

OH-3096, Merl Raisbeck, 4-14-2015, Laramie, WY In Flight

MERL: [00:00:00] Probably the first or second thing I did when I turned 18 was went out and started flying lessons. I'm no longer on the family payroll, I'm no longer under their thumb, by God I'm going to do it.

BARBARA: And where was this?

MERL: That would have been Fort Collins Loveland Airport, Fort Love. I can remember as a boy the old Loveland Airport was north of Benson Lake out west of Loveland. It's all subdivision now. And I can remember riding my bike up there and just snooping around. It was a little dirt strip. It wasn't very busy. There was hardly ever anybody around, but just looking at the airplanes. And I thought they were neat. They're neat machinery. And I also remember Mrs. [Crayton?] who was the children's librarian at the Loveland library. This is back in the dark ages. It was a big old brownstone building, one of the Carnegie libraries, and they had a spiral staircase from the back of the children's [00:01:00] section up into the adult area. And you came up into the science fiction and from there you went into aviation and I never made it any further. I can remember thinking helicopters were really, really neat as a boy. I mean today I'm like any

other fixed wing pilot, a helicopter flies because it's so ugly the ground repels it. But I bought my first set of plans for a home built aircraft, the Benson Gyrocopter, I think I must have been about 12 or 13. I had to save quite a while to buy just the three view drawings. I think 10 or \$12 back then, in Popular Science. My mom found them. They didn't actually beat me in those days, but God almighty, I got the icy silence treatment. At any rate, so I started [00:02:00] half assed dabbling with flying lessons in 1968 or '9 when I first was in college. And typical of most college students, I never had the time and the money at the same time. If I had money I didn't have time because I was working. If I wasn't working I didn't have money. So the first thing I did when I got out of school -- I was practicing in Missoula, Montana -- is I signed up for flying lessons. And I got my private pilot's license in a 141 school in Missoula, executive aviation, I think in 19 -- probably would have been about '76. Might have been '75. No, it would have been '76. And I decided that was too boring so I bought a hang glider and started teaching myself to hang glide in 19-- let's see, when did I break my leg? I think it would have been [00:03:00] '77. And one thing kind of led to another after that. I've been hanging around the fringes of aviation ever since. I am

not quite as rabid about it as I was at one point. I've got several former students who, they think I must be dying because I will pass up a chance to go flying. In fact, one, Dylan, he's a retired instructor for the Navy -- God, I wish I could retire at 35, but any rate, he's getting married up in Driggs and he's popular enough on that airport that they have delayed resurfacing the runway so everybody can fly in for his wedding. And there's going to be glider rides and balloon flying. His bride, his wife, flies C3s off of the -- I think the Nimitz. She's in the Gulf right now [00:04:00] and we won't go -- they met when she was one of his students and I guess that's absolutely verboten, but it seems to have worked out. At any rate, Dylan, I get these panicked calls from Dylan, "George says that you didn't want to go flying. Are you sure you're feeling OK?" At any rate, so --

BARBARA: When did you come to Wyoming?

MERL: 1988, July of 1988. first thing I did when I got up here was put up these temporary bookshelves and the second thing is I ran out to the airport and asked around to see what there was available to fly. And at that point in time Jerry Bowser had the FBO and the flying club -- they called it the University Flying Club then. I think at that point it had already divorced itself from the university, but so

I joined the University Flying Club and eventually I checked out as one of their instructors and I've been [00:05:00] instructing at that club ever since. I guess it's a rather informal sort of a group, but I'm the chief instructor for Laramie Flying Club now.

BARBARA: OK, now tell me about the club.

MERL: It's now called the Laramie Flying Club. It's a 501C7, I believe. It's a club. Its charter says we're organized and promoted to -- to promote aviation and make inexpensive, if there is such a thing, flying available for people in Laramie. It started as a student organization. Many years ago Ernie [Gasoway?] apparently landed the club plane just out where molecular biology is now and taxied it onto [Prepsie's?] Pasture for a display. I couldn't even get permission to haul a glider in there on a trailer. But they've been based, I believe -- [00:06:00] legally it's a de novo club. It was created from scratch in '85 or '86. There had been a predecessor that had gone belly up. That got a little bit exuberant and tried expanding too fast when the economy was down and went broke. And it's a club. There's a real strong pressure from the members to keep things as cheap as possible and inevitably that backfires. I mean there's cheap and there's inexpensive. And the

bottom line, when you cut back on the hourly cost too much
any little thing that happens to an airplane is expensive.

BARBARA: So the club owns the plane?

MERL: Yeah, we own our aircraft free and clear. We do as
much of our maintenance ourselves as we can legally. We
have a member who is an IA mechanic. He does the rest.
[00:07:00] We've got a reserve fund that I can't give you
details on, but at the moment it's rich enough that there
are several people agitating to decrease dues or something.
And I just keep looking at that and remembering how much it
cost the last time something went wrong. I took over as
president in '99 or 2000, served a couple of terms. At
that point in time the past officers had succumbed to that
disease and they'd run everything real cheap. We needed a
new engine that was going to cost \$20,000 and we only had
3,000 in the bank. We managed to pull that off, but it was
kind of a hairy couple of years. So I'm a big believer,
money in the bank and altitude underneath your wheels.

BARBARA: So let me interrupt just for a minute. How many
aircraft does the club own? [00:08:00]

MERL: Just one.

BARBARA: What is it?

MERL: A Cessna 172N [side off?].

BARBARA: And when did they acquire it?

MERL: That one we got in 2008 or '9, I think. The previous -- OK, in 1985 the original University Flying Club purchased a 172 -- I've forgotten the dash number. Ernie Gasoway found it on the airport in Powell. It was sitting there, low time, in good shape, but the owner had gotten tired of it or something. I think they paid 13,000 for it. OK, when Dave Little wrecked it up here on the hill, and it was insured for 72, I think, thousand. So 5,000 hours and 20 years later it's worth that much more money. [00:09:00] Now they've gone the other way in the last 10 years, but we used the insurance plus the engine reserve that we had set aside and bought [Zulu November?] which is the current aircraft. And I think it's up to about 5,000 hours now. I wasn't in favor of buying it. Let's just say it had real pretty paint and nice radios and the guys who were doing the shopping fell in love with that. I was looking at other things and whatever, but we've got it and it's served the purpose pretty well. I think I've personally run -- five or 10 people got their licenses in it. I limit myself to one student at a time because I've got a real job. We've had younger people, younger instructors who had more free time, [00:10:00] that will run three and four at a time.

BARBARA: How many members of the club are there?

MERL: You'd have to talk to Matt [Jolavet?] or Steve [Base?] about that. I think that our last insurance form we listed 28. And technically that's -- they say that a club should only have about six people per airplane. Unfortunately we've got a lot of people who just pay their dues to have it available occasionally and don't fly regularly, which concerns me from a safety standpoint. It's one of those skills, if you don't use you lose. But that's the way it is. I would say that we've got right now, one, two, three -- we've got about five people flying it real regularly, three of whom are students, and there's another three or four -- I mean I have my own airplane so I don't fly the club plane unless mine's broke down. But [00:11:00] there's a couple of, three others in that same category. And then we've got several people that are just kind of hanging in the background.

BARBARA: Do you have regular meetings? How does the club kind of operate?

MERL: Monthly meetings and then an annual business meeting to comply with the corporation law. And we have tried, and I still think it's a good idea, we've tried to organize like safety seminars and stuff and invite people from around the area. We sponsor the annual airport Christmas in conjunction with the airport management. We have

monthly plane washes and barbecues in the summer. There should be more to a club than just cheap aircraft, but let's face it, that's why most people join.

BARBARA: OK, so it isn't necessarily a social club. It's to have access to the airplanes?

MERL: Yeah, I mean legally it's a social educational group. I think [00:12:00] we could probably get a 501C3 if we wanted to jump through the hoops. As it is we're a not for profit as opposed to a nonprofit. It's a joke because we never make any money anyway. But yeah, no, the intent was to promote safety as well as available flying. And it's gotten to be at this point in time it's the only game in town for quite a ways around. There was a nominal flying club in Rawlins. I think they're defunct. There is an FBO in Cheyenne. I don't have any idea what kind of shape they're in. I don't think you can rent planes in Casper or Rock Springs anymore. It's difficult to rent one in Fort Collins or Greeley. Aviation in general is kind of drying up. I'm sure you've heard that theme before.

BARBARA: I have actually. But this sounds like a pretty healthy outfit if you have that many members. I understand they're not all active.

MERL: Again, it's that many members, but that [00:13:00] could turn around in a heartbeat. When I moved here -- OK,

I flew out in 1986. I was working at the University of Missouri at the time and I had come out -- I had accepted the job here and I came out to look at housing. And when I landed there were probably 20 aircraft tied down on the ramp and I asked the FBO to fill my plane and I said I'd be back on Friday. And he seemed kind of like a surly sort, but I didn't think much about it. I came back on Friday and the door's hanging open and even the toilet's gone out of the FBO. And they hadn't put gas in the plane, to say the least. OK, today if you go out there it's a rare occasion you even see one tied down on the ramp and the hangar may or may not be full. I think that pilot numbers nationwide are down from a high of about [00:14:00] a million 20 years ago down to close to 600,000. We're just not recruiting. There's a lot of reasons that get bantered around. It is expensive. I think more than that, it takes a fairly significant time and effort commitment that -- I'm sounding like my father now, but that the younger generation is not willing to make. Now, there's exceptions. Did I save -- I got it somewhere here.

BARBARA: You did say you had some students in your club, right?

MERL: Oh, yeah. And I instruct at the gliderport too and I was just going to show you my latest project. Come on. Oh, computers. No. I thought I saved both of them. Any rate,

I had a picture of my -- he just got his private [00:15:00]
license not too long ago, but he and his grandfather went
out to Mendon in a sail plane, got in a wave, got up to
25,000 feet.

BARBARA: Oh, my gosh.

MERL: It's a nice picture. There's four generations of
pilots in that family.

BARBARA: Wow. Is that here in town?

MERL: Actually it's Owl Canyon. Colorado Soaring, just
south of Cheyenne. But any rate, yeah. And I've got -- I
don't know if I have a student right now or not. I had
some medical problems the first of December and so I
grounded myself. Emily, typical teenage girl who's got too
many other irons in the fire. I haven't heard from her in
six months. Eric, who I was working with then, is about to
graduate and go in the service so he's decided not to
restart now that I -- because he'll be out of here next
month. And I just spoke -- [00:16:00] so like I said I'm
between students, but I try to keep a couple going
regularly.

BARBARA: Tell me what people use the plane for.

MERL: There's an awful lot of just wasting gas, flying
around on a Sunday morning just looking at things. Some
people try to use it for transportation and yeah, if you're

real careful that works, but the plane is relatively small. even though it's instrument equipped it's not really powerful to fly bad weather in this country and if you fly -- let's just say you take it from here to California, you do that once a month for the year you're probably going to get three or four times that you're going to be stuck for a day or two waiting on the weather. It's not a turbo prop, it doesn't have radar and that sort of thing, so it's mainly [00:17:00] people use it to get their license and a lot of them then move on to something else, to one of their own or go someplace they can rent something bigger and faster. Several of my students have wound up flying for the airlines or with military, but there's an awful lot of us that just like to go out -- they used to talk about the \$100 hamburger. You've heard that term too, I'm sure.

BARBARA: I haven't, no. Explain it.

MERL: Nice sunny day, you go someplace new to get a hamburger. We used to -- there's a bunch of us from the glider port that used to -- guy name of George lives in Denver, likes to go to breakfast in these little tiny farm towns. So he would pick a place to go and check to make sure the café was going to be open after church and we would start from everywhere from Colorado Springs to Laramie and just congregate out there in Oshkosh, Nebraska

or somewhere. It's hilarious because usually there's two old folks in the corner and one [00:18:00] waitress about half asleep and here comes 10 people, you know. But flying along looking at the country and chitchatting with your buddies. When Evans Field was still operating they did a lot of that Sunday morning breakfast run.

BARBARA: Where was Evans Field?

MERL: Just across -- OK, if you look at the old maps it was called Howe Field. It's The Paddocks now. Sam's kids subdivided it. But it was straight east of the cement plant. That was the Laramie airport. Historically that goes -- I wish Sam was alive. He could tell you more about this.

BARBARA: Sam who?

MERL: Evans. Yeah, seven nine Victor. It was the legal Laramie airport for a long time. It was always private. It was public use and then he took it private use in '95 or '6 because the regulations were getting to be so bad. And he was one of these -- he was wealthy [00:19:00] from somewhere although you'd never know it to me and he was one of these people that was desperately trying to make it cheap for people to fly. I think maybe he took it a little too far. The maintenance on some of his aircraft was a little shaky. There's stories about people landing with a

-- oh, never mind. I could probably get -- that could wind up in legal action. Any rate, we don't want to go there. But no, Evans Field was a collection -- I mean there were hangars and there were two dirt runways and you had to buzz the runway to get the horses off and I swear I was probably the only one out there with a license. Everybody else learned to fly in World War II or something and then never bothered to make it legal. And they would take off in a gaggle on Sunday morning in the summer going to Saratoga for breakfast or something. And we used to joke [00:20:00] it would take them all day to go ahead and retrieve the ones that had to land in a field somewhere, but they never anybody. And it was kind of fun. I mean, again, it was a pretty -- I think eclectic would be the polite word. It was a collection of interesting people and there is a lot of fun. Unfortunately with just the one -- the club plane is the only rental plane in town now so it's kind of hard to go somewhere with a bunch of your friends in that aircraft. And we strongly, strongly discourage formation flying. That's something you don't do unless you know how.

BARBARA: Oh, sure.

MERL: But yeah, people still use it for that. I know Tom Cartwright will -- I don't know -- he learned in the military, but I don't think he was a military pilot. Any

rate, he's retired and this is the cheapest flying available and he'll come out -- I'll catch him out there probably once or twice a month and he's just going to go for a half hour, [00:21:00] 45 minutes, and check out the antelope along the river or something. And the plane, it's not bad for that, but there's other stuff that's better. It's just what's available. I mean it's a compromise. Because of the elevation here we need more engine to train with. Lower elevation people use 100 horsepower trainers and we've got 160 and it is big enough that if you're careful you can take the wife and one kid and some luggage and go somewhere. People -- Tom [Beands?], when he first got his license, would load the kids up and go to Tahoe with it. And like I said, whatever. He rapidly progressed. At this point he's got three aircraft and one of them --

BARBARA: That's what I understand.

MERL: Yeah, one of them is an Aerostar that is really swish and I just wish I -- you know. I mean the thing is like 300 knots and radar [00:22:00] and he plays in the airliners. And that was more appropriate for an all-weather transportation. Unfortunately it's way out of most people's price range. I'm going to take the wife and we're going to go visit my daughter in Oklahoma City in May and legally I'm instrument rated, but I'm kind of getting old,

cowardly. A 182 is a -- if you're careful it's a decent instrument platform, but I don't have radar, I don't have de-ice and it has no business getting anywhere near a tornado.

BARBARA: Oh, Oklahoma in May.

MERL: Yeah, right, Oklahoma in May. So the way I fly is go early in the morning and be on the ground at noon because that's when things start to build.

BARBARA: Now, what's your plane?

MERL: A 182. Somewhere around here. Oh, that one. Irish student was visiting, I gave her a ride and she took the picture.

BARBARA: That's cool. [00:23:00] So it's housed at the airport?

MERL: I've got a hangar out there, the Eagle Project.

BARBARA: Oh, really?

MERL: Yeah. How'd that work? It was slightly before my time, but there was no hangarage available so Sam Kotby and Dick [Poledna?] and a bunch of the locals strong-armed the board into leasing them the ground and then they built it up and paved the ramp and built hangars. And that's been kind of a sore point ever since because certain people who have been on the board thought that, number one, you shouldn't have anything private on the field and, number two, they figure they want more rent. And like I said, I'm

one of them, but I would be willing to negotiate but I'm not just going to roll over and play dead. I paid good money for that and if they want it they can pay me for it. But yeah, it is -- I lease the ground, I own the hangar. It's set up as an LLC just for liability [00:24:00] purposes. You talk to Charlie, he is a former partner of mine and he has the hangar next to mine. I think he's out of it now. I don't know what he told you. Everybody's kind of waiting to see if he comes back this summer, but he and Sandy decided they needed something sexier and faster than the old 182 so they got a really pretty turbocharged 182 and then they didn't use it enough to begin to justify the expense and his friends, including me, flew it more than he did. And it still doesn't fly enough to really keep the ring seat. So yeah, that's a drawback. And I think -- I had thought maybe he would invest in like an LSA, a light sport or an ultralight or something. When he was learning he was talking about just wanting something he could go look at the flowers with. And that [00:25:00] turbocharged rocket ship was not the appropriate machine. Well, his dad was in southern New Mexico and his mother-in-law was in Bakersfield and they tried using it for transportation and had a couple of push the weather a

little too hard and scared themselves. And then there was
-- for whatever reason he's now taken to flying commercial.

BARBARA: You mentioned ultralight. Is there much of that in
this area or in Wyoming in general?

MERL: Not anymore. Ultralights have really kind of died out
in general. There are several categories. There's hang
glider, ultralight, light sport and recreational. And from
barely regulated to less regulated to more regulated and
smaller slower to faster and faster. The only ultralight
I'm aware of on the field right now is Kent Allen. Used to
teach industrial arts at the university. His last year
here he had his class build his ultralight [00:26:00] for
him.

BARBARA: Oh, my gosh.

MERL: And it's, you know. I wouldn't be surprised if
tomorrow morning you go out at 6:00 and it sounds like
someone's mowing the lawn at 500 feet. It's got a little
two cycle Rotax engine that just sounds exactly like a lawn
mower. And like he says, I think the furthest he's taken
it, I think he said he was down to the state line once, but
it takes him about an hour to get to Tie Siding and back.

BARBARA: You could drive faster, right?

MERL: Oh, yeah. I mean he had a Mooney with four partners
and they were using it for transportation and his wife's an

accountant and the money didn't work out and, I don't know, I think there were some other issues and he hung that up. And then he built the -- there was a hiatus there where he was trying to use the club plane to fly and the problem with the club plane is you're sharing it with other people. I mean this costs me way too much money, but I can go out there and open the door and go. [00:27:00] Anyhow Kent's little -- I've forgotten the end number on that, but it's a Rans S-6 I think. Any rate we call it the lawn mower. But there used to be several people had ultralights at the field that the weather and the altitude around here don't lend themselves to it.

BARBARA: That's what I was thinking.

MERL: Yeah, if you fly it -- it's like hang gliding. I mean hang gliding on the coast is one thing, hang gliding inland is potentially pretty scary. The weather goes from bad to worse, or good to bad, just so fast. And with something that flies at 100 knots a 20 knot gust is no big deal, but if you've got something that flies at 10 knots a 20 knot gust is pretty hairy. So any rate, the ultralights are kind of a compromise between that and the hang glider. And then LSA would be the next step up. Wes and [Lurlene Bressler?], [00:28:00] who you may or may not know --

BARBARA: I'm pretty new to town so I don't know.

MERL: They're local characters. Wes is retired manager of the water department. He's on the airport board. They built a little Zenith. It's a light sport. And I was kind of like, you know, light sport, if you can't -- the big thing is Lurlene has some sort of health issues and you can fly a light sport without a medical. If you've got a driver's license that's good enough. And she was afraid that it was getting too much, it was costing too much to maintain the medical every year because she had to do a bunch of extra testing. And if you ever flunk a medical then you cannot fly LSA. So they built this. They can do their own maintenance and they don't have to maintain a medical to fly it and so in theory it's cheaper. Now, given what they've spent on it I doubt it. And that's one thing. People talk about only rich people fly and granted [00:29:00] the stuff's expensive, but if I walk up and down that row of hangars there's one, maybe two, people that I would call really above average. Most of the rest of us have made sacrifices elsewhere to do what we want.

BARBARA: Let me ask you this. Let's go back to the flying club for a moment. What's the procedure for reserving the plane, checking it out?

MERL: We maintain an online calendar. To join the club you have to fill out an application, put up some money. And

then I, at the moment I'm the one who does the check outs. And what I'm looking for is can you fly to basic private pilot standards? And for people who come from back east I tend to really hammer on crosswinds because Laramie, we never have a calm day. So then once you've done that you're good to go and, like I said, there's a calendar online and you just dial up and reserve -- or you log in and [00:30:00] reserve the plane. We used to keep a log book out at the FBO and we'd call out there and they'd write your name in the book and frankly, this is way less work for the FBO and they've got other things to do anyway. And it's convenient. We have one member who doesn't have computer access, doesn't do internet, and he just goes out and looks to see if anybody's there. So email and internet has changed flying a lot. When I moved here we still had a flight service station in town.

BARBARA: OK, what's a flight service station?

MERL: It's a weather safety, whatever, advisory service.

And it was staffed 24/7. They consolidated all of those. All the Wyoming was consolidated into Casper [00:31:00] and then recently they contracted it to Lockheed and now there's only, I think, three or five nationwide. And frankly it's, in my opinion, useless. I can get the same -
- OK, you've got a guy sitting in Kentucky somewhere

looking at a computer screen. I can look at the same computer screen. It used to be that when they had Jerry and the guys out here in flight service, OK, fine, the weather we got wasn't that great. We got it by dialing an 800 number, but I could call Jerry on the radio, and I'm in Cheyenne and the clouds are thick over the ridge, and ask him, "Does it look like I can make it in there?" And he would say, "Yeah, it's clear." Because a lot of times it'll be clear in the valley and if that's the case, no big deal, but I don't want to push into this valley in a 172 and pick up a load of ice and not be able to get back out. So any rate, so what we have now, there's an automated thing [00:32:00] out at the airport. Let's see. [dialing] You can get this on the radio or you can dial it up or you can get stuff online and like I said [phone recording plays]. Oh, better go quick while it's that calm. Any rate, that's part of a nationwide system and the same information is available via internet along with quite a bit more. There is much more information available today. What is missing is the local knowledge to interpret it. When you had guys who lived here and had watched the weather around this -- I remember I was getting ready to leave here that day that the toilet disappeared and I walked over to flight service [00:33:00] and I've forgotten

his last name, World War II vet, Jerry something or other, but any rate he says -- we sat there talking because it was looking kind of grim to the east. And he says, "We've got a four corners low so the up slope is going to be real bad, but if you get to Nebraska you ought to have smooth sailing." It was clear here in the valley and if you get high enough coming out of Laramie you can be VFR on top. You're legally flying an instrument flight plan, but you're not in the clouds with the ice and stuff. And I was flying a Turbo Dakota so it was useful. Today you would probably get somebody with a barely English accent telling you to, you know, VFR not recommended. So I don't even call Lockheed anymore and I probably should because that's going to -- I'm afraid that will reflect on my students someday. If you call them then you're legally in the system. If you brief yourself online it's questionable. And but [00:34:00] people today have to learn to interpret the weather much more than they used to.

BARBARA: Because there isn't that local knowledge.

MERL: There isn't that local knowledge, yeah, that's right.

BARBARA: How interesting.

MERL: Little things like a four corners low. I tell people about that out at the airport and the old-timers shrug their shoulders and the new guys are like, "Huh? Where did

you learn that?" The fact of the matter, if you've got a lower pressure system down in the four corners region there's an anti-cyclonic flow that is pushing warm air up against the Laramies and the other side of the hill, it'll be clear here and Cheyenne will be zero-zero. So any rate, God, I got off it.

BARBARA: No, we were talking about the impact of the internet on flying.

MERL: Yeah, anyhow the internet has had a really big impact and it's like a lot of things, it's plus and minus. And I think actually probably aviation is a good example of the internet in general. There's a ton more information, you have to be a little [00:35:00] selective in how you winnow it and the personal touch is way, way gone. So far gone people have forgotten it even existed. I'm dealing with this in some of my -- I teach. The kids today, they can't read a book. If it doesn't come in video they don't understand it, and I'm talking medical students. And I guess that's the way it is, but it seems a little --

BARBARA: I know what you're talking about. I understand what you mean.

MERL: OK.

BARBARA: So let's go back to your experience now. You've had a plane since you started in the '80s, your own plane?

MERL: No. I started saving for an airplane when I was 14 or 15. I finally got to the point I could afford one in -- I started shopping in '86 and I missed out on several, [00:36:00] what I thought were fairly good deals because I had to arrange a schedule to drive somewhere. And so when I got here my aircraft was in a subchapter S corporation. It was a partnership with a bunch of lawyers and I bought a share of that from Lyle [Mettler?] who was leaving town and just basically to have a set of wings so I could go places to look at something to buy myself. I never thought I'd own a 182. And that would have been 1989 or '90. Over the years Charlie bought in and then we bought the other partners out. Then he got out in 2002, I think. That was kind of interesting. I went from -- let's see. I married my wife and daughters in 2001. We signed the contract [00:37:00] on the house on the 10th of September in 2001. On the 11th of September Charlie announced that he wanted out of the partnership because they were buying something else. And I'm looking at my house payments and like oh my God, how am I going to buy him out? And he was real nice about it. He let me -- he carried me for several years. And Charlie was a wonderful partner. I mean he was always Johnny on the spot. It's nice to have a partner when the bills come in. I haven't had the nerve -- he and I used to

charge ourselves \$30 an hour to fly the plane and that covered our maintenance. I think this last year it was probably closer to 1,000. I haven't been able to fly because of health and gasoline's up to \$6.50, \$7 a gallon and it's just, you know, as much as I like it -- my granddaughter, step granddaughter, was visiting over Christmas, I took her for a ride and I think it was the [00:38:00] ninth of January and the plane has been sitting since until yesterday.

BARBARA: Oh my gosh.

MERL: Yeah. And it's not good on the aircraft. If they don't fly they deteriorate. So yeah, I think that's a factor. I mean I'm pretty dedicated and it's something I really like to do, but I think that again, the same factors. It's the difficulty of maintaining currency. The legal requirements have just snowballed with 9/11. The cost of aircraft has gone through the ceiling and the cost of fuel's gone through the ceiling. And then once you've done all that you've got Homeland Security looking over your shoulder and all of a sudden half the places I used to fly are -- you never know when they're going to be off limits because Obama's visiting or something.

BARBARA: Really? That's interesting.

MERL: Yeah.

BARBARA: In all those costs you didn't mention insurance.

MERL: Insurance for me, because I'm fairly high time and have a clean record, is relatively speaking not [00:39:00] terrible. I think I'm spending about -- I think my last premium was \$1,013 for a year. I've got the plane insured. It's only insured for 50,000, but planes have depreciated quite a bit because of things. And that's a million smooth liability and I've got an open pilot clause so I can let some of my friends fly it. You could probably insure it for 800 a year. And yeah, the thing that kind of got me, my oldest turned 16, 15 and she got her learner's permit and I had been teaching her to fly at that point and she got interested in horses and boys and never finished, but you can solo a glider at 14.

BARBARA: Wow.

MERL: Yeah. And I frankly would rather do that because at 14 they've got a lot more brains than they do at 16. come 18 or 20 maybe they grow up again, but any rate, but no, I [00:40:00] put Bonnie on the insurance so that I could teach her and I think that cost me 50 extra a year and my God, she turned 16 and my car insurance went up 1,015, something like that.

BARBARA: Isn't that odd? I wouldn't have expected that.
That's interesting.

MERL: I think that -- OK, to a certain extent aviation is a small captive market and I know that they take advantage of us. There's a bunch of rules. OK, for example I'm 64, starting next year I probably don't want to change insurance companies and right now I'm mad at the current outfit so I'm thinking about, but once you've got some age on you they just don't like covering you. Getting life insurance for a pilot is difficult and frankly -- OK, now I can buy life insurance through AOPA, the national pilot's association, and it'll cover me against kind of a flying accident. I can buy that cheaper than I can buy regular life insurance. Or I could, past tense. Once I turned 60 that's kind of [00:41:00] changed. But so I think that the insurance companies are just playing games, but by the same token if you look at, OK, we solo people in gliders at 14 and I've had a lot of parents just oh my God, the sky is falling. Well, if you think about it, it's not it's parked in the garage and they can take it whenever they want. They're under supervision pretty much constantly. At that age they learn fast, they've got beautiful reflexes. If you've got somebody providing a little bit of judgment for them they don't get in trouble. What scares me is a 20 something that is nominally an adult and it's like OK, my granddaughter, Australia you can drink at 18 and you can

drive at 18. I've never figured that one out. OK, she was 17 and a half and someone gave her a car. So she's just driving herself back and forth to school and [00:42:00] she was in a wreck and got caught and needless to say they threw the book at her. Now, to my way of thinking that was a serious lapse in judgment, but Lee, the young man who just got his altitude badge, I soloed him at I think 14 and one month, he got his private glider at 16, his power ticket at 17, and it looks he'll have his commercial probably by 18.

BARBARA: Wow.

MERL: He's got real supportive -- his father is a single parent and his grandfather is not wealthy, but he's retired and has a little bit of income and I think he's probably subsidizing some of this. But the biggest single thing is his family is real supportive of the whole idea. I mean there's no niggling at him for spending all of his time at the gliderport.

BARBARA: [00:43:00] Now, the gliderport you're talking about is Owl Canyon?

MERL: Owl Canyon.

BARBARA: I've seen the signs for it, but I haven't been out there.

MERL: Lee and Dave have a Piper Archer they keep in the hangars out here and they fly that, they fly back to Wisconsin to visit family a couple of times a year. I don't know, they make trips. They were up to Alaska two years ago. And I think they traded their glider out to Mendon for the [wave/way?] flight. But so they do fly and so for Lee it's been kind of relatively easy. He still had to work pretty hard, but today -- when I was a kid I used to ride my bike to the airport and hang around. You hang around the airport today, you'll have some of those TSA people hassling you.

BARBARA: Yeah, it's totally changed.

MERL: And frankly, as far as I'm concerned they're a bigger threat than any terrorist ever was --

BARBARA: I'm in sympathy there. I'm looking at the clock and realizing we could do this all day because I'm having a really fun time. [00:44:00] You mentioned something about an Eagle Scout. Did I misunderstand that? About building your hangar?

MERL: Oh, Eagle Project. That was what they named the -- when they built the hangars there were a group of people who went together and financed the project and contracted with the airport and they called them Eagle Hangars or Eagle Project or something like that.

BARBARA: Oh, OK. I made that leap. And then you were talking about this young man Lee and it makes me wonder if -- I don't know if there's a very active Boy Scout program in Laramie. Is there any kind of aviation connection there?

MERL: No. We used to have a civil air patrol squadron here. I suspect that they still exist on paper, but there's no longer a civil air patrol aircraft here. I know that some friends of mine from up in the north part of the state [00:45:00] have children in civil air patrol and they do get to fly occasionally. It's not very much. I haven't seen a Boy Scout aviation unit in quite a while. I don't have any idea if there's any around Wyoming at all.

BARBARA: Because I was growing up I remember hearing a lot about civil air patrol and you don't hear about it anymore because --

MERL: You don't. They've kind of -- I mean there's several things. I joined in '88 to do search and rescue and they've kind of -- they're following the money. I mean they go where the money is. They've got off into Homeland Security and all sorts of -- and the mentality of some of the people involved has gotten to be -- I just don't care for the attitude. It's a place where everybody who flunked of [PFC/POC?] can be a general. And you've got a whole lot of wannabe undercover cops. You land somewhere and they're

crawling over your airplane and asking all sorts of questions [00:46:00] and getting real pushy and nasty and, you know, I'm in Wyoming because I like it here.

BARBARA: I understand. You mentioned search and rescue.

That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that as an area of inquiry. Is there someone in town who --

MERL: I occasionally will fly for someone if they ask me.

In theory the sheriff can request assistance from civil air patrol and in theory they will have a team here within a day or so. Again, like I said, their emphasis -- that's why I got out, their emphasis changed from search and rescue to I Spy sort of stuff. And I honestly don't know how quickly they'd respond anymore, or if they even would. But yeah, no, at one point the Laramie squadron was called the SAR pigs which is an inside joke. We were the first ones on site any time [00:47:00] there was a call like lost snowmobile or lost hunter or something. And we'd be the first ones there and the last ones to leave and probably put in the most hours. There were several people. Bob Sutherland who's passed away. George Twitchell is still floating around town. You may or may not have heard that name.

BARBARA: I have, but --

MERL: I think he might still be involved. Earl Wilkerson I think is, if he's still in town, probably still involved. I don't know who else. Oh, there's a guy, what's his name? He works over in ad communications and he was the local squadron commander for a while. Again, that was since my time. I hear this stuff and periodically someone will bug me about rejoining but I just, like I said, it's got to be a whole lot more quasi military and a whole lot less about flying.

BARBARA: But you think George Twitchell is still involved?

MERL: George Twitchell would be someone to talk to about it.

[00:48:00] He has been involved in aviation around town since about the same time -- maybe before I got here.

BARBARA: OK, I appreciate that because I do still have -- I'm contracted to do so many interviews so I'm always looking for people.

MERL: That's fine. I just started thinking who else we've got that are old -- what I would call legitimate old-timers. There are some people that are kind of old that really didn't do much. Mick is dead, Sam is dead. The Evans brothers closed down the field so I don't consider them aviation friends. Jack and Andy at the airport both started in mid-'90s.

BARBARA: I did interview Jack.

MERL: Nice guy.

BARBARA: He is, very nice guy.

MERL: He's a good guy.

BARBARA: And I called Dave Lambert.

MERL: Ah, that would be a good one.

BARBARA: But he never returned my call. I left a message.

MERL: What number did you call?

BARBARA: I have a cell phone for him.

MERL: Yeah, he got rid of his [00:49:00] land line.

BARBARA: Because if you could put in a word for me I would love
to talk to him.

MERL: No problem. I think probably he would. Dave was
involved in what I would call mainstream aviation, 760-9795?

BARBARA: I don't have it with me, but that sounds right. I'll
just keep pestering him.

MERL: Yeah, keep pestering him and I'll send him an email.
But yeah, I need to talk to him about some maintenance on
my plane. He worked for Jerry Bowser. I don't know where
he got his license or where he came from, but he's the
mechanic for the club. He was teaching at the mechanic
school, the A&P school over at Sidney, Nebraska for many
years. His wife was living in town and he was commuting
back and forth in a 150. He retired from there, moved over
here I want to say about 2000 and he's been doing some

part-time instruction at LCCC wind program. [00:50:00] And then doing a little bit of mechanicking out here at the airport.

BARBARA: And I don't remember if Jack told me -- I also interviewed Cody [Dekroger?]. He flies for Premier.

MERL: OK, yeah, the Aussie. He's fairly recent. I don't think -- Vince Hedrick flies for Bone & Joint. His grandfather ran the FBO.

BARBARA: Oh, really?

MERL: Now, again, Vince can be kind of -- I don't know how much he would really know, but he'd be someone to contact. Let's see. I was just trying to think if there's any of the old Evans group left because some of them go back to the '30s.

BARBARA: That's so interesting. I had no idea that there was a little field out there.

MERL: If you Google -- there's like historic Wyoming airports I think is the web page.

BARBARA: Yeah, I have seen that.

MERL: It's seven nine Victor. And I've still got some pictures somewhere, a bunch of them. [00:51:00] A bunch of the younger guys that had kind of adopted Evans Field took videos of the last plane departing Evans Field and it's kind of like that last helicopter in Saigon, you know?

BARBARA: Without the people clinging to it.

MERL: Yeah, well, it was just about that bad. That was an era and that was a fun place. Those old hangars were -- God, you'd hate to put anything you valued in them because they looked like they were going to fall down. He was charging \$20 a month and you could fly any time you wanted. I had a friend, that Champ belonged to a guy over in animal science. Bob didn't fly it much and that's the neat thing. Evans Field, if you hung around there as a 16-year-old with a license back in the '80s there's a fair chance somebody would hand you the keys and say, "Take a ride." Today, even if you could find somebody that generous the law and the insurance would tie you in knots. [00:52:00] And I think that's part of why aviation is dying. If you look at the demographics -- AOPA has studied this a lot -- we've got a few new people coming on and they're really gung-ho like Lee and some of these guys, but most of them, most of us, I'm probably one of the youngest people in the flying around here and I'm 64. We're dying off. It's just it's difficult. Even people, even kids who want to get into it have a real steep hill to climb.

BARBARA: And I have heard that all over the state. It's the regulations, it's the cost.

MERL: And it's not any one thing. There was a big push -- it was dogma, if you were a pilot you had to believe it, that back in the 1980s and '90s if we could just get rid of product liability, the lawyers were burying aviation. And they finally got that reform. The lawyers went from suing manufacturers [00:53:00] to suing mechanics. So we didn't gain much. But there was a little turnaround. But then the dotcom bubble, the various gasoline or energy crises. I think they were saying at one point there was an airport closing once a week in this country. And once you lose the infrastructure it's hard to get people back in. You know, 30 years ago there were two flight schools out here and there were airplanes and you could fly from here to Medicine Bow, you could fly from here to Two Dot, Montana, whatever you wanted. Today you better call and make sure the airport's still there. I've had six airports that I have personally flown regularly out of that are closed now. And I've been flying for, what, 40 years? I happen to think they were the really fun neat ones, but they were all stuff like Evans Field, [00:54:00] little out of the way places. I mean I go into DIA occasionally, but it's not my favorite place.

BARBARA: Were there many others like Evans Field in Wyoming that you're talking about?

MERL: Oh, yeah, lots of them. Right around Laramie here, OK, Ray Grove had a field out west, there was [the Sprig?] up off of Fallow Lane. I've forgotten the name of it, there was one up by Arlington. Gil Smith had one up at Morton Pass. You know, little backwoods -- no services or anything, they were private airports, but a place you could land. But yeah, no, there were a lot of them. And there were a lot of private -- [Shlarette?], Sundance, Wyoming, that was the only airport they had and the guy who owned it died and his heirs split the place up. There was one, Bar None I think was an airport at one point in Casper. There was one at [00:55:00] [Glydon?] Rock that I'm familiar -- again, if you look at their website it doesn't begin to cover them all. And again, OK, the Green River Intergalactic is still there. Unfortunately it's not safe to land because they don't -- they try to maintain it but the kids keep tearing it up and there's no one watching it and you don't want to come in there needing to land and have all those ruts in the runway. Rock Springs is trying to keep theirs open so they can get a commuter in and out of there, but it's hard to justify. If the federal subsidies go away the commuters are going to go away. And I don't know how badly -- everybody says that will wreck the local economy. I don't know. As it is I'd say half

the people at the university drive to Denver anyway. I don't because I just can't stand DIA in general and Denver traffic, but you've got to admit it's pretty pricy to fly from here. And Sky West is doing OK, but [00:56:00] the Great Lakes outfit that had it here before, you didn't know if you were going to go or not.

BARBARA: Yeah, I've heard bad things.

MERL: And the days you could hop on a plane from here and go to say Kansas City are long since passed. And I have to question -- I mean I know the airlines are making more money with the hub and spoke system, but I really have to question how economical it is for the country. By the time you factor in everybody driving down to that place and the man hours and manpower it takes to maintain. Well, I flew to San Diego for a meeting and everything went really smooth for modern air travel and basically I tied up a day and a half either way. OK, 25, 30 years ago I could have hopped a plane and been there in a couple, three hours. Hell's bells, I could take mine and make it in six.

BARBARA: It does seem to be an ordeal [00:57:00] anymore.

MERL: It is, it really is. And they just, there was a piece on the news last night that the airlines that have the lousiest service record are the ones that have the highest stock prices.

BARBARA: Gee, you think that's correlated?

MERL: Yeah, I think that's correlatable, yes.

BARBARA: That's really interesting. This has just been so enjoyable. I have just really enjoyed listening to your stories.

MERL: Unfortunately you could probably -- you may have noticed I can ramble for a long time.

BARBARA: That's great. That's better than someone who says yes, no, I don't know.

MERL: Any rate, like I said, Laramie Flying Club, there was a Laramie Flying Club. Good luck, bad luck and bad management, they went broke. Sam Kotby, Bobby Lou Jeffries, George Twitchell -- Kotby might be someone to talk to. Do you know him?

BARBARA: I know the name.

MERL: He used to have the Dodge dealership here. Sam and his brother are Egyptian. [00:58:00] Their father was involved in selling military aircraft around the Middle East. They have flown from a fairly young age. They're, as you might kind of imagine the personality given where they come from, but Sam has been involved and he was an early supporter of the flying club.

BARBARA: You said Sam Kotby.

MERL: K-O-T-B-Y.

BARBARA: Yeah, I know the name certainly.

MERL: I don't know if you have a number for him, but he's around.

BARBARA: That's OK.

MERL: Any rate, I think he still has a Bonanza at the airport although --

BARBARA: And you think he was part of the original Laramie Flying Club?

MERL: I don't know if he was part of the original. I know that he put up some of the money they used to buy Yankee Juliet when the University Flying Club was created. Or at least that's what I've been told. I was never privy to any of those old records.

BARBARA: That early -- let's see.

MERL: There was a Laramie --

BARBARA: And what dates roughly are we talking about for that one, do you know?

MERL: [00:59:00] Mid-'70s to early '80s. Maybe late '60s to early '80s. Somebody gave me -- they didn't realize there was no relationship and a widow of somebody who'd been the treasurer gave me a whole bunch of newspaper clippings and stuff and, God, it's like watching a bad movie where you can see the end coming. And they voted to go in debt and stretch themselves to the limit to buy another airplane and

then the gas crisis of, what was it, late '70s hit and prices went up and nobody had a job and predictable result. Then the University Flying Club started as a university student organization, university affiliated. And I don't know when we separated from the university. The university anymore wants absolutely nothing to do with aviation. I'm [01:00:00] faculty advisor for cowboy soaring club and God almighty, just the crap that we put up with there. But any rate, so the University Flying Club became independent from the university somewhere in the '90s and then in 2003 or '4 some of the newer membership that didn't have any of the history just said, "Look, we ain't got anything to do with that bloody university, why do we call it" and they changed the name. So you've had, there's Laramie Flying Club, University Flying Club, Laramie Flying Club.

BARBARA: OK, I get it. Now, this is just kind of a side question, but who maintains the records for this organization and where are they?

MERL: (laughter) The IRS would like to know, I'm sure.

BARBARA: No, I don't mean it that way. I'm thinking as an archivist who --

MERL: Unfortunately this is like a lot of flying clubs and a lot of clubs in general. We're probably in a world of hurt. OK, Steve [Bays?] is the treasurer right now and I think

he's kind of acting as the sort of secretary. [01:01:00]
Andrew Hanson was our last secretary; he only did it for a year. I don't know how many records he inherited. I know when I was acting as president I had a little banker's box. It wasn't much and it was awful scant. Unfortunately the records I think are largely folklore. And we're having the same problem at Colorado Soaring. We've got a physical plant that's worth over \$1 million and we don't have like our original (inaudible). There's a lot of paper that's -- people retire and die and the paper work gets thrown out and that has come back to hurt a lot of clubs.

BARBARA: Sure, yeah. I was just curious about that.

MERL: Like I said, I would say Lurlene Bressler -- get you a number here. Lurlene or Wes. I'd say probably Lurlene, [01:02:00] 721-8804. She was only involved with the club from 2004 or so, but she's like a hyper organized sort of a person and she's kind of hung around aviation for quite a while here in town so she worked out at the airport.

BARBARA: She'd be great to talk to because actually I think I've only talked to one other woman in this project.

MERL: That's the problem we've got. It doesn't seem to attract -- it must be sex-linked, but wings just don't attract women.

BARBARA: I understand that, but I did talk to one gal --

MERL: That one, she was ready to solo and all of a sudden --
I remember one day we were sitting there and she was
talking about oh, yeah, she's about ready to solo the
glider and how neat it was and one of her friends goes,
"Ewww" and that's the last time she flew.

BARBARA: And that was your granddaughter?

MERL: That's my daughter. She's the one I'm going to see in
Oklahoma. Actually it's kind of [01:03:00] interesting.
She was back visiting over Christmas and I took her for a
ride, she asked to go, and she says, "God, I wish I'd
followed up when I had a free instructor and airplane."
Boys don't seem to be that excited about it anymore. We've
got -- let's see. The gals in aviation are real gung-ho
and they tend to be better than average, but I'd say 10%
maybe, 15. Lurlene is definitely into flying. I fly with
her and Wes periodically in that little LSA of theirs just
to smooth out some of the rough spots, coach them a little
bit. Ask her about stalls some time. But Lurlene is
hyper-organized and she was the secretary of the club for a
period. She might have some records.

BARBARA: [01:04:00] Can I tell her that you --

MERL: Sure.

BARBARA: I'm going to get out of your hair.

MERL: All right.

BARBARA: This has just been so great. But I need you to sign something. As I said, this is the state archives so the information will go into the state archives and be available for researchers. There's no commercial use of it. If somebody wanted to turn your life story into a movie you'd have to give permission.

MERL: They wouldn't have much. There's nothing I told you that isn't public information. Now, off the record we could talk about some of the flights from Evans Field to some of the places for breakfast.

BARBARA: That just sounds like so much fun.

MERL: Yeah, like I said it's just -- well, it's kind of funny. In gliding and soaring we refer to it as a landout, not an emergency. And it's just part of flying. You don't have an engine. Periodically you meet lots of new friends. Hopefully friends. [01:05:00] But in power it's kind of frowned upon to land some place other than where you intended.

BARBARA: Can I have a mailing address for you?

MERL: 2852 Riverside.

BARBARA: So you can practically walk to work, right?

MERL: It's about a mile and a half. I ride my bike.

BARBARA: Oh, cool.

MERL: I like Laramie.

BARBARA: I do too. I've been here -- I've been in Wyoming
since '91 and I've been in Laramie -- is that 82072?

MERL: 82070.

BARBARA: I've been here about a year and a half and I really --

MERL: Like I said, I grew up in Loveland and this was as
close as I could get to home in more ways than one. It's
nice.

BARBARA: OK, just a signature right there. You're welcome to
read it if you like or then I'll give you a copy and you
can read it at your leisure. Thank you so much. And
thanks so much for the recommendations [01:06:00] too.

MERL: That's fine. Like I said --

BARBARA: That helps me a lot.

MERL: -- after you called I was kind of like she doesn't
want to talk to me --

BARBARA: Yes, she does.

MERL: -- but I got to thinking, I hate to say it but I'm
getting to be the senior person in town.

END OF AUDIO FILE