

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSIONER

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: Grant Lane  
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Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner  
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30 Pages



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BAUMGARTNER: Today is March 24, 2022, and my name is Karl Baumgartner. I am conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Grant Lane at Lane Airport, Rosenberg, Texas. This is the story of the first airport built in Rosenberg and the history of the aviation company created there by Grant Lane and his father George Lane, Jr. It describes the development of a tiny crop-duster business operating south of Rosenberg, into an international corporation with facilities in Brazil and sales as far away as the Mideast and Africa.

Grant, I'd like to start with your personal and family background before we talk about your family's involvement and development of the aviation business in Fort Bend County.

What is your full legal name?

LANE: Grant Erling Lane.

BAUMGARTNER: Your date of birth and place of birth?

LANE: May 3, 1954, in Polly Ryon Hospital, Richmond.

BAUMGARTNER: And what were your parents' full names?

LANE: My dad was George Curry Lane Jr. He was also born in Rosenberg, in 1920. My mom's name was Mary Judith Tinius Lane but she was known as Judie.

BAUMGARTNER: How long has the Lane family been around here? Was your dad the first generation in the county?

LANE: No, his father was, George Lane Sr., my grandfather. And his wife, my grandmother, was Edith Ray. The Ray family had a lot to do with Fort Bend County. Going back into the late 1800's and early 1900's they were a fairly prominent family around town.

BAUMGARTNER: So, your dad was born in 1920 and grew up kind of in the aftermath of the Depression. Did he ever comment much about that era?

LANE: No, I mostly recall him just talking of his early school years and high school years. He ran track and had typical activities. He became associated with a member of the Taylor Ray family, either the son or nephew of Robert H. Ray who I believe was Taylor Ray's nephew. Robert H. Ray was in the oil and Geophysical business. Dad worked for him as a teenager as a field man and was involved in surveying and working around the United States.

BAUMGARTNER: Taylor Ray was namesake of Taylor Ray Elementary School on Avenue N in Rosenberg, I guess?

LANE: Yes.

BAUMGARTNER: Was your dad in World War II?

LANE: Yes. He was at Texas A&M working toward a degree in geophysics. And then the war came about, and he and his brother Mickey (we called him Uncle Mickey), went in and joined the Navy.

BAUMGARTNER: Is that Rocky and Dusty Lane's dad? Rocky and his brother Dusty would be your cousins, Rosenberg natives.

LANE: Yeah, Rocky is Mickey's son. Dad and Uncle Mickey went in and joined as pilots. They both already knew how to fly; somewhere along the way they had taken lessons and learned. So anyway, they went in and joined the Navy. During the training process Uncle Mickey had an injury, a broken leg or something, and it slowed him down. Dad continued on and then went into the Marines as a fighter pilot. Uncle Mickey went into the Navy as a transport pilot.

BAUMGARTNER: How did they learn how to fly planes?

LANE: I'm not sure; I don't recall that part of the story.

BAUMGARTNER: I mean, I don't know how many planes were flying around in the 1930s.

LANE: I always accused them of acting as Orville and Wilbur Wright [laughter].

*Editor's Note: It was in 1903 that the two brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright, the first aviators, built and flew the first machine-powered aircraft in history on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. [Click this link for more information.](#)*

BAUMGARTNER: Okay, so they were in the service together. When did they get out?

LANE: 1944 or 1945. Both of them were discharged then and they came back here and started their business south of town in 1946. They named it Lane Airpark.

BAUMGARTNER: So, your dad and his brother created Rosenberg's first airport. Today what I would like to talk about is for you to describe the background and history of the business and how it evolved over the next seventy-five years.

How big was Rosenberg in those days when they started?

LANE: 4500 people. By comparison, today it's closer to 45,000.



*George and Mickey Lane at opening of Lane Airport in 1946*

BAUMGARTNER: They built the airport by themselves?

LANE: Yes. They built this hanger here themselves (walking outside the office at Lane Airport). And right next to it was a Quonset office, just like you would see on the Gomer Pyle TV show. And then they had a small shop over here on this side of the building as well. And that's really how it started out.

BAUMGARTNER: And so, they built the building. And then what?

LANE: They saw a need for flight instruction, and the VA bill was available for financing. The Veterans Administration provided funding for flight training and they could use their training and experience from the war to train others. Basically, they started the airport with the idea of teaching people to fly under the VA bill.

BAUMGARTNER: That was the initial impetus to get the business off the ground.

LANE: Right. The agriculture and crop-dusting end of the business actually started a little later.

BAUMGARTNER: And so, what did they do for planes? How do you get a plane when you're starting out?

LANE: They obtained local loans and probably loans through relatives to be able to buy some of the planes, and equipment.

BAUMGARTNER: What did those cost in real money?

LANE: Probably \$300.

BAUMGARTNER: You're kidding. Wow. That's all? Like a fancy bicycle today?

LANE: It's pretty inexpensive in today's dollars. I'll bet you right now, that was probably equivalent to \$1000 to \$1500.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. And who did they train? Was it farmers who wanted to use them for their crops?

LANE: No. Nothing in the way of agricultural at all. It was all either just general aviation flying or people who wanted to use them in their business for transportation.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? I didn't know that private little planes like that were so plentiful then. And so, how long did they continue that? When did it branch into crop dusting?

LANE: They started off in the training end of it, and then they found that it wasn't really making enough money to sustain the operation and support the two families, Dad's and Uncle Mickey's families.

So, they started looking at some alternatives. Some farmers had gotten interested that there was the ability to put out materials by air. They came to Dad and asked him about it, and in 1948 he started looking into it. And then he went in and procured some little planes called Stearman's, which were World War II training aircraft. The government was disbursing them, and they actually had a bunch of them over at Kyle Field in Bryan and were selling them off.

BAUMGARTNER: Who built those?

LANE: Those were built by Boeing Aircraft.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, Boeing was around then?

LANE: Oh yes. The plane was called the Boeing Stearman. And I'm sure it was built under contract for the government. They built thousands of them.

## CROP DUSTERS

Anyway, they became available up at College Station on bid, and they could be bought between \$100 and \$300 apiece. So, Dad was able to get a number of those. He brought them down and converted them into planes which could be used for crop dusting.

BAUMGARTNER: What is crop dusting, and how does it work? I've seen crop duster planes flying over farmers' crops ever since I was a little boy.

LANE: Crop dusters are specially built agricultural airplanes that are used to spray or eject a fine, mist-like material over agricultural crops, to serve as pesticides or fertilizers or other specialized purposes to protect the crops.

Material is stored in containers in the planes called hoppers. They store either dry, solid materials such as dust, fertilizer or seeds; or liquid materials with chemical contents. Dry materials are dispersed through the bottom of the hopper through a device called a spreader; liquid material is dispersed out of the aircraft using a pump and valve assemble attached to each wing.

When Dad was getting started, he brought little Boeing Stearman planes down here and converted them into sprayers by adding a tank to hold the material and booms attached to the wings to disperse the material.

BAUMGARTNER: That doesn't sound too complex.

LANE: It was not real complex. Nothing like what we've got nowadays.

A lot of the material that they sprayed at the time was dust. That's why the original name of this company was Lane Airport, but the company name was Southern Air Dusting and Spraying. And so, the material that they put out, some of the material they put out, was a dust.



BAUMGARTNER: Do you mean dirt particles mixed with some kind of chemical material? And dust you are talking about, that was really like dust?

LANE: Yeah, actually dust. And that was done by using the same hopper in the airplane that you would for the liquid, except rather than going out through a pump to the spray booms, it went out through the belly of the airplane, what we call a gate box. A gate box and an apparatus attached to the bottom of the airplane called a spreader. And that would produce the dust.

BAUMGARTNER: Is that what the crop dusters used? I've seen them fly forever, but I vaguely thought...

LANE: That is how they got the name crop dusters. Because it's been around for years.

But crop dusting is no longer a “fly by the seat of your pants” job in airplanes modified or converted from some other surplus aircraft. GPS is used in nearly all agricultural aircraft today for accuracy of material placement to avoid spray drift off target. It is a highly demanding job that requires professionalism from the time the plane is prepared for the job until it is put up in the hangar at night.

BAUMGARTNER: So, with respect to people being worried about getting contaminated by the spray, is there a difference between reality and their perception?

LANE: Yeah, but probably back then of course there wasn't as much knowledge of chemicals as there is nowadays. And knowledge can be good and it can be bad. There's a lot of misconception about poisons. The big one was Rachel Carson's Silent Spring book about DDT which created a reputation of it being really bad. The DDT saved so many lives it's unbelievable with the use of it.

BAUMGARTNER: The DDT was a chemical spray.



LANE: Yeah. Or it could be dust. It all gets back to knowledge and how it is used.

BAUMGARTNER: Over the years were you guys burdened with litigation threats regularly?

LANE: Not too many. We've always been really proactive on how we handle our spray operation with regards to litigation. You get the complaints and whatnot generally related to off- target drift. It typically originates out in the middle of the field and the question is, if somebody gets sprayed in the middle of the field, what are you doing in the middle of the field? One of those deals. Plus, we see obstacles. We see things around the field, we see people, we see cars. We do everything we can to avoid getting material on people.

And a lot of the material that we put out is not dangerous material. I mean, fertilizers, seeds, and the fungicides that we put out, even the insecticides that we put out nowadays that are known as barazides, they're very short lived in their toxicity. And the industry has come along so far in type of nozzles that we use, the chemical that we mix it with, material that we can add into the chemical load that can retard drift and make the droplet heavier. A lot of work towards the deposition of the droplet on the plant and not out of the field.

BAUMGARTNER: When did your dad's business start evolving from training into also crop dusting?

LANE: 1948.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, it was pretty soon after the airport opened.

And who would be the crop duster? Would it be a farmer that he taught how to fly?

LANE: No, the crop-dusting operation was actually Dad and two or three other pilots that he had. Mel Chynoweth, did you ever know him?

BAUMGARTNER: Yes, the name is familiar.

LANE: Yeah. His son and daughter still live in the area. Michael Chynoweth, who worked with Houston Light & Power for a number of years, came out of the war as well and worked for Dad for something like 55 years. He was a pilot. He and Dad and a couple others flew. Uncle Mickey never did fly the agricultural end of it. He went the way of a corporate pilot because, back to my uncle again, Robert H. Ray needed a corporate airplane and a pilot. And so, Uncle Mickey would fly the corporate side of the business.

BAUMGARTNER: You said your uncle was Robert Ray. There was a Bob Ray business on Avenue H in Rosenberg.

LANE: No, that was the Ray Glass business. My relatives who had property in the area were Robert H. Ray, Don McMillan.

BAUMGARTNER: Don McMillan, the automotive dealer.

LANE: Yeah. Don McMillan and his wife, Collette Ray were out of the Taylor Rays that we've mentioned. Taylor Ray, who the school is named after, and there was also an offspring, a younger Taylor Ray.

BAUMGARTNER: What was Taylor Ray's background? Was he in education or was he someone they would name a school after? Just out of curiosity.

LANE: I'd really have to refresh my Rosenberg history to see. When you start getting into the Lane history, then my cousin Rocky would be the one to check with.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, really? I haven't seen Rocky around lately. Is he still involved in real estate?

LANE: Yes. Anyway, Rocky really dove into the history part of it. I had some articles and paperwork that he had written, part of my dad's files.

BAUMGARTNER: But in regard to crop dusting, you said that activity was handled by your dad's employees or your dad. There are other crop dusters around. Are they just individuals who decided to get into this? I remember in the mobile home business back in the 80's, from time to time I would have people come in and say that they were crop dusters and wanted to buy a mobile home. And you never could get them financed because the lenders would always say, that's too dangerous a profession.

LANE: It would appear that way but our industry has matured along with equipment. Safety is our number one priority and the aircraft are built with that in mind. Also, the aircraft can cost upward of 2 million dollars now and you don't want some "hot shot" pilot tearing it up.

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah. When you were talking about a few hundred dollars when your dad started that didn't ring a bell.

LANE: And yes, there are always other crop dusters around the area in competition. It wasn't like we all got along and didn't compete. Our charges were not based on hourly fees, which would have been a lot better if we just charged by the hour. But we charged by the acre or by the pound of material that we're putting out per acre. And there's different amounts that you can put out. You can put out a gallon per acre, two gallons per acre, three up to ten gallons per acre. And the more you put out, the higher the price, naturally. Say that you're putting out five gallons and you're charging at the time, say, \$5 per acre. And then your competitor, he's offers to do it for \$4.50.

BAUMGARTNER: The American way.

LANE: Anyway, the crop duster operators in the area would compete. Dad had some who were good friends who just kind of drew a boundary line particularly up around Katy. For example, Dad took care of everything south of FM1093 and the competitor did it north of 1093. But nowadays we've got two operators over by the Alvin- Rosharon area. Then you go west towards El Campo; there's two operators at El Campo and one operator at Eagle Lake.

You've got an operator at Bay City and then got them kind of scattered around. There used to be three operators up north in the Katy - Brookshire area, but no operators there now because of the housing explosion.

BAUMGARTNER: So, crop dusters contract out to farmers – that's their primary business.

LANE: All are contracted out to the farmers in the area. As far as farmer owned airplanes? Well, there's two now. There's actually one that's over in Garwood. There's a large farmer over there who bought out a flying business, and he will do not only his, but he'll do other farmers as well. And then there's another one, the grass farm over at Boling. He's a farmer that bought a single airplane, maybe his own. He doesn't fly himself.

BAUMGARTNER: With the way that litigation has got so overwhelming in recent years, it seems like that would be something you'd have to cope with all the time, either threats or potential lawsuits.

LANE: You have to carry your liability policies. We haven't had an exorbitant amount of litigation over the years. I can't count more than two or three that I can think of. Like I said, we did our part to hold it to a minimum.

### PROGRESSION OF THE BUSINESS

BAUMGARTNER: So, your dad got started in the later 1940's. How did the business progress?

LANE: Working from 1948 on, Dad continued the agricultural end of it, crop dusting to protect farmers' crops. During the winters when he wasn't flying the agricultural end, he liked to trade airplanes. He would travel around and buy and sell airplanes, general aviation airplanes. He enjoyed doing that, and inspecting and keeping up with developments in equipment.

## LELAND SNOW

And then in 1957, he met Leland Snow. He is a good story in itself. He was a Texas A&M graduate in aviation design, aeronautical engineering. He was a young kid, ten years younger than Dad, who loved airplanes and could fly them as well.

He started out and he built him a little plane he named Snow S1, the first plane he developed. He actually designed it and built it, and he took it down to Nicaragua and flew it down there for the cotton crop. Crop dusters during that time, back in the mid-50s, would go down to central America when the season here was over with. They would travel to Nicaragua because there was a need for airplanes and crop dusters as they grew a large amount of cotton there.

Leland would fly his airplane down there to test it and prove his concept. And then he would come back and would make some changes on to improve it.

*Editor's Note: [Click this link to read a Texas Monthly article about Leland Snow.](#)*

BAUMGARTNER: That's a pretty long distance.

LANE: I mean, really, if you look at it, in the airplanes that they were flying in those days, that took some gumption and some barnstorming and a lot of drive to do that.

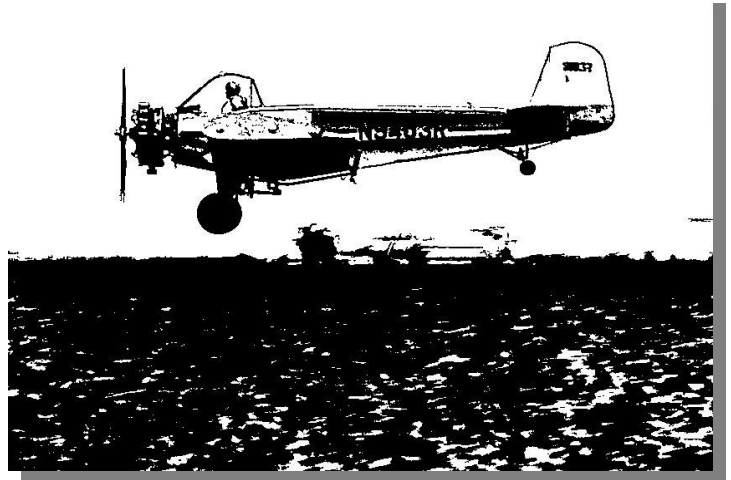
BAUMGARTNER: Really. Wow.

LANE: Anyway, when he came back, he decided that he could make the plane work. And he came up with this new design, which is the S2, and the next step

was to arrange financing so the plane could be built. He set about trying to find funding for it.

Olney, Texas, about 40 miles south of Wichita Falls is out in the middle of nowhere north of Possum Kingdom Lake. There was an old military field there with three runways and the city fathers were trying to get growth into the area.

Telling the story, Leland said he was taking the plane up there to show them what he had, and what he was going to build. He was a small man and so young they said he looked like a kid when he hopped out of his plane. He met with the city fathers and gave them a demonstration and they ended up funding him!



*Original Snow SP2 Crop Duster Airplane*

BAUMGARTNER: So that's where the plane was to be built initially?

LANE: And the aircraft are still built there today.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? Wow.

LANE: In fact, it's the largest employer in the area. Almost 400 employees now. Out of this little factory that started back in the late 50s.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow, that's quite a success story.

LANE: What it is. Leland continued modifying his new design. Dad was attending a conference of aerial applicators at College Station in the Fall of 1958 where Leland was debuting a new airplane, and Dad liked what he saw and put a deposit down for two of them. And that became the first Snow Airplane.

That airplane was a new concept. It was designated an airplane built for agriculture. It wasn't converted to a crop duster like everything else prior to that, like the Stearman and Piper Super Cub planes. Now we had a plane built for agriculture.

BAUMGARTNER: What were some differences between the new design which the old ones didn't have?

LANE: It generally had a little larger tank in it. The wing was designed specifically to be a lifting wing, not a speed wing. You weren't after a lot of speed in the airplane, but you wanted to be able to lift a lot. And so, the airflow was designed and used to lift the loads, and for the airplane to be somewhat stable while flying. The first one was an open cockpit airplane. You sat almost right behind the engine, and the hopper, the area of the plane that contains the material to be dispensed, was actually behind you. You tried to put the hopper in the center of the airplane for center of gravity loading and weight distribution. And so, as the hopper went down it didn't change the weight and go forward and aft on the airplane. It just kind of stayed in the center.



*Hangar at Lane Airport in Rosenberg*

And Dad had success with that airplane. Leland continued to build three more models. His first one was called the S2A. And then he built the S2B, S2C, S2D, and then the S2R.

Dad's involvement with Leland continued to grow during the process of these model changes, and Dad became a dealer with Leland.



BAUMGARTNER: So, Leland was the manufacturer, and your dad became his dealer, a company responsible for selling and distributing the product. And how long did that last?

LANE: It began in the early 1960's and we remain one to this day.

BAUMGARTNER: During over 50 years of continuous change in the aviation industry. Remarkable history of continuity. You must have seen quite a lot of Snow over the years.

LANE: I knew him over half a century. If we hadn't had Leland Snow in our business, it would have been a different story.

BAUMGARTNER: You had a lot of exposure to the real pioneers in the business, didn't you?

LANE: Yeah, over the years.



*Lane Airport in Rosenberg*

## GRANT LANE – GROWING UP WITH AIRPLANES

BAUMGARTNER: Grant, when did you go to work for Lane Aircraft? You must have grown up around planes.

LANE: When I grew up all I wanted to do is fly, period. It didn't matter when I was a little kid out here waiting, just hanging out and whatnot. And when an airplane left here that maybe I could have got a ride on and missed, I was in tears. I missed my flight. Flying even nowadays is still something for me that's really enjoyable. I look forward to doing it.

It's not everybody's passion. I mean, some people like the job, but I'm talking about I just like to get in an airplane and in an hour, there's a time change, and a scenery change, and I'll be in a whole different area.

BAUMGARTNER: What's the age requirement to fly a plane?

LANE: Well, it starts out with a glider. You can actually solo in a glider at 14 years and then a powered airplane at 16.

BAUMGARTNER: Really?

LANE: Yes, at age 16 you can fly solo by yourself or with a flight instructor. And then at 17, you can get your private license, which allows you to take passengers, but you can't charge for your services. 18, you can get your commercial license, which does allow you to carry passengers and charge for your services. And then on top of that, you've got ratings that you earn like your helicopter rating or your instrument rating, or multi-engine rating. Ratings permit you to operate more advanced aircraft.

BAUMGARTNER: Does that seem bold to you, to fly at those ages at the time?

LANE: At the time, no, I did them all [laughter].

BAUMGARTNER: Really?

LANE: Yeah. I started taking lessons when I was about ten years old, and I flew solo on my 16th birthday.

BAUMGARTNER: Was that a big deal? I would think so.

LANE: About five different airplanes I flew solo that day.

Most people just get one airplane. We have five different kinds of airplanes here. And I solo all of those. Got that done. And then afterward I went down and got my driver's license.



*Local newspaper article about Mark's solo flights at age 16 in 5 different types of airplanes*

BAUMGARTNER: Really.

LANE: It was a busy day. (Laughing)

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. That seems dangerous to me.

LANE: Like I said, when you're young like that, you're bulletproof.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

BAUMGARTNER: When you were in high school, did you spend much of your time here? When did you start hanging out around the airport?

LANE: Any opportunity I had. In school, I did a little bit in sports. I played football in junior high, and then I played golf in high school, and that was really about it. I didn't do any other extracurricular activities in the summertime. I always was working out here. I graduated out of Lamar.

When I started flying, I started doing AG -crop duster work back in the early 70s.

BAUMGARTNER: So, you were what, barely in your 20s?

LANE: Barely 18.

BAUMGARTNER: What other family members are involved out here at the airport with the company?

LANE: My son Logan is an A & M graduate, and I've got a stepdaughter, Elise, here, too – another A&M graduate. My brother, Mark, is also here on a part time basis after retiring helping move aircraft around the country to the buyers.

Mark, who was a pilot, came back about 25 years ago, and I needed a chief pilot. So, he was my chief pilot in the Ag business up until he retired in 2017 when he told me he really wanted to slow down. He'd been there 20 years.

When he said that I thought, well, that's a good time to close my Ag business. I had been thinking about it. I didn't want to go hire another pilot, because it's a pretty critical area. The Ag business had become a minor part of our business and I just said, I'm going to get that headache off me.

BAUMGARTNER: And that worked out good?

LANE: It really worked out well. Mark's done some contract flying for some other operators and he's done well at that and made some good money doing it, and then this year he said he's just not going to do it anymore. He hangs out at his leisure, and he helps me move airplanes.

BAUMGARTNER: Mark's a good guy. I used to play gin rummy with him and Mac McCune and those guys. And so, Logan is your right-hand man.

LANE: Yes. Logan has been here five years now since graduating A & M. He's Vice President of the operation. He's fixing to get married later in the week.

BAUMGARTNER: Did he grow up in the business to the extent that you did when you were growing up?

LANE: He had an interest in the business, probably not as much as I did. He's doing what I'm doing. He flies. He has his license.

Like yesterday, we needed to move an airplane from the factory over to Cleveland, Mississippi, just north of Greenville. And so, he and Mark did that. He took Mark up to get the airplane, and then he chased him.



*Grant and son Logan*

Mark was here this morning. He plays gin with former sheriff Milton Wright. They go in the conference room once or twice a week.

BAUMGARTNER: I haven't seen Milton much lately. I know he's still kicking and making trouble. I need to call him and harass him.

LANE: Tell him that he's an easy take. They are playing a penny a point. Milton will come back in here and play and I got him for a \$1.50 yesterday.

### LANE AVIATION BECOMES INTERNATIONAL

BAUMGARTNER: But anyway, the business continued to evolve after you phased out the crop duster business.

LANE: Yes. Leland sold out his Snow Aircraft in 1968 to Rockwell International, and during a 5-year non-compete period he designed a state-of-the-art agriculture airplane. He named it Air Tractor. During the intervening period Rockwell began building a competing ag airplane with Pratt and Whitney engines which was named the Thrush. So, at one point we at Lane were dealing with Rockwell as well as Leland and became dealers for both airplanes.

Following completion of his non-compete agreement Leland began selling Air Tractor in 1973 and asked Dad to help him market the airplanes, and we became the first Air Tractor dealer in 1974.

BAUMGARTNER: That's what's sitting outside?

LANE: Nothing like that; not exactly. But it was a predecessor. Pratt and Whitney had earlier developed the engine that we are using nowadays and put it into an airplane that you might have heard of called a King Air. They're still producing the engines for the King Air.

BAUMGARTNER: I think I've flown in them; isn't King Air one of your buddy Steve Holmes' airplanes?



LANE: Yes, I've got one over here in the hanger, too. King Air is such a great airplane. Good transportation. Not real fast, but fast, 300 miles an hour airplane.

BAUMGARTNER: Steve has taken me on a few trips in them.

LANE: Yeah. He's a good friend. He comes in, we see him at least once a month.

BAUMGARTNER: He's done good. He was contemplating retirement, and despite Covid put a deal together and sold out his aviation business just in time before the pandemic hit.

LANE: Yeah. It's funny, with Covid and aviation, I don't understand it. We've been doing great. I mean, we got more work than ever. We're sold out through mid-2023 now.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? Wow. People have backlogs that long just to get inventory.

LANE: Karl we used to have airplanes sitting out here at the airport, used and new airplanes. We would be sweating. I know Dad did and I did. We would have loans down at the bank and the interest was high plus insurance, and we would be pacing the floor out here on what we were going to do with those airplanes. And today, it is 180 degrees from that right now!

BAUMGARTNER: Somehow it turned around and Covid hasn't slowed it.

LANE: It was doing okay before that, but for some reason I don't get the correlation.

But we reached a point in our business where we were carrying two competing lines—the Pratt and Whitney Thrush and Leland Snow's Air Tractor. We reached the point where it was a good time to go ahead and give one up and so we continued with Air Tractor.



For many years our main business had been agriculture, flying and crop dusting. We were busy and that made 95% of our money. The sale of the airplane was a plus every now and then. And then it worked itself to the opposite side where sales were making up 95% of our business and our crop dusting was just 5%.

BAUMGARTNER: At some point then you had started expanding overseas, hadn't you?

LANE: Yeah. We were already selling some internationally at the time, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Africa, Australia. But nothing in South America. And I had a good friend tell me I should expand in South America.

Then another friend of mine, who writes for our industry in a magazine distributed worldwide, had just started going down to Brazil, and he said, hey, you need to come along and go down there with me. And I thought, what a perfect opportunity. And so, I got with him, and we went down to Brazil. He had already been going for a couple of years, so he kind of knew a little bit around down there.

BAUMGARTNER: Now, when was this?

LANE: This was about 20 years ago. We went down and I started kind of looking around and thinking this might be good because agriculture was growing down there. The product that they had down there was a smaller airplane, and the farms down there were large.

BAUMGARTNER: Did they have Air Tractors down there or was it a different aircraft?

LANE: It was a different aircraft. They were just starting to get some Air Tractors into the country, just starting to hear about them. And there were a few in the country, but very few.

Anyway, I went down and found out that there was no way I was just going to be able to be sitting here in my Texas office selling airplanes in South America. So, I needed some help, and I joined forces with a company down there called Aero Global. And the guy that was running it actually was an engineer, but he sold the other airplanes for the company.

### OPENING IN BRAZIL

BAUMGARTNER: So why would you need a facility down there-- for display or for parts or for maintenance, or actually for distribution?

LANE: Actually, for distribution. Somebody down there running the sales.

BAUMGARTNER: Because nobody down there was going to fly up to Rosenberg, Texas, to look at your product.

LANE: Right. It's a trip and a half just to make the trip. We do occasionally have customers come visit. Some of them will make the trip, but it's an effort.

BAUMGARTNER: So, you opened a distributorship?

LANE: Yes. My distributorship is about 150 miles west of Sao Paulo in a small town named Botucato, Brazil. It turned into a great relationship with the guy who owned Aero Global, Fabiano Zaccarelli. He had the desire, I had the need, and he built the facility down there. The airplanes never really go to his facility, but he built a large training facility to help with the transition to the aircraft and to teach the guys down there about the aircraft. He's also got a training facility for the engine to teach him about the turbine engine.

And in fact, I'm going next week. He has a grand opening because he expanded the facility, and he took a crashed Air Tractor down there and built basically half the airplane, a wing and the fuselage. Which they can inspect for maintenance instruction.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you keep an operable airplane down there for demo purposes?

LANE: Never had one to spare.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? That's great.

LANE: Right now, we've sold about 250.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. So, who does buy them in Brazil?

LANE: Operators, but mainly farmers. We sell a lot to the farmers. The farmers are so big down there that it's like another tractor to them, it's another piece of equipment. We've got one farmer down there with over a million acres.

BAUMGARTNER: My goodness. That's more than the King Ranch.

LANE: Unbelievable. You go to his place and you go to the main facility and it's almost like a little community. It's got a school; it's got a little hospital and infirmary. We call it Little Walmart [laughter]. And anyway, it's all on his place there.

When I visit, we fly to Sao Paulo, and a lot of the time we rent a car and take off; we may see a couple of operators en route before we go to an open house that Aero Global is putting on.

BAUMGARTNER: And so, you bring someone to go along with you, too. Now, do they speak English?

LANE: I always find somebody that speaks English. And what's really interesting on it is that you get to talk to these people who can speak English. If you ask them if they went to school to learn English, they explain they learned it off the television.

BAUMGARTNER: Really.

LANE: They love American television in songs. With the music down there, a lot of the songs are in English.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? How is Brazil doing and how is President Bolsonaro doing?

LANE: I think he's doing okay. It's better than the last one they had who I think they locked up.

BAUMGARTNER: I guess that was Lula da Silva. Anyway, he's running again, he's trying to make a comeback.

LANE: Whatever. Out of jail to run for office.

BAUMGARTNER: So, you don't need to know any Portuguese when you go?

LANE: I wish I knew Portuguese.

BAUMGARTNER: By coincidence early in my career I worked for a major bank in New York City and was scheduled to ship to Sao Paulo with the Bank, and studied Portuguese for a year. Do you know any Spanish?

LANE: I know some Spanish. You can kind of get by, but Brazil's the only country down there that speaks Portuguese. I tell people If you can speak Spanish, throw some rocks in your mouth and you're speaking Portuguese.

BAUMGARTNER: How often do you go down there?

LANE: Two or three times a year.

BAUMGARTNER: Is it fun?

LANE: It used to be a lot of fun. Now it's more business. Ten-hour trip down and just the logistics of getting around, whatnot and getting tired.

BAUMGARTNER: Is Brazil, the country, is it making progress in the world?

LANE: I think so. Agriculture is growing down there. In the United States, agriculture is not growing. You don't see any new farmland. All you see is new solar farms, windmill farms, taking stuff away from agriculture. Currently international sales make up 65% of our annual sales with the remainder in the US.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? That's happened since 2000?

LANE: Yes, it's been evolving that way during this period. So, we don't see the growth here coming from the United States.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you have to employ anybody here at your airport that speaks Spanish or Portuguese?

LANE: Yeah, in my Parts Department, where I actually have my largest staff, I have a lady from Brazil. And I also have a lady from Venezuela.

BAUMGARTNER: And they're both conversant and knowledgeable enough about the mechanical issues to work with and get the parts your customers need?

LANE: They've done really well.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you have much competition in selling a multimillion-dollar product like this into Brazil?

LANE: Yeah, there's actually three of us that sell the Air Tractor into Brazil.

BAUMGARTNER: So, you compete with them?

LANE: Yeah, more or less. I mean, we've got it pretty much set up right now where we're not competing on price anymore.

We finally said, hey, guys, we've got a lot of inherent expense moving airplanes. We don't need to be cutting any prices. Why don't we just all stick with our price and then we'll work on it through service? We sell service.

So again, my company has done really well down there. We sell 50% of the agricultural airplanes going to Brazil, and the other two companies take up the slack.

BAUMGARTNER: That's your key. For most successful companies, the key to their success is the difference in service performance.

How many planes do you have to maintain here on the facility? Do you keep the planes of other companies here?

LANE: We call them our people airplanes. There are just "flying around" aircraft, service planes and customers who are using them domestically.

BAUMGARTNER: Compare your yard today with what your dad and Uncle Mickey started with.

LANE: Yeah. They could take a Stearman, the biplane, the \$300 airplane. Dad said by the time that we got all the equipment and a bigger engine on it and really made it just as much of a crop duster as they could, we might have spent \$3,000.

This is nothing versus these planes out here. Each of these with the equipment on them are somewhere between \$1.6 to \$2 million.

If we got a customer that's down and out of operation when one of these airplanes are down, typically like a mom-and-pop operation that has one airplane, then you're down.

BAUMGARTNER: That is, they can't operate.

LANE: Right. It's not operating. They're not able to fly and they're right in the middle of their busy season. It's not like this is an everyday nine- to- five job. In the spring and summer and the fall, it's hot and heavy. That's your money-making period. And if the airplane is down for anything, it needs to be fixed.

BAUMGARTNER: It's like a farmer with a tractor that's down. He needs his tractor.

LANE: Every minute that you want to count is costing you money, so we use the equipment to move either parts, or parts plus mechanics, in a hurry. We try to offer that service as well. We keep equipment around that can do that.

BAUMGARTNER: That's great. That's taken place under your watch. Your dad didn't have a large role in Lane's international expansion, did he?

LANE: It was pretty much me; Dad had stepped aside by that time, more or less. He told me he wanted to slow down, and he never really retired. He just came to work later. The business was his hobby as well. He didn't really have any hobbies, and Mother did get him to do a lot of traveling there at the last of their lives.

BAUMGARTNER: Now how did he pass away?

LANE: Had a stroke. He and I had been invited down to the King Ranch by one of the King Ranch heirs, a lady that I fly around quite a bit. She asked if we'd like to come down and stay at the Norias Ranch there and do quail hunting for a weekend. Anyway, dad and I flew down to Harlingen and rented a car, and we were driving up to the ranch and actually he sneezed and had a stroke. We got him back to the hospital there in Harlingen.

BAUMGARTNER: Your dad had quite a life, didn't he?



LANE: Yeah. He never talked much about the war and whatnot. He was a fighter pilot and apparently was good at it, but he never talked about it.

BAUMGARTNER: So now your business is, to a large extent, conducting a good-sized sales and service international operation. Wow, looking from the beginning, who'd have thought?

LANE: Yeah. Looking back, it's pretty amazing. It's pretty amazing.

BAUMGARTNER: Pretty cool. I mean, really, for your dad to get out of the Marines and buy him a \$300 plane and go for it. He didn't focus on the risks, did he.

LANE: Dad used to say about the war and being a fighter pilot, that you see your buddy get shot down and other people get shot down. But the attitude was that it's not going to happen to me. Get back in the airplane and go again.

BAUMGARTNER: It's a fascinating story. I've enjoyed talking with you.

End of interview