

Interview with Arni & May Richter

Dec. 15, 1992

1. Why did islanders decide to establish an airport in 1928? Wally Arnsen interested local people in flying by 1) taking them up for rides 2) offering instruction. None of the 18 original subscribers flew themselves. Some used planes to transport goods, perhaps in part because early planes lacked storage space. Arni, upon examining the 18 subscribers concluded that an airport might reduce the remoteness of the island community; in the 20's & 30's ferry service was limited and seasonal. Arni did note that "General Ray" Anderson was first attracted to the island because he attended a fly-in fish boil. (There may have been others who purchased homes [second] here for the same reason.)

In the late forties, the fear of H-bomb attack may have played a role in airport expansion in 1948.

2. The "bull picnic" of 1929 was one of a series of such events. The ceremony was held at the airport, although Arni & May did not think off-islanders (of whom there may have been close to 100) flew in. The island was well-known throughout the state for being a center of pure-bred disease-free Holsteins. Just about every island family had its own cow in those days so of course the whole island came to the picnic and the dance later at Nelson's Hall.

Indians were a part of this ceremony as their chief wished to visit burial sites of his ancestors. One Indian told the assembly that their custom of eating dog meat was ceremonial, a way of identifying with mother earth. Prominent attendee was popular county agent.

3. Claude Cornell, Mary's older brother by eleven years, was taught to fly by Wally Benson. (Mary herself took a single flying lesson with Wally.) Claude's wife, Ruby Garnett, came from the Coonto area. Mary thinks Claude purchased the plane partly so he could fly Ruby back and forth to see her relatives. Claude's plane was strictly used for pleasure, it had no commercial purpose.

4. The Dickie Bjarnason episode - Arni was asked to accompany Dr. Farmer to scene of accident. The arm "looked pretty rough" so Dr. Farmer arranged to take Dickie to Escanaba. Since Esther & other family members wanted to go, two planes were chartered. They landed safely on the ice at Detroit Harbor. Esther & family members took off for Escanaba. Dickie, Dr. Farmer & pilot followed in second plane. Carburetor trouble caused second plane to land at Jackson Harbor. The plane having been repaired, the pilot prepared to take off. Instead of take-off, the wheels broke through thin ice, negating the flight to Escanaba. Dr. Farmer then contacted Dr. Dan Dorchester of Sturgeon Bay to come to Dickie's aid. When Dorchester's plane arrived, it was after dark so cars were lined up on the ice to provide landing light. Shortly thereafter, Dickie's arm was amputated on Dr. Farmer's kitchen table. Dickie had lost so much blood a second Sturgeon Bay plane was commissioned to bring up more. Arni recalls Dickie was incredibly self-possessed, looked at his shattered arm and calmly asked what "the doc" thought of it. Arni recalled the weapon as a shotgun.

5. Arnie mentioned Wesley Hanson's WWII experience being shot down in the Burma theater.

6. Further contacts: Elaine Cornell Gilson of Sturgeon Bay (Cland's adopted daughter); Poke King.