I came back from the war, Ida Grove, Iowa, is my home town where I went to school. When I came back there, there was a fellow that had an old **Jenney** he was flying that was flown in the First World War. He was charging \$15 to go up in that thing and I rode with him. That was my first airplane ride and that was in 1920. He had this old **Jenney** out of Sioux City, Iowa, and he brought it down there and he hauled a quite a few people. It was nothing like those other airplanes.

Q: Did you ever think that airplanes would ever become as commonplace as, and airlines, they are today when you were flying stunts. Did you envision that happening as big as it has?

When we got the Ford airplane, yes. We were down in Texas and you've heard of Kings Ranch in Texas?

Q: Yes.

We were invited out there with our airplane and we flew out there. King himself was talking about air routes and stuff at that time. We flew a lot of his help around and they had a lot of guards around there, almost military. He told us, "I can see where the airplanes will have air routes." That was sure enough, it wasn't long and they come.

Q: You've ridden on a commercial airplane I suppose in recent years, like a...

Well we just went to Las Vegas two years ago.

Q: 747?

No, I'd like to have been on it. 707, Western.

Q: They're quite a change from a tri-motor?

Yes, you fly at different heights. Our average flight was at 2000 or 2500 feet and it's a little bit rougher flying at that altitude you see. You get the currents and stuff. Everybody called them air pockets, but there isn't such a thing as an air pocket, it's currents. It's a little more bumpier but when you get in the commercial way up there, it's pretty smooth.

Q: Did you have any close calls or near accidents with your planes?

Just once. We were going to do some advanced advertising for a carnival and they had the bills and everything. I set in the front seat and I had all these bills in there. We had 18 towns besides Morris that we had to take and throw these pamphlets over the town. When we took off we didn't realize the load was so heavy. There was a row of trees on the end of the runway. This is the only close call that we had that I was really scared. I was looking down and he were going right straight into those trees. Just as we got there he pulled the wheels back just enough so that the wheels hit just the tops of those trees. Otherwise, we'd have crashed into them. He pulled her up just enough. It was really close and that's the only one we ever had.

Q: I see. Do you have any other interesting things you would like to say before we wrap up? That you'd like to comment about flying and your experiences.

No, I don't know, it's just one of those things. Gets in your blood and you hate to quite it. I hated to quit it but it was just the money situation run out and that's all.

Q: Well thank you very much for your time and for your interview.

You bet.

(506-30 min.)