

Interviewee: Fred Cone
Interviewer: Bill Kessler
Date: unknown

[After my interview with Bill Kessler on 30 October 2003 (GVA-4), Bill loaned me a tape of an interview he conducted with Fred Cone, Gainesville mayor-commissioner during the 1940s, about the development of the municipal airport. ...]

War assets

Kessler: As a matter of fact, I was in charge of a research project ...back in the late 1940s and early 1950s

brand new GE refrigerators

old building I

K: Mr. Cone, I was here at the time and I should remember the years you served on the city commission

C: I think it was 1942 to... 9 years

K: 1942 to about 1951?

C: Somewhere along there.

?: How did we acquire the airport to begin with, before World War II?

C: Well, World War II started and the Air Force come in here, and _____ Mobley, the city manager at the time, said they wanted the airport for defense purposes. So they rolled around town and picked out that location. _____ went out to E. Mise, head of Fairbanks. He [Mobley] came back that night, my first meeting [as a newly elected city commissioner] and says I'm just as pleased as I can be, [because] Mr. E. Mise is going to lease us the airport for a dollar a year, and we're going to turn around and lease it to the government, and they're going to build an airport. I was sitting there, with those old commissioners...Livingston, I don't know just who else was on that, [and] they said that's great. I was the brand new freshman [and] I said no, that's not great. I said we need to buy. They said oh, we haven't got the money, we can't buy.

I kept arguing with them, [saying] we ought to buy it. _____ I make a motion that the freshman commissioner be authorized to see what he can do to negotiate for the airport. I said I'll accept it. So the next morning I got in my car and went out to Mr. Mise, ... I said Mr. Mise, I came out here to talk to you about the airport for the city. I said the city, we have this old Stengel Field out in here east Gainesville and it's not going to be adequate as we grow. I said I'm not going to fool you. The governments going to pave the runways, build, put in water and sewage and improve it a great deal on your land. But I want to buy it for the city. Mr.

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Mise looked at me. He and I were real close friends, [and] he said Fred, I'll sell it. I said what do you want for it? Now I may be hazy _____, but I think he told me \$18,000. I wouldn't want to be held to that figure.

K: That number's not particularly important, that's okay.

C: Anyway, I didn't have the authority to tell him, but I said we'll take it. It's a deal. That old man, his word was his bond. So we come back, the next time we had a [commission] meeting, I said gentlemen, I've been to see Mr. Mise and he said he'll take eighteen and so many x dollars for the airport. They said we can't buy it, we haven't got the money. I said we've got to buy it. So they argued about it [for] about 45 minutes to an hour, and I said gentlemen, I'll tell you what I'll do. I've got a man who's put the money in the first national bank in the escrow, to buy it from the city when it's sold for \$18,000 dollars. They said who is that man? I said me. They said well, if you think that well of it... Clarence Stephens was sitting over there, [and] in those days Clarence had a lot of money on us. [He was a] great financial officer, because he could hide the money and wouldn't let us know where it was. I looked over there [and] I said Clarence, can you get up \$18,000? He said yes. So we went ahead and bought the airport from Mr. E. Mise. And the war went on, and they [the Army Air Forces] built the airport, and the war was over.

K: What were the conditions under which the government was using the airport, which now the city apparently bought?

C: They were leasing it.

K: Leasing it.

C: In the contract, if I remember correctly, they were to restore it back to its original condition, which would have been putting it back in pine trees like it was. So Baughman slips in there ahead of us and gets control of the airport and the buildings from War Assets for educational purposes, which was alright, if you had to _____. So they wound down and the War Assets wanted to get out of their contract. They sent a delegation down here and [at the time] I was mayor, I think. They wanted to do a little talking about [the city of Gainesville] releasing them from their obligations and bringing in the university. I said wait a minute, the university doesn't have anything to do with this. You played with the university when you had [the airport] in government hands, [but] now the city's taking it back. I said it [says] in this contract that you'll restore it back to its original condition.

K: What year was that in?

C: I don't know... it was after the war. So we had a little fuss with them, and finally they said well, will you just take it back like it is? I said, yes, we will. So we got it back. Then we went out there and built a little terminal on the corner over there, and put up a hangar.

K: Earl _____ was mayor at the time, I believe.

C: Who?

K: Earl _____

C: Yeah, I think he was. Then I lost interest in [the airport]. I've stayed out of it, although they did name it Alison Airport. I saw that on the plaque out there and I said oh my gosh.

K: It should have been the Fred _ Cone Airport?

C: No. E. Mise.

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O: That's right.

C: E. Mise, not me.

K: How do you spell his name?

C: M-I-S-E.

K: M-I-S-E.

C: E. Mise.

K: His first initial was E.

C: E. Elis Mise.

K: Elise Mise. Okay.

C: That's what it ought to be named, not Fred Cone. Because the old man just practically gave it to the city.

K: That should be recognized.

C: I said something to Shorty [Stotesbury] about the situation. I said this chamber of commerce down here don't know what their talking about. I have anything against Alison. We was raised here, went to the Univeristy [of Florida], went into the Army [Air Corps], was a great aviator, but nver came back to Gainesville to live or anything. He didn't have anything to do with it. But E. Mise was the man the airport should have been named after.

K: I agree with you.

O: Good Lord, yes.

C: But, I've been reading in the paper where they took the city manager out of the city manager job and put him out there as the airport manager [with] some tremendous salary. I don't see why they had to do that. If it were me I wouldn't have done it. And the fellow who's out there now, I don't what's his name

K: Are you talking about Bill Cousins?

C: Yes, Cousins. He's always fighting and fussing with the city. So I don't know what's going on in the city commission at the present time. But after that, my last two years on the commission Ocala didn't have much of an airport. [It] was on the west end of town. And they were growing, and I got the idea one afternoon while riding to Ocala, down where 441 and 301 merge, the land down there was selling for \$30-40 an acre, \$50 maybe a hundred. I thought about buying 2000 acres and trying to get the county in Alachua, Marion, Levy, Gilchrist, Putnam [and] Flagler to put a central airport there and assess the counties on a tax basis by population. By that we would have drawn from all these cities in freight, in commerce and we could have stopped airplanes from Delta, Eastern, any airplanes we wanted to stop to go there. We would have generated enough volume and business for them to go. Ocala, Marion County, was interested. But I came back to Gainesville and I couldn't sell the county and I think it was one of the Stringfellow boys who was head of the airport thing out there, and he fought it and I saw it was going to get into a dogfight and I said I don't give a damn if they have an airport or not. So that's where it should have been done. And those counties with a little pushing and guidance and leadership, would all have gone in and we'd have put in a Central Florida Airport.

K: That would have been the right tiem to do it.

C: Yes, that's before we built this new terminal. And that was before we ever built this first terminal. Of course, when we built the first terminal, the coastline railroad jumped on me, gave

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me a fit because we didn't build them a depot. And I had to dodge that around for a while.

K: If you're going to build a terminal for the airplanes, why not build one for the trains?

C: That's right.

K: That's kind of hard to answer.

C: It really was hard to answer, but I don't know what's going on now. And I don't want to get mixed up in it.

K: Well, I'll tell you honestly, we don't really know what's going on either, and we feel that some historical perspective would help us pull a lot of things together. They say those who don't know their history are condemned to repeat it, so by getting as much of a sense of history as we can, we might be able to figure out what's going on now a little better.

C: I can remember just how much acreage was in there now. I can't recall. Then after we got the airport

O:

K: Almost 2000 acres.

C: I thought it was around 1800.

O: I believe you're correct. 890 [acres] in the industrial park, which is the old barracks and infirmary area. See, that's another problem. You being a good land holder, we don't know why that hasn't been developed. The city commission seems to have been against development for years.

C: Well, when I was on the commission, Sperry come along, and they wanted to locate in Gainesville, and they wanted us to build a building. The only way we could have built that building without employees pension plan money. First I said no, I don't want to take a chance with those people who've been waiting for their pension. The further we went into it, finally, I said I'd go along with it on one condition, that we bond Sperry, with a bonding company to perform their contract. The vice president of Sperry came down here and he looked at me and he said Mr. Cone, for your information, we're bigger than the bonding company. I said I realize that, but I said with your lease, and your contract with the city, bonded, we have the bonding company guaranteeing it behind you, and you all try to pull any shenanigans, we've got the bonding company to fall back on.

K: It's not that they were unable to do so or able to do so, but whether or not they would do so.

C: That's what I told him. Everyone laughed, and they thought I was a country hick I think.

K: I doubt that.

C: Bond it. So we bonded it and we built it. It brought in, I've forgotten the revenue now. But it funded the city's pension plan for a number of years. ... taxpayer. Because you can take money...and actuary, it can just work so fast there's [nothing] faster. When we first started with the pension, we were the first to put it in for the employees, with the money we had and looked at the actuary, it wasn't attractive for the employee to pay monthly into it because at his retirement he wasn't going to get but about \$60-70 a month. This Sperry business put it on a sound, firm basis. It kept taxpayers about \$2 [million] off their backs.

K: It was a good deal.

C: Yes. Now what's happened to it since then I don't know. Sperry left here. I think they fulfilled their contract with the city and all, but what's out there now I don't even know that.

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O: _____ it teaches people how to work by keeping them off the streets.

C: The federal government paying for it?

O: The federal government's behind it, somehow or another their making out like it's the city. It's the old _____.

C: How much is the city getting out of it?

O: The city bought the business. That is one of the problems that we have tried to tell the city commission. We need to put a group of people on a board, and give the board the authority to run the airport as a business, and get it out of petty politics. There were some politicians who didn't want it to be developed because they own land across the road. There was another politician...