America's Local Service Airlines Part I

by David H. Stringer

Many folks today do not realize that, in the 1950s and 1960s, the United States was blanketed by a group of air carriers that served virtually every nook and cranny of the Lower 48 states. Residents of smaller cities, such as Hazleton, Penn., Moultrie, Ga., and Gallup, N.M., could board a 24-28 passenger Douglas DC-3 at their hometown airport and be on their way to any place else in the world. The 13 airlines certificated to provide this convenience eventually wound up serving more than 580 cities in the U.S. with a fleet of more than 400 aircraft.

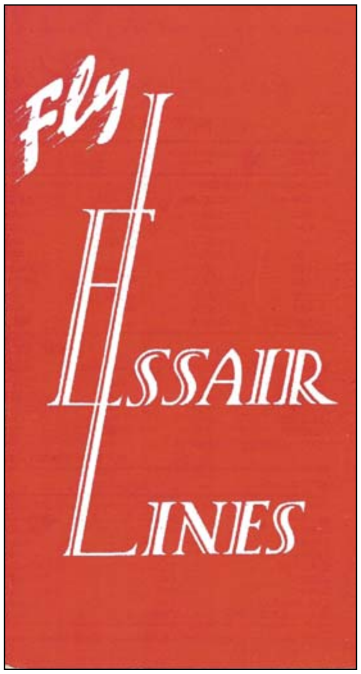
These Local Service Airlines, as they eventually became known, were given birth by the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB). In 1943, the CAB undertook a mission to investigate the possibility of extending scheduled air service to smaller cities and towns throughout the United States even if the service to some of these communities might not be economically viable. This was an incredibly progressive undertaking for a government agency. America was in the midst of WWII. The nation was becoming "air-minded" and the members of the CAB knew that, once the war was over, every city and town would want to be on the airline map with this new industry carrying the weight of importance that the railroads had shouldered in the 19th century. Providing transportation to isolated towns and implementing air service to communities near military installations in support of national defense were additional reasons for examining the potential of this new type of air carrier.

In order to make routes into smaller cities attractive to airline entrepreneurs, government aid would be offered in the form of subsidy for carrying the U.S. air mail. When the war ended there would be hundreds of freshly-trained pilots returning to civilian life looking for jobs. There would also be an assortment of war surplus aircraft available. With these three forces at work: subsidy, manpower, and affordable aircraft; the seeds were planted and the timing was right.

The CAB issued its opinion in the summer of 1944, stating that, indeed, this new level of air service should be instituted on an experimental basis. There would be a whole new set of certificated carriers to be called "Feeder Airlines" because their primary purpose would be to transport passengers from smaller cities and towns to the big airports where those passengers would be fed to the trunk airlines for their onward journeys. By this time there were already hundreds of applications on file for different forms of air service to small cities and towns. In addition to feeder airline proposals using fixed-wing aircraft, there were helicopter service presentations, plans for mail pick-up service and schemes by companies associated with railroads and bus lines for air service to be coordinated with their primary businesses. In addition, the established trunk airlines were very wary of creating a whole new set of airlines when they felt that they could handle the feeder service proposal themselves. But the CAB wisely decided that an entirely new and experimental concept should be carried out by new outfits that would have to prove themselves capable. Their operations would be scrutinized every few years to determine if their certificates should be renewed. The Board felt that large carriers concentrating on bigger markets would not offer the kind of service envisioned for smaller, less productive stations.

The process began. Regular CAB hearings scheduled to cover service proposals in specific parts of the country would now include applications for feeder air service. Presentations were made in these "cases," oral arguments were heard, proposals were examined and recommendations were made. After the recommendations were studied, awards would be granted by the five-member Board and, often, there would be appeals and rebuttal arguments. After the process had run its course, many applicants would be eliminated and one company that had shown it to be particularly "fit, willing and able" to provide feeder service in a particular part of the country would walk away with the coveted Certificate of Public Convenience

Many of the local service airlines started service with Beech 18s/C-45s similar to this Challenger Airlines. Most quickly graduated to Douglas DC-3s. (Photo from the Robert Parameter collection)



Empire Air Lines replaced their Boeing 247s with five Douglas DC-3s, including NC62376 seen here. They would merge with West Coast Airlines in 1952. (From the author's collection)

and Necessity. Most of the time the Board got it right. They chose an outfit that could take the concept from drawing board to reality. And America's Local Service Airline network began to take shape.

THE FIRST FEEDER AIRLINES

The honor of being the first of the certificated feeder carriers to get off the ground goes to a company calling itself Essair, the ESS standing for Efficiency, Safety and Speed. On August 25, 1945, Essair began service between Houston and Amarillo, Tex., via four intermediate stops using Lockheed L-10A Electras. The following year Douglas DC-3s were introduced to replace the Electras and the company management wisely changed the outfit's name to Pioneer Air Lines. Pioneer would become the first of the local service carriers to operate an aircraft larger than the DC-3 when it replaced its fleet of "Gooney Birds" with Martin 202s in 1952. Unfortunately for Pioneer, the upgrade to Martins without permission did not sit well with the CAB and the company was eventually forced to reinstate an all-DC-3 operation. Pioneer reintroduced the Martin 202 into its fleet before finally succumbing to a merger with Continental Air Lines in April 1955. By that time Pioneer was serving 21 stations in Texas and New Mexico.

Florida Airways, originally called Orlando Airlines, was awarded routes in the State of Florida in the CAB's Florida Case, decided in March 1946. Florida operated Beechcraft D-18s to 10 airports in northern Florida on routes stretching from Orlando to Jacksonville and Tallahassee. Service was planned as far south as Miami and as far west as Pensacola. But Florida Airways would be out of business in 1949.

Empire Air Lines, formerly known as Zimmerly Air Lines, was already operating in Idaho when it received its certificate on May 22, 1946, to operate from Idaho Falls, Idaho, to Spokane, Wash., via a string of intermediate cities. Empire operated Boeing 247Ds, eventually replacing them with five DC-3s. Empire would merge with West Coast Airlines in 1952. West Coast would be the surviving carrier.

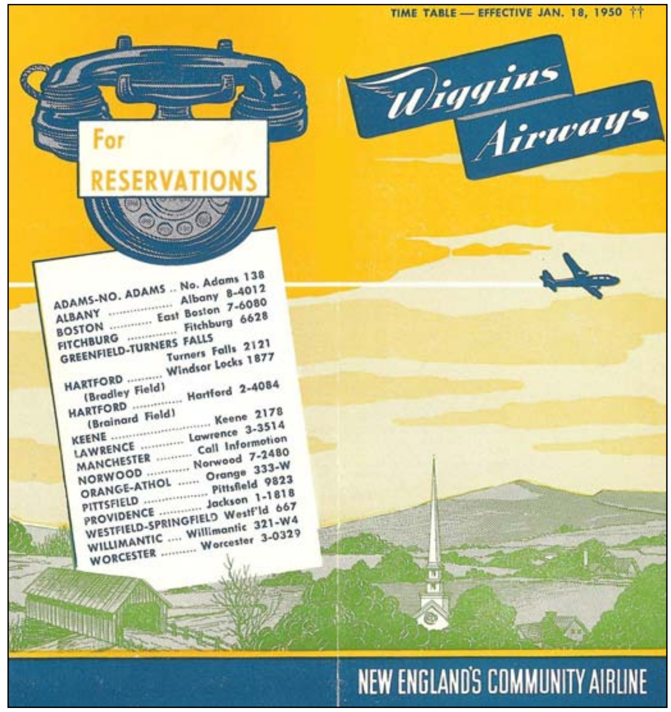
Other CAB route cases in 1946 gave birth to more feeder airlines. Ray Wilson, Inc., an applicant from Denver, Colo., was awarded routes from Denver and Salt Lake City south to Albuquerque via intermediate stops in the Rocky Mountain States Case. When the company inaugurated service in November of that year it had taken on the name Monarch Airlines. In that same case, Summit Airways was chosen to operate from a northern terminus of Billings, Mont., southward to Salt Lake City and Denver via intermediate points. By the time Summit began operations in the spring of

1947, it had rechristened itself Challenger Airlines. Monarch and Challenger would eventually merge and absorb the certificate of yet another feeder, Arizona Airways, in 1950. The amalgamated enterprise would proudly call itself Frontier Airlines.

In the CAB's West Coast Case, also heard in 1946, two more feeders received their certificates: Leland Hayward's Southwest Airways was awarded a system that stretched from Los Angeles northward through many cities in California to Medford, Oregon. Nick Bez's West Coast Airlines received authority to operate from northernmost Washington State (Bellingham) southward to Medford, where it met up with Southwest. Both airlines began service in December 1946. Southwest Airways would change its name to Pacific Air Lines in 1958.

By the end of May 1947, seven feeder airlines were operating under their new CAB certificates: Challenger, Empire, Florida, Monarch, Pioneer, Southwest, and West Coast. Two airlines, Bonanza and Robinson, were conducting intrastate operations in Nevada and New York State, respectively, but both would be operating under full CAB feeder certificates before long. One more company, All American Aviation, was flying air mail and express only on a unique air pick-up system in the Middle Atlantic states. All American Aviation would eventually abandon this type of operation for a full-fledged passenger, mail and express feeder certificate as All American Airways, ultimately to be renamed Allegheny Airlines.

All in all, between 1945 and 1950, 25 new airlines were issued Certificates of Public Convenience and Necessity to



Oliver Parks formed Parks Air College Airlines in 1944 and was awarded routes out of St. Louis, Mo., that were eventually sold to Mid-Continent Airlines. In September 1950, Parks began operating this DC-3, N12989, in the Parks Air Lines livery, but was acquired within days by Ozark Air Lines. (From the author's collection)

West Coast Airlines serviced Washington, Oregon and Idaho, connecting with Southwest Airways in Medford, Oregon. (From the Tim Williams collection)

Southwest Airways DC-3, N63107, seen at Los Angeles (LAX) in 1952. (From the Tim Williams collection)

operate as feeders. Hundreds more were rejected in their bids for certification. The term “feeder” was losing favor as the definition of this new type of air carrier was evolving. Not only was their purpose to “feed” passengers to the trunk airlines, the new carriers were expected to connect big cities with the smaller cities and towns within their market sphere of interest allowing a person to travel from the big city to the small city in the morning, conduct business, then return home later the same day. The ability for the opposite transaction was also to be provided for by these airlines: a person could leave their small city residence in the morning, fly to the big city, conduct business or shop, and then return home late that same afternoon or evening. To provide this level of service a minimum of two round-trips per day over each route would be necessary, one outbound from the big city or “hub” airport in the morning, another in the late afternoon or evening and one inbound in the morning, another later in the day. The ideal route would have big city airports at both ends with smaller cities along the route between the two, similar to links in a chain. That way flights proceeding in both directions would have a large terminal city at either end to serve as a shopping or business destination and as a transfer point for passengers connecting to trunk airline flights. The title Local Service Airline conveyed this concept better than the moniker Feeder Airline and it became the standard term for these new companies.

THE CONCEPT COMES OF AGE

The feeder airline concept was an experimental proposition and the CAB exercised tight control over the rules of what these carriers could and could not do. The Board’s goal was not only to protect, nurture and grow the new Locals but also to protect the interests of the trunk airlines assuring that they would not suffer undue competition from this new breed. When the CAB announced its approval of the feeder concept in 1944, it issued guidelines for certification of the new carriers. Each certificate would state specifically what a company could and could not do with regards to nonstop or skip-stop service. And even though only the companies that were meticulously scrutinized and found to be the most “fit, willing and able” were selected to perform the new service, their certificates were subject to renewal after three years following yet another meticulous review of their operations. Everything about the feeder airline concept was “temporary” and “experimental.”

By 1955, the original 25 certificated companies had been whittled down. Of the 25, five had never gotten airborne under the terms of their certificates (Air Commuting, Arizona, Island Air Ferries, Purdue Aeronautics and the proposed helicopter operations of the Yellow Cab. Co. of Cleveland) and three more had their certificates cancelled by the CAB after their first three-year review (Florida, Mid-West and E.W. Wiggins). Two mergers between two different sets of Locals (West Coast / Empire, Monarch / Challenger) had reduced the number of operating certificates by another two and one (Parks) had its certificate revoked after a lengthy investigation during which it tried to establish service. One more (Pioneer) merged with, and was absorbed by, a trunk carrier, Continental Air Lines.

Los Angeles (LAX) was the only common service point between Bonanza and Southwest, captured here in this 1956 photo of Bonanza DC-3, N91232, with Southwest equipment in the foreground. (From the Tim Williams collection)

The 25 Feeder Airline Certificates Issued by the C.A.B., 1945 – 1950

AIR COMMUTING
ALL AMERICAN AIRWAYS
ARIZONA AIRWAYS
BONANZA AIR LINES
CENTRAL AIRLINES
CHALLENGER AIRLINES (formerly SUMMIT AIRWAYS)
EMPIRE AIR LINES (formerly ZIMMERLY AIRLINES)
ESSAIR
FLORIDA AIRWAYS (formerly Thomas E. Gordon d/b/a ORLANDO AIRLINES)
ISLAND AIR FERRIES
MID-WEST AIRLINES (formerly IOWA AIRPLANE CO.)
MONARCH AIRLINES (formerly RAY WILSON, INC.)
OZARK AIR LINES
PARKS AIR TRANSPORT
PIEDMONT AIRLINES
PURDUE AERONAUTICS CORP.
ROBINSON AIRLINES
SOUTHERN AIRWAYS
SOUTHWEST AIRWAYS
TRANS-TEXAS AIRWAYS (formerly AVIATION ENTERPRISES, INC.)
TURNER AIRLINES (formerly ROSCOE TURNER AERONAUTICAL CORP.)
WEST COAST AIRLINES
WIGGINS AIRWAYS (officially E.W. WIGGINS AIRWAYS)
WISCONSIN CENTRAL AIRLINES
YELLOW CAB COMPANY OF CLEVELAND

In addition to the above, Mid-Continent Airlines, one of the existing 'trunk' carriers, was issued a feeder certificate in 1950 for the one segment of the Parks Air Transport (Parks Air Lines) system that was awarded to Mid-Continent when the C.A.B. revoked Parks' certificate. That segment extended from Sioux City, Iowa, to the terminal points of Chicago and Milwaukee via several intermediate stops. The remainder of the Parks system went to Ozark Air Lines.

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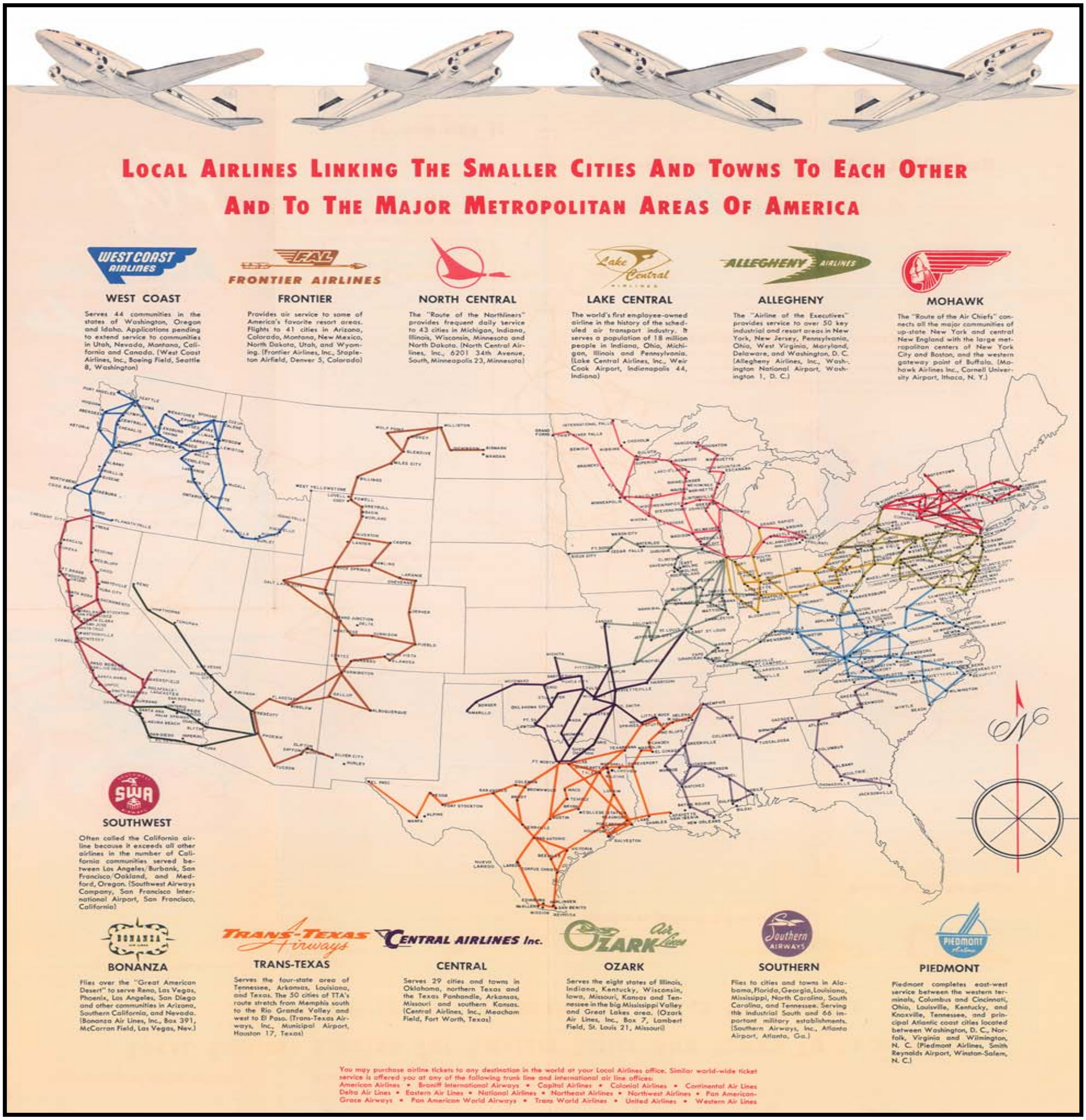

By 1956, competition and consolidation had resulted in 13 local service carriers, each with its own niche market as indicated in this period route map. (From the author's collection)

That left 13 relatively strong operating companies in business as of May 19, 1955. The 13 each operated in their own territory and, together, they did a good job of covering most of the continental United States. On the date mentioned above, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation that gave permanent certification to the 13 remaining Local Service Carriers. No longer would their certificates come up for renewal every three to five years. With assurance from the United States government that these airlines would be around for awhile, they now became much more attractive to financiers. They became stable investments instead of risky ventures.

Each of these 13 carriers became familiar to the residents of the territory that they served. These were their hometown airlines. Because of the regular and reliable schedules that the local airlines offered to the communities that they served, businesses and industries were more willing to establish offices and locate manufacturing plants in smaller cities. The Local Service Airlines connected "Main Street USA" to the rest of the world and gave many of the small cities and towns on their networks better inter-city commercial transportation than they would ever see again. ❑