

OH-3086, Rick Patton, 8-4-2014, Cody, WY In Flight

BOGART: This is Barbara Bogart. I'm interviewing Rick Patton in Cody, Wyoming at the firm GDA. We're talking about airport construction in Wyoming. The date is August 4th, 2014. OK.

PATTON: OK. Here we go.

BOGART: All right, so the map of the Wyoming airport system...

PATTON: Is in front of us. Let me give you a little bit of background on GDA.

BOGART: Right, right.

PATTON: [Graham did?] -- it started off as a firm called Graham Associates, back in the '50s. And so, a guy by named Lee Graham started it. He was an engineer with the Marines with World War II -- in World War II. He grew up in Tetonia, Idaho and moved to Cody right after Korea, I guess it was. He had -- because he was an engineer, he ended up with the Marines, fought through the islands. And then they had him in there measuring the damage of the bomb at Hiroshima right after it went off, so he was walking around the ground pretty hot. So [00:01:00] it came back to haunt him later. He was -- got out of the service in World War II, got back in for Korea. Let go after Korea was -- and then he came here and started the firm as a

civil engineer. And by civil, we mean basically dirt, streets, roads, that kind of stuff. Part of his job became -- he got hired by -- I think one of his first aviation clients was Big Horn County, so I've got some drawings and we can look at those later. But that -- from the firm was doing in the '50s for aviation, in Big Horn County and then here in Cody [at YRA?]. In the '60s, he picked up a young engineer right out of school in Laramie named [Darvon Deeds?], and Darvon and -- when Lee started to get sick from basically walking around -- the cancer -- he got cancer from the radiation. So he started grooming this guy named Darvon Deeds, who was a Powell kid. And went to school, came back as a civil engineer. And so he became [00:02:00] kind of the second generation. Lee passed away in '87, pretty young, and Darvon took it over. And I started coming up in probably mid 90s, and Darvon was my boss at the time. And then early 2000s, we hired a guy from Powell. Actually, from Thermopolis. His name was Dustin [Spomer?]. So right now, Dustin and I own the firm. So we're the third generation, I guess with aviation, again going all the way back years. My background, I always wanted to be in aviation from a kid -- as a kid, and so I ended going up going and getting a business degree, and in '87, graduated from aviation college Embry-Riddle, and with

an aviation degree.

BOGART: And where is that?

PATTON: It's -- they've got campuses all over the whole world, they're mostly tied to a-- to the military guys, but I was civilian, it was always civilian. [00:03:00] My background really kind of set me up to be an airline manager, but couldn't find work in there so I ended up teaming up with a consultant in learning aviation planning. And this is where I go back to the -- more just constructing airports, to start somewhere, and so what planning does is we go look at all these airports from what kind of traffic is coming in, what kind of airplanes, matching those up to the FAA's design standards to make sure that the airport is built the right size for them. You don't want to underbuild but you don't want to overbuild as well. So my job is to go in and look at an airport and match it to the community. A lot of times, what will come out of those plans is that it needs the runway extended, or it needs to be widened, or it needs to have a taxiway or the [aviary?] needs to be bigger for parking. And so, we start looking at getting those funded from the FAA and the state, and then that turns into a design project, and that's where the design side of the house takes over. [00:04:00] And so, they'll go through the design process as a civil engineering project and

design pavements and subgrades and stuff, and then eventually, we get to build an -- the project, whatever that is. So from start to finish, from the time that a project, like, that I'll get out of a master plan, it's pretty common that it's 10 years to 15 years even before there gets to be pavement on the ground. So it takes a long time. But the firm does everything here, from the planning, which again, some of our drawings go back into '50s, to -- all the way to the construction. And so...

BOGART: Well, let me back up just a minute, and ask you do you go out and solicit clients or do they put out RFPs? Or how does it work that you get hooked up with a client?

PATTON: In the world of federal projects, the state has five airports that are not federal, that's supported by the federal system. So everything -- there's 40 public airports [00:05:00] in Wyoming, and all but five of those public airports are federally supported. And -- and in those airports, the way that we get hired is the airports go out on a five-year selection, so they'll offer us an RFP, request for proposals, every five years, and that's generally open to anybody that's qualified to do that kind of work. And then, we typically go through an interview process, and then, if we get selected, we're, I guess, eligible for the sponsor that can -- we can do all the

projects for the next five years at the airport. So they only have to do the selection once every five years. So, if -- you said you were from Laramie, right?

BOGART: I'm from Laramie, right.

PATTON: So in Laramie's case, they've got a big runway project just finishing up. So five years ago or whenever, they went through a selection process, it was listed as one of the projects. In Laramie's case, they selected a consultant out of Denver [00:06:00] to come help with that project, along with anything else on the list. In the five years, the airport puts together another list of project that they expect to do for the next five years, and then they select again. And sometimes, they select an existing consultant that's been there for a long time, but other times, somebody else, you know, weasels their way in and is able to knock out a incumbent.

BOGART: Are you the only firm in Wyoming that does this?

PATTON: There's a couple of that dabble in it. We're probably -- we're the only one that really has a whole staff, kind of, towards it. We're -- right now, we have 40 employees, and we work at airports -- well, on this map, it's -- I'll give you this to just take back. But we work at -- the planning are the big dots, and then blue dots are the ones we really engineer at. Sometimes, we're not always both,

but either one because an airport will select the planning projects -- excuse me -- [00:07:00] and engineering projects separately.

BOGART: OK. So the ones that are not federally supported are the ones that are not marked? Like, [could we share?] (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

PATTON: No, no. Those just wouldn't be ours. This one, we've [driven over this?]. The ones that aren't federal are [Codville?], Green River, Medicine Bow, Upton, and Shoshoni. So relatively -- with the exception of Green River, relatively minor communities that never got into it. Green River is just -- I don't know. (laughter) They just -- they're a big airport. They had Rock Springs to kind of lean on, and they just have never developed their airport. I'm doing a master plan right now with them to see if they're interested in actually maybe getting at least a small strip. But...

BOGART: That's interesting.

PATTON: The other thing that -- just in case you haven't gone over it in the past, when we say federal money, we're supported by the federal money, it's typically -- it's FAA money. [00:08:00] It isn't our state or our income taxes, which is a big deal. And as we go around to communities, making sure everybody understands that's a big deal.

Because if you've not put money into the system into -- through an airline ticket, or you've not bought aviation fuel, or you don't buy spark plugs for your airplane or anything that deals with aviation, then you've not put into the aviation system.

BOGART: So that's what [funds the?] the FAA, is aviation activities?

PATTON: Correct, right. Through -- the way that -- the way the capital improvement projects like runways and taxiways and stuff, correct, yeah. If you've not actually bought into the system -- kind of like our highways with our fuel tax -- it's the same thing. It's a trust fund that comes back to us. So, it's really the Denvers and Salt Lakes of the world, the Billings, you know, big airports selling lots of tickets, they collect all that money, and then through the system or the process, [Aeronautics?] Commission down in, you know, Cheyenne they help divvy that -- their monies is back out [00:09:00] of the smaller airports. So it becomes a, in a sense, kind of a feeder to the big airports, both on the general aviation side and the commercial side. Now, there's a big -- in Wyoming, there's a big, big difference between when we say commercial service airports, that's only the airports that have airlines, OK? And everything else is general aviation.

And so one of the challenges we have in Wyoming is that you can get on a commercial service airplane and get off on a commercial service airplane in Wyoming with -- I think there's one exception. I think there's a flight between Gillette that goes to Laramie, and then to Denver. Other than that, you can't get on a plane and get off in Wyoming. Which is -- for business people, that's critical. So...

BOGART: Of course, it's a nuts system. But I have been -- I've been reading about the economics of it and I understand that that's the driving force, but it still bizarre.

PATTON: [00:10:00] It's -- right. Our community has struggled to keep commercial service, even bigger communities, with the exception of Jackson. You know, yeah, we pay subsidies and we're -- even here in Cody, as much as we traffic as we have, we still pay -- and I believe Laramie, I believe, still pays subsidies as well. So just to keep an airline in here and have the service available. So everything else being general aviation, that means all military traffic. In Wyoming, we have a huge need for medevac now, because our hospitals -- nowadays, you know, we stabilize people and we get them out to the big hospitals. And so communities that are scattered out, that's one of the biggest users of our system is the medevacs, and then

businesses. We fly quite a bit. I mean, it's our business in aviation, but we fly quite a bit. A good example would be that if we've clients all the way down in Utah and wherever. You know, if I go down to Vernal, Utah and it's myself, I'm probably in a pickup truck. Because, [00:11:00] you know, if it's -- if I put two people on an airplane, or, you know, or I got two people going, then it's a wash between putting them in a pickup truck or flying them down, you know, privately from -- flying them down. And with three, really, it makes sense to go ahead and charter an airplane, charter meaning that we actually rent an airplane from somebody, and a pilot, and put them in an airplane and go. If --

BOGART: So the firm doesn't have its own?

PATTON: We don't have it. Yeah, a couple of reasons. But yeah, we used to have airplanes, but we don't right now. But that's another option for that. We've chosen to actually charter because it's kind of the decision-making for weather and everything else, and, you know, professionals' hands, out of ours. But, you know, when we've got a guy down to Vernal, or even down, say, to the southern part of the state -- or, actually, a good example is we work in Pinedale. You know, from Cody to Pinedale, it's every bit of a five-hour drive. It's a 40-minute

flight. [00:12:00] And so instead of taking 10 hours of drive time on the road and then having that person come back late at night, after a quick meeting, we put him in an airplane and fly him over the mountains, he's there, he's back home for lunch. That's the real key. And then Vernal, Utah, is the same way. All the way down there, it's an eight-hour drive. By the time --

BOGART: At least, yeah.

PATTON: Yeah. But, you know, so I don't have -- we don't have hotel rooms for those people, we don't have, you know, all that travel time, we just get them over and back and he's home for dinner. I think that's probably one of the keys in Wyoming's airports, is the sort of business sense is, you know, having those -- that opportunity available is important for business traffic. It really is. And that's why -- I think that's why the legislators have been so good to airports in Wyoming, because of the -- again, they see that we don't have commercial service, so to be able -- for businesses, even as small as we are, to -- to be able to get people out and then back home, you've got to have an airport. And --

BOGART: [00:13:00] Sure. Well, let's talk about the firm for a minute. When Graham got started here in the '50s, who were some of the first clients?

PATTON: Big Horn County was a big client. Most of our airports around Wyoming are owned by [mist valleys?], you know, or county commissioners, you know? So the county owns it or the city owns it. So his first clients were literally the public entities of the counties and the states. Rarely do we have private clients that do airports. There are a couple, actually. There's actually some pretty good sized runway strips in Wyoming that are private that -- but they're pretty rare, normally associated with big ranches, you know, that somebody's done. There's a lot of little strips that farmers use all the time, but, you know, we as a firm don't get into them really, doing those.

BOGART: Right. So Big Horn is --

PATTON: Greybull Basin.

BOGART: Worland?

PATTON: Worland is Washakie County.

BOGART: Oh, OK.

PATTON: And I believe, a long time ago -- if I go back [00:14:00] in the records, the firm's probably touched about every airport in the state. But again, that five-year cycle that we were talking about, sometimes you lose, sometimes you win. So again, we just kind of move around with different clients.

BOGART: So what projects have you worked on?

PATTON: I worked on master plans at about a quarter of the space, of airports. I'm trying to think of where I've done on -- done master plans in -- with another firm in Big Piney. I've done one in Kimber. We're doing one in Green River. We're doing -- we've done wildlife hazard assessments in Rock Springs. I'm doing a master plan on [Lander?] right now, Thermopolis, in terms of building a new airport. I was part of [an EA?] there, doing a wildlife hazard, and a construction survey in Worland, [how a?] master plan's [kind of?] -- just master plans mostly scattered around. Some of our larger projects right now going on, [00:16:00] we -- you know, quite a bit of work by myself in Pinedale with an [apron?] project where the aircraft park. And then they've got quite a bit of big traffic associated with oil, [that's up there?]. So they're a pretty busy airport. Which actually -- maybe, let's back up. These are -- on this side of the state system, (inaudible) how the system plan is divide them up between commercial airports, business airports, intermediates, and local. And so some of our state support networks, from a business standpoint, are these airports. In every case, the commercial service airports are also our business airports. You know, they're just kind of that

way.

BOGART: Right. OK. So a business airport then is one that --
that --

PATTON: From the state --

BOGART: -- whose customers are business --

PATTON: Typically business related.

BOGART: Rather than just private pilots or --

PATTON: They're probably pilot -- all private pilots.

[00:16:00] It's just that there's a focus on -- on handling business traffic in that area. Let's take Big Piney and Pinedale for an example. I mean, covering everything from the -- from the Wyoming Mountains all the way through the Big Basin. If you're going to fly business traffic, large jets, that kind of stuff in, it's probably going to go to Pinedale. So the system needs to accommodate those tra-- that traffic with a bigger runway, more facilities, the ability to get to town, those kind of things. We're playing to Big Piney. That stuff can happen for sure. It probably just isn't the focus of it. [Lander?] and Riverton, let's say, take that as an example in that area. Lander being the general aviation, is kind of the guys -- more [pleasure blind?]. You know, where Riverton is the commercial service-slash-business, you know, facility in that area. And you'll see that kind of scattered around

the state to where they'll probably -- and every kind of service area, you'll have a business airport, [00:17:00] or a commercial service airport, and possibly one or two of the small private airports that -- not private, but less -- more like just the local guys doing stuff. Now again, does that mean I can [fly in there from a?] business?

Absolutely. It just isn't the focus.

BOGART: Yeah. I lived in Evanson for a long time, and I actually talked to Mike there as part of this project, and he talked about their expansion, whereas Fort Bridger airport I'm assuming is much smaller --

PATTON: It's a local -- the local pilots typically -- or the local airports, normally if they're going to do business, it's for the [ag?] guys. They're doing spray operations. Fort Bridger does a lot of spray operations. You know, those kind of -- that kind of traffic. Almost -- all of our little airports have got a contingent of game and fish guys that do animal counts, so they'll fly up in small airplanes. You know, and so it's a business, and they were being hired by the fish and game, [but it isn't?] business like [00:18:00] [Exxon?] flying in there on a jet.

BOGART: Yes. So local pilots are contracted with fish and game to do --

PATTON: To do those kind of flights. Right.

BOGART: OK. OK. Now, you mentioned earlier that you did wildlife hazard assessments. Tell me what that means.

PATTON: Yeah. Mostly commercial service airports right now -- let's go all the way back to -- to when pilot -- or Captain Scully in New York, when he caught all the air -- the birds, that became kind of a focus of how do we try to make airports safe from having wildlife becoming an issue with us? In Wyoming, typically, we don't have bird problems. Excuse me. We have deer and antelope problems. And so for Wyoming, that means making sure airports -- commercial airports have got fences around. You know? And then what other -- like, in Rock Springs, the fences were definitely keeping out antelope and deer. But we had lots of rodents [00:19:00] running around. So the rodents attracted predatory birds. OK, and so when we do these assessments, we're looking, at again, what's going on in the airport that might cause issues? And then if they're causing issues, is it enough to, say, cause a concern to where we need to -- to do something? Do we need to go out there and, say, get rid of the roads so that -- you know, or is it not enough of a problem to make a big deal out of? And so, like, again, in Rock Springs, there's almost no habitat for anything that would be -- right, right.

BOGART: It's up there on top of that (inaudible).

PATTON: Right. But we still have to look at it, because every commercial service airport had to look at it. In Worland, we're getting ready to kick one off, so Worland might be -- because it's more agricultural, more stuff around there, deer might be another focus. Or maybe coyotes trying to get through the fence. Because even a -- even a coyote will cause a real problem if he gets hit [00:20:00] on the runway.

BOGART: Of course.

PATTON: And so you look for the environment around it, and see if there's an aviation. And every airport, obviously, is -- not just in Wyoming, but every airport has its own individual conditions -- conditions.

BOGART: Sure. So you did the assessments and made recommendations then to the --

PATTON: Right. Right. Yeah, correct.

BOGART: -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)? OK.

PATTON: Yeah. We make recommendations into the plans that we'll follow on about, OK? [What we found?] an issue with you -- with holes in the fence. So you're -- the recommendation would be make sure that you keep your holes plugged. Those kind of things. You know, if you were back East where there's a lot more water or more things like that, it might be scaring the birds off the water so that

they don't come up in flocks, where all the sudden a big jet hits a flock of birds. We could handle one or two hits, a flock takes an airplane down.

BOGART: Sure.

PATTON: And again, I mean, we've had instances -- I know that there was an antelope we had at Big Piney years ago.

[00:21:00] And again, that completely totaled the airplane. Nobody died, but you know, those are the kind of things that we have to watch [then?] to make sure that the fences are good. OK? Unlike an air-- you know, I mean, airplanes are normally landing at well over 100 miles an hour. And so even the slightest coyote, or ground squirrel, or whatever can be an issue for us, to wildlife hazards. So...

BOGART: Oh, sure, absolutely.

PATTON: But again, that's been a focus.

BOGART: So that sounds to me like -- OK, let's go to [reason for?] Wyoming airports. What other special considerations are there for design and construction of airports in the state?

PATTON: One of the biggest things that we deal with on the construction -- design and construction site in Wyoming is our short construction season. And I'll give you a link to a great document that talks about that. And not just

Wyoming airports, but in mountain airports that -- one of our problems, one of our issues and challenges, is that the way that we [00:22:00] -- our federal system is set up for grants to do these projects, we typically don't get money for those grants until late spring to early summer. In Atlanta, Georgia, that's fine, because they can build all year. But if we're not even getting out to contractors until, you know, July for the construction projects, that -- I mean, we're just -- we're going to get into winter. You know? And so, you know, sometimes we'll have to really phase projects to be able to get them constructed. You know, which means that a community [might have?] a real problem if it's a main runway, that we'd have to shut it down, or we'd really have to push it up. And so we -- and you can make a contractor do a short construction project. It's just going to cost a lot, you know? They had him put every resource he's got on it. And so in Wyoming and mountain states -- not just us, but around -- one of our biggest issues is controlling costs [00:23:00] with a short construction season. I mean, as we drive, it's the same issues that we deal with on the roads. We have just a certain window that we can build in. And in aviation, again, our -- to compound it is our funding scheme puts us into a weird cycle where, yeah, things get really, really

crazy about this time a year, because we're trying to get projects, you know, started. And knowing we've only got a month and a half or two months, you know to get stuff built. In Cody's case -- which bring sup a good example -- because we have a single runway, that's another one of our issues in Wyoming -- most of our big airports -- big being a relative term -- have only got one runway. And so in Cody's case, we're -- as we speak, we're working on a major [refab?] for the runway. We're not, but another firm is. Well, they've got commercial service, and it's their busy season. So how do we keep it open during the day and build it at night? [00:24:00] And that -- so they're doing little segments of it every night during the whole summer. Well, that drives our costs up. And --

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