

BY JIM KERSHNER



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THE PORT OF MOSES LAKE

A history

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**PORT OF MOSES LAKE
GRANT COUNTY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
FOREIGN TRADE ZONE #203**

**7810 ANDREWS ST. N.E., SUITE 200
MOSES LAKE, WA, USA 98837-3204**



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ON THE COVER: A Japan Air Lines 747 glides in for a landing during a 2008 training run at Grant County International Airport. *(Photo by Christopher Anderson, from The Spokesman-Review's photo archives)*



CHAPTER ONE



Crowds roam the taxiways in May 1965 during one of the final open-house events at Larson Air Force Base. Larson shut down in mid-1966 and was acquired by the newly created Port of Moses Lake.

(From The Spokesman-Review's photo archives)

A RINGING CALL TO ACTION

For nearly half a century, the Port of Moses Lake has been a visible presence in central Washington – not only to the residents of Moses Lake and Grant County, but to thousands of cross-state drivers startled by the sight of a Boeing jetliner gliding high above the lonely sage flats on a training run. The Port, sprawling over 4,700 acres north of the city, consists of a huge airfield with one of the longest runways in the U.S. (13,503 feet); a modern airport terminal; extensive facilities for aircraft testing and training; complete aircraft repair and service facilities; and numerous multi-million dollar industrial plants and factories. It has become one of the key economic drivers for all of central Washington.



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Yet back in the mid-1960s, the Port of Moses Lake emerged as something even more vital: the salvation of the city of Moses Lake itself. The town was facing the biggest crisis in its brief history. Its very existence was far from certain.



“The thought around here was that Moses Lake was going to dry up and blow away.”

- Col. (ret.)
Clyde Owen

Why? Because on November 24, 1964, the U.S. Department of Defense dealt a devastating blow to the people of Moses Lake and Grant County. It announced that it was planning to close Larson Air Force Base, the keystone of the Moses Lake economy since 1942. Larson was on the front lines of the Cold War, a major Strategic Air Command (SAC) base and a Titan missile base. It employed about 4,000 people and housed about 8,000 – in a town whose entire population was only 11,299 (1960 census). The only other big industry in Moses Lake was the U&I sugar beet factory, which employed only one-tenth as many people.

“There were no other industries,” said

“The thought around here was that Moses Lake was going to dry up and blow away,” said Col. (ret.) Clyde Owen.

Why? Because on November 24, 1964, the U.S. Department of Defense dealt a devastating blow to the people of Moses Lake and Grant County. It announced that it was planning to close Larson Air Force Base, the keystone of the Moses Lake economy since 1942. Larson was on the front lines of the Cold War, a major Strategic Air Command (SAC) base and a



Owen. “None whatsoever.”

Owen was certainly aware of the implications, since he was the man who had to deliver the news to a stunned populace. He was the commander--destined to be the last commander--of Larson Air Force Base. He remembered opening the official letter announcing the planned closing and then calling the editor of the Columbia Basin Herald in Moses Lake, and saying, “I have some pretty strong news for you.” The harried editor asked if the news could wait, since he was about to roll the presses. Owen delivered his bombshell. It was the presses themselves that would have to wait as the front page was remade.

The editor of the neighboring Grant County Journal in Ephrata expressed the general sense of foreboding in an editorial on November 30, 1964, a week after the announcement.

“The full realization ... is a little numbing,” said the editorial. “It is hard to realize how we can continue to prosper



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Larson Air Force Base was named for Major Donald A. Larson, a pilot from nearby Yakima who died in combat in Germany during World War II. *(From the Port's archives)*

without its \$15 million annual payroll and the \$4.5 million that is spent locally with suppliers.”

To understand the impact of the closure, we must first understand the history of Larson itself. It began on November 24, 1942, when the army opened the Moses Lake Army Air Base just north of town for training P-38 pilots and later, B-17 Flying Fortress crews. Moses Lake, in the rain shadow of the Cascades, turned out to have ideal flying weather: clear weather most of the time, high ceilings the rest. Most

important of all, it had vast amounts of air space, clear of competing air traffic.

In May 1945, the Moses Lake Army Air Base was briefly mothballed. Then, in 1948, Moses Lake landed its biggest windfall: the installation reopened as a U.S. Air Force base, the headquarters of the 325th All-Weather Fighter Wing, bringing in more than 1,000 military personnel and civilian employees. In 1950 it was renamed Larson Air Force Base, a tribute to the late fighter pilot Donald A. Larson from nearby Yakima, who was killed in a mission over



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Larson Air Force Base was by far Moses Lake's largest employer, so the community had to come up with a plan to turn this vast, de-commissioned airfield into an economic asset.

(From The Spokesman-Review's photo archives)

Nazi Germany. One of the tasks of the new base was to patrol the skies over Hanford's atomic facilities, the Grand Coulee Dam and into Canada.

The base grew even bigger in the 1950s

as it acquired a troop carrier wing and an air transport operation. Larson made tragic international news in 1952, when an Air Force C-124 transport plane crashed on takeoff, killing eighty-seven passengers



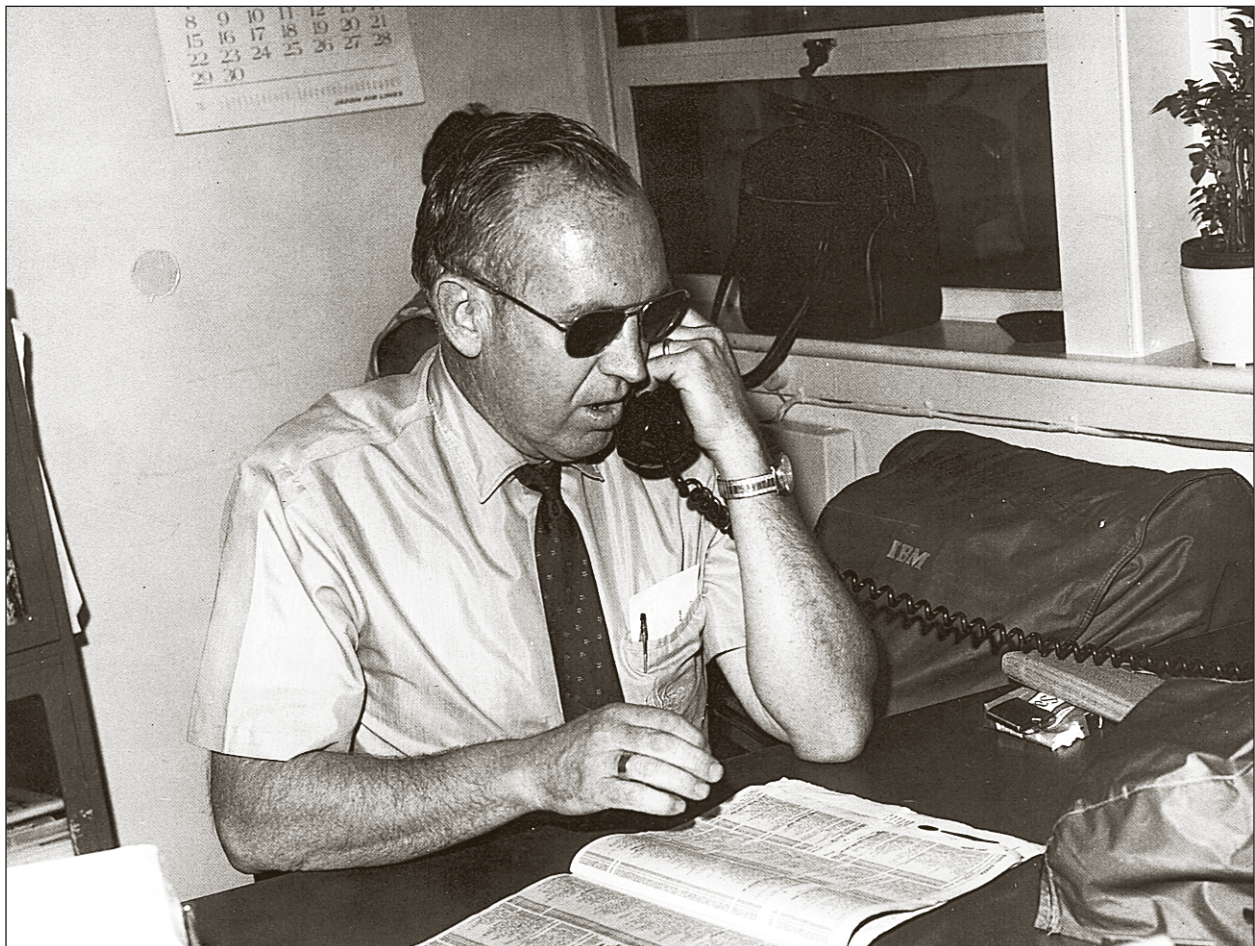
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and crew, mostly service personnel heading home for Christmas vacation. It was, at the time, the deadliest crash in world aviation history (surpassed six months later by another C-124 crash, near Tokyo).

Yet Larson continued to grow. Because of its proximity to the big Boeing plants on Puget Sound, Larson soon became a Boeing test flight center for B-52 Stratofortress bombers and KC-135 refueling tankers. The Air Force built a massive hangar at the base,

capable of holding eight B-52s at once. In 1960, it became a Strategic Air Command base under the 4170th Strategic Wing and also acquired three Titan missile-launching facilities, scattered in the countryside.

This was the status of Larson when Owen took over command in April of 1963. Larson had 15 B-52 bombers, each of which could carry four nuclear bombs. Six bombers and four Stratotankers were on combat readiness alert at any one time.



The Port's commissioners convinced Clyde Owen, the final commander of Larson Air Force Base, to become the first executive manager of the Port of Moses Lake. (From the Port's archives)



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Larson appeared to be a vital component in the Cold War national defense system. Yet in another ways, there were signs that Larson was among the lowest of the Air Force's priorities.

"As I look back, I missed the signals," said Owen, nearly fifty years later. "We had the worst facilities of any military base in the country. No doubt, it was the worst-equipped and worst-prepared base I had ever seen."

Every year Owen would submit a budget to the higher-ups, and every year they gave him only the bare minimum to keep the base going for one more year. Most of the facilities dated from 1942 and had never been upgraded. The commissary was up on blocks. Owen's own headquarters was heated by a oil-fired stove.

They "never spent any money maintaining the thing," and when they did, they only made things worse.

"I don't know where in the world they got a bunch of pink paint, but they did," said Owen. "And they painted everything the worst color you had ever seen."

Larson Air Force Base had acquired a nickname known throughout the Air Force: Moses Hole.

"They jump all over me for using that term," said Owen. "But it was referred to as Moses Hole."

So when the Air Force began announcing a series of base closures in the mid-1960s, Owens said he "should have known something was in the wind."

Even Washington's powerful senators, Warren Magnuson and Henry "Scoop" Jackson couldn't save Moses Hole. On the day of the closure announcement, exactly twenty-two years to the day since the wartime Army Air base had been opened, Owen had to break the news to 500 civilian employees and nearly 3,500 troops. Most of them knew they would be relocated to another base. The people in the larger Moses Lake community didn't have that option. The only shred of hope? They had

a one-and-a-half-year grace period until the official closure of the base was scheduled on June 30, 1966.

The Grant County Journal issued a ringing call to action in that same 1964 editorial: "Now is the time for concerted action. If ever the tri-cities of Moses Lake, Ephrata and Soap Lake needed to join hands, to look upward toward future

"Now is the time for concerned action. If ever the tri-cities of Moses Lake, Ephrata and Soap Lake needed to join hands, to look upward toward future potentials of Larson Air Force Base, the time is now."

- 1964 editorial in the Grant County Journal



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A view from the tower during the transition period from Larson Air Force Base to the Grant County Airport. *(From the Port's archives)*

potentials of Larson Air Force Base, the time is now. There is much at stake for all of us. Let us hang our crying towels on the rack and wipe the tears from our eyes. We're flat on our back and we're looking up. Let us not divert attention from this high objective."

A group called the Larson Action Committee immediately sprang up, chaired by Dr. Alfred M. "Al" Philips, president of Big Bend Community College. First, delegations went to Washington D.C. to

try to talk the Department of Defense out of their decision. No luck. Then, they formed subcommittees to look into the best options for turning this huge air base into some kind of community asset. They soon discovered that a public port district might be a particularly powerful tool.

A port in a land-locked county? Not far-fetched in Washington. Patrick Jones, current executive director of the Port of Moses Lake, said the state of Washington "uses the word 'port' differently than most



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parts of the world.” Public port districts were first authorized in Washington state in 1911 mainly to help maritime ports develop public docks, wharves and other infrastructure and to seize control of the state’s harbors from railroads and other private interests. Yet by the 1960s, the

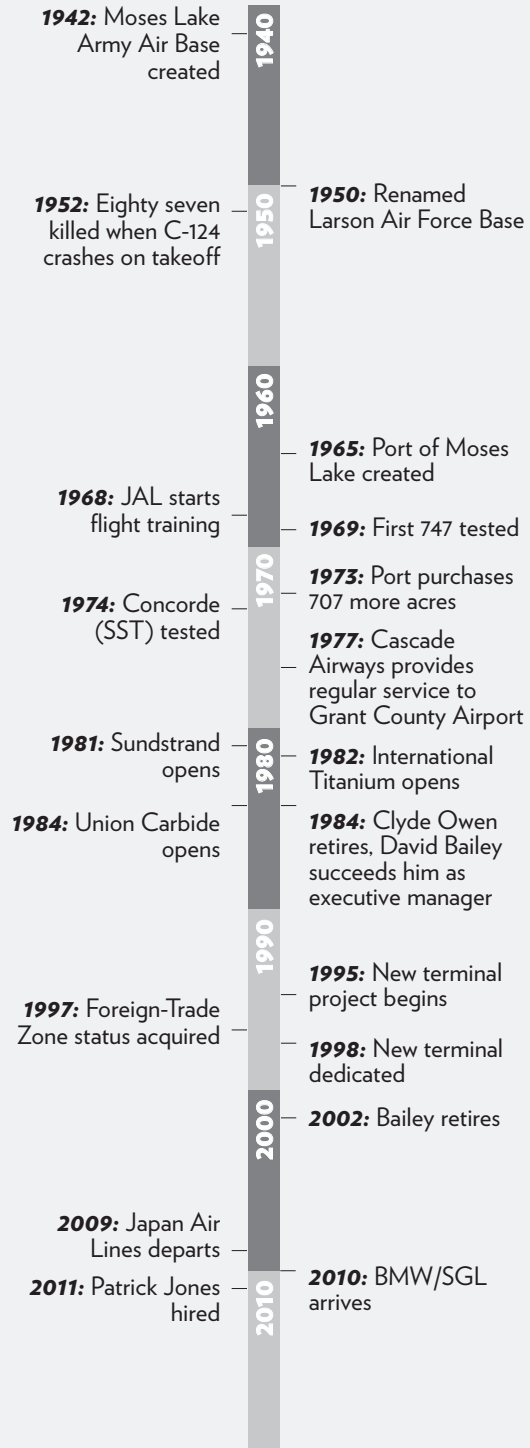
On Nov. 2, 1965, voters in Grant County overwhelmingly approved the Moses Lake Port District by a vote of 1,835 to 201.

state legislature had broadened the definition of a public port to allow non-maritime communities to create their own taxing districts for a variety of economic development projects – including airports.

By March of 1965, the Larson Action Committee realized that a public port district might be able to take over this huge airfield – with its aging hangars and infrastructure – and operate it and maintain it. The committee invited an official from the Washington Public Ports Association to speak to their group, and the committee soon became convinced that a port district was one of their best options.

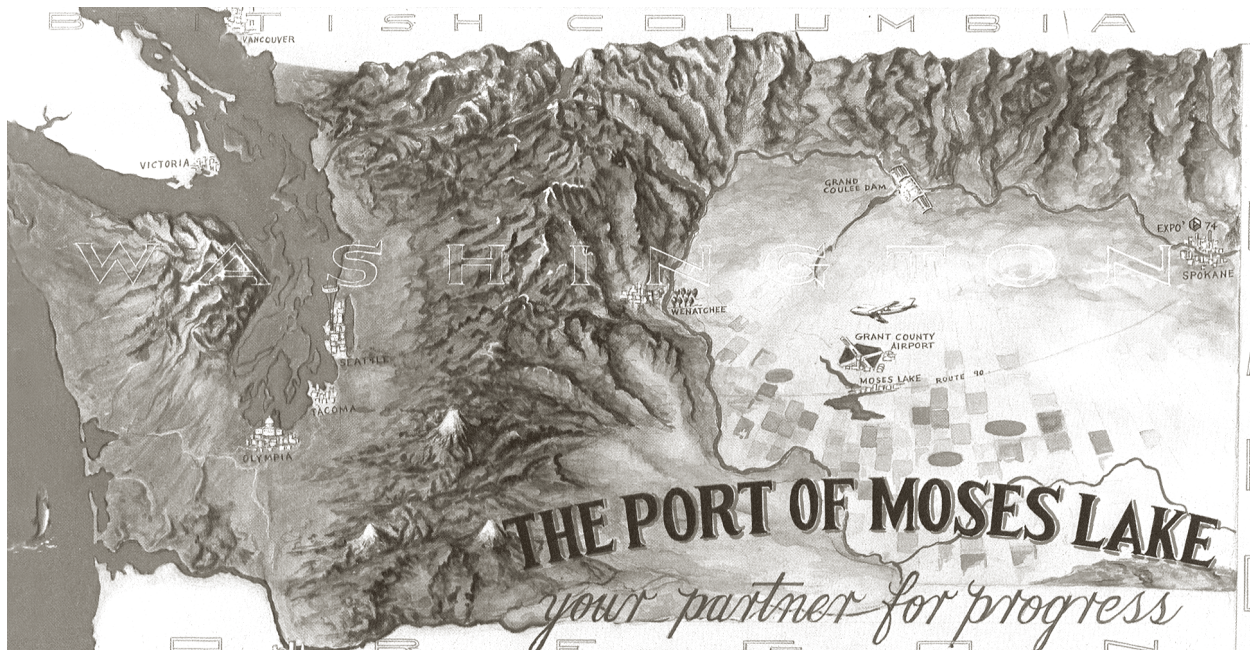
Port districts were nothing new in land-locked Grant County. In the late 1950s, a campaign had begun to create one huge port district encompassing the entire county. This idea hit some roadblocks,

THROUGH THE YEARS





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This graphic, from the cover of a 1973 brochure, showed off the Port's assets: a huge runway and a central location in the state. *(From the Port's archives)*

mainly from towns that wanted more local control and didn't want to get gobbled up by a giant district. Many of those communities subsequently proposed, and passed, their own port district propositions. So by 1965, Grant County already had eight port districts, covering most of the county, except Ephrata, Soap Lake and Moses Lake. In the spirit of "concerted action," the Larson Action Committee proposed a port district encompassing almost all of the county not already in a port district. However, in May 1965, a group of Ephrata business people called the Ephrata Industrial Corporation had a different idea. They announced plans to pursue a separate Port of Ephrata.

Chet Waggener of the Larson Action Committee told reporters that the committee "is somewhat disappointed that Ephrata is forming a separate port district rather than coming in with a proposed three-way port district." On June 29, 1965, Ephrata voters overwhelmingly approved the Ephrata Port District, the ninth in the county, by a vote of 1,036 to 287. Supporters of a Larson-based port district were not discouraged by this outcome – in fact, they considered it to be good news. It indicated that public opinion in Grant County looked favorably on port districts as a concept. So supporters quickly moved ahead with plans for their own Moses Lake-centered port district with the specific goal of taking over



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Larson Air Force Base.

“They sent people out into the community to ask them if they would be in favor,” said Owen.

They were. Boundaries were established, encompassing 380 square miles with Moses Lake roughly at its center. Petitions were distributed and signed. On September 13, 1965, the petitions were presented to the county and certified. Two weeks later, the Grant County commissioners authorized a vote on the issue in the November 2 general election. The official name of the district was specified as “Grant County Port District #10 (Port of Moses Lake).” Races for three port commissioners from three commissioner districts were on the same ballot. The Larson Action Committee and other

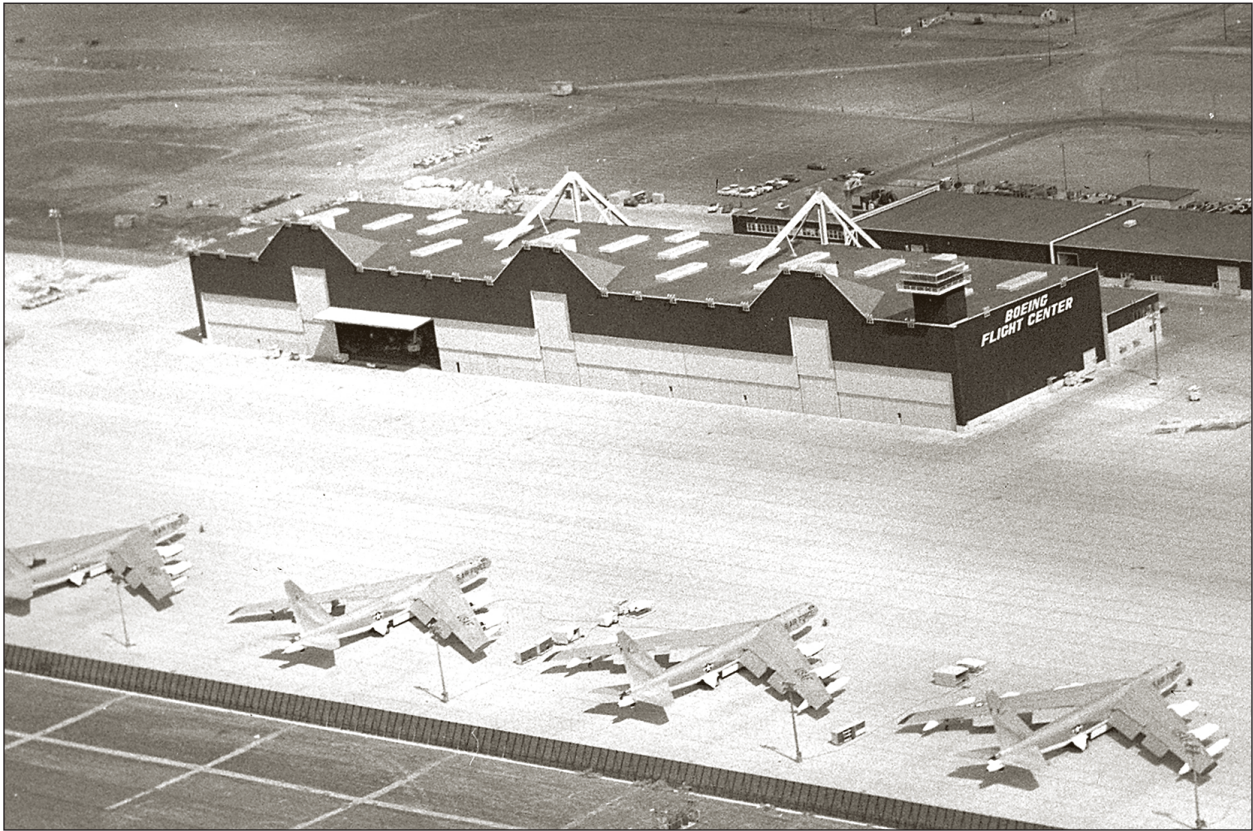
proponents of the new port district had a little over a month to whip up enthusiasm for an issue that could potentially raise the property taxes of all of the farmers, ranchers, homeowners and businesses in the district.

As it turned out, port boosters had nothing to worry about. The port issue passed by a vote of 1,835 to 201. That’s a ninety percent approval rating and a landslide by any measure. Three port commissioners were also elected by wide margins: Leon Bodie in district No. 1; Floyd Rigsby in district No. 2; and Dan B. Dunn in district No. 3. On November 15, 1965, the Grant County commissioners passed a resolution certifying the results: Grant County Port District No. 10, the Port of Moses Lake, was officially born.





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The area known as the Boeing Complex, or Boeing Flight Center, began as a test and service facility for Air Force planes during the Larson era and then became a test center for Boeing’s commercial airliners.

(From The Spokesman-Review’s photo archives)

GRANT COUNTY AIRPORT LIFTS OFF

The commissioners met for the first time on November 22, 1965. Rigsby was elected the first president of the commission; Bodie was elected vice-president; and Dunn elected secretary. They drew straws to decide their posts.

“Floyd won the draw, so he got to be president,” said Dunn in a 1996 interview. “Leon and I figured we didn’t have any money anyway, so what difference did it make?”

Commissioners were paying most expenses out of their own pockets in those early months, according to Bodie, a respected Moses Lake veterinarian. He later explained that he got involved with the Port because “whatever



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good happened to Moses Lake also happened to me . . . I wanted to do all I could do to help.” Rigsby was a prominent area car dealer, having owned Moses Lake Ford since 1956. Dunn owned Dunn Auto Electric and had been a well-known community leader for decades.

The commissioners weren’t even entirely certain that they would be able to acquire the old airbase, nor were they positive what they would use it for. At one early meeting, a citizen wrote a letter asking if Larson “could be used as a drag strip.” The commissioners, perplexed, told the man to “write again in about six months.” Another helpful soul suggested that they “raise chickens in the hangars.” Others suggested using abandoned runways as feedlots. In fact, Dunn later said that people told him that “the only thing this area was good for was raising hogs and chickens, and to give it up.” It became clear that the commissioners’ first order of business should be to formulate a more ambitious mission for the new Port of Moses Lake. They codified this mission in a “Plan of Action” passed at their December 20 commission meeting:

“Primarily, the Port of Moses Lake plans to acquire, operate, develop, construct, maintain, and regulate the property known as Larson Air Force Base, Washington, and to

create industrial development facilities, also, rail or motor vehicle transfer and terminal facilities, or any combination of such transfer and terminal facilities. To acquire, operate, develop, construct, maintain, and regulate other commercial and industrial improvements, also, rail or motor vehicle transfer and terminal facilities, or any combination of such transfer or terminal. To acquire, develop, operate, maintain and regulate recreational facilities.”

And then the commissioners proceeded to implement this plan. The key element was acquiring this sprawling property once the government officially declared it surplus. They had received indications before they even floated the port proposition that the government would be willing to turn the airfield over, yet it still required extensive negotiations. Three agencies were involved in these meetings: the General Services Administration (GSA) which had the responsibility of disposing of Larson’s assets; Big Bend Community College, the two-year state institution in Moses Lake, which was also interested in acquiring property on the old base; and the local hospital, which stood to acquire the base hospital, which Owen described as the “most modern and newest facility on the base.”

In February 1966, the Port recruited a crucial ally--The Boeing Company--in its



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Crowds gather for the official dedication of Grant County Airport on Oct. 8, 1966.

From the Port's archives

case for taking over the airfield. Boeing had long used Larson's long runways and uncluttered airspace to test its B-52 bombers and other military aircraft. Now, Boeing went on record as saying it wanted to use the former Larson runways and facilities to train airline pilots and flight crews as part of its commercial airplane business. The aircraft giant, based in Seattle, said it wanted to expand its training programs and that Larson would be key to that expansion.

"If Larson is acquired by the Moses

Lake Port District, the training program will be split between Boeing Field and Larson, with the bulk of the training done at Larson," said Layne, chief of pilot training for Boeing. He went on to tell news reporters that "Boeing is prepared to begin using the facilities as soon as contracts can be drawn up."

This is exactly what the Port needed to strengthen its case to the GSA: a "facility-use reason" for acquisition of the airfield. Boeing was so adamant about using the airfield that it sent a representative to



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almost every negotiating session. His job was, in Owen's words, "to make damn sure that nothing was going to happen to that runway at Larson AFB." Boeing had good reasons for wanting to ensure access. Boeing was delivering dozens of Boeing 707s and 727s to airlines around the world, and those airline flight crews had to be trained. Meanwhile, the 727-200 (the stretched version of the 727) and the new 737 would soon need to be tested. The Boeing 747, a giant airliner that needed a long runway, was also in the planning stages. Boeing Field in Seattle and Paine Field in Everett were too crowded for all of this training work. The airspace was often clogged, and people in the area were beginning to complain about the constant din and roar of takeoffs and landings. At Moses Lake, training flights could take off and land all day. There were more jackrabbits than people to hear them. One airline training chief would later remark that he could accomplish in four hours at Moses Lake what would take at least five hours at almost any other airport.

As it turned out, Boeing's involvement was more than sufficient to solidify the Port's case. The GSA subsequently granted the Port of Moses Lake all of the runways and almost all of the other aviation-

related facilities at the old airbase. Big Bend Community College was given three hangars for use in its flight and aviation mechanics program and would eventually acquire larger chunks of land, to which it would later move its entire campus. A federal Job Corps program, which was already occupying a site at Larson, was given the buildings it was already occupying (it remains there today). The local hospital district was given the base hospital, although it soon gave the building back. The Port had a contract with the U.S. General Services Administration to manage about 1,200 units of base housing, which was spread out south of the airfield (it would

all be turned over to the Grant County Housing Authority by 1977). The Port's share of Larson was by far the biggest, comprising 2,400 of the base's total 10,000 acres – a number that would soon grow as more pieces of Larson were made available. The value of the Port's new property was estimated at \$25 million.

While all of these negotiations had been going on, Larson Air Force Base continued to operate, but in a lame-duck fashion.

"We weren't quite closed yet," said Owen. "That's the hardest thing to explain. We were still in war plans – combat

As it turned out, Boeing's involvement was more than sufficient to solidify the Port's case.



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The audience at the 1966 dedication ceremony listened to bands, heard speeches and watched sky-diving exhibitions. *(From the Port's archives)*

readiness status, six bombers on alert, four tankers on alert, each of the bombers with bombs aboard. We were busy, and the biggest trouble was that we were losing people and there was nobody coming in [to replace them]. Down toward the end, it was getting pretty terse.”

The bombers finally left in February 1966 and their commanding officer was happy to wave goodbye to the B-52s and their immensely powerful payloads.

“When we got rid of the airplanes ... I got rid of the bombs, real fast,” said Owen. “I did not want them around.”

The bombs were shipped off to an undisclosed storage facility for nuclear bombs, and the planes dispersed to other

Air Force bases.

“The base population was about 4,000, but the minute the planes left in February

1966 it was just one mass movement,” said Owen. “The only thing that held us up was our location in the U.S. – it was difficult to get enough moving vans. By the official closing date of June 30, 1966, we were down to about 300 people. That’s all I had left.”

Owen at first assumed that he, too, was not long for Moses Lake. In fact, he was assigned to an air base outside of Bangkok, a strategic spot in the escalating Vietnam War. He considered this a good assignment; maybe the best air base he could ask for, from a military standpoint. Meanwhile, he was attending the meetings

“When we got rid of the airplanes ... I got rid of the bombs, real fast. I did not want them around.”

- Clyde Owen, in 1966



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of the new port district commissioners and giving them drawings, maps, and plans to help them prepare for the takeover. It soon became evident that he and the port commissioners were working well together; so well that the port commissioners asked Air Force authorities to postpone Owen's Bangkok assignment until the transition was complete. Not long afterwards, the commissioners approached him with a surprising proposition: Would he be interested in becoming the first executive manager of the Port of Moses Lake?

He would have to retire from the Air Force, of course, but the more he thought about it, the more appeal it had.

"My wife was really having trouble with sickness and my mother-in-law, who had gone through several strokes, was living with us," said Owen, who was forty-eight years old and had been serving in the military since 1940. "And actually, I was really getting fed up and tired of the work. I thought it was time to move on."

He accepted the Port Commission's offer and retired from the Air Force. The Port Commission and its newly appointed executive manager took care of two of the

most important tasks right away. It renamed the airfield the Grant County Airport as of July 1, 1966 and it immediately approved a contract with Boeing. The contract ran through 1980 and Boeing agreed to underwrite some of the airport's operating expenses during the first year.

The commission began planning a coming-out party for the new Grant County Airport: an official dedication ceremony on October 8, 1966. That date was chosen in part because that's when Sen. Warren G. Magnuson, one of the most powerful men in the U.S. Senate, was available to be the keynote speaker. In addition to the formal dedication ceremonies, the commission also planned an all-day community celebration and open house. They booked skydivers, stunt fliers, marching bands, and plane exhibits.

October 8 dawned cool and windy, however. A planned Flying Farmers fly-in breakfast attracted only a few pilots, instead of the hundred expected. An 11 a.m. stunt-flying demonstration by Dave Rahm of Albion was also cancelled due to high winds. However, the winds abated and Rahm's 2 p.m. performance proceeded on

"My wife was really having trouble with sickness and my mother-in-law, who had gone through several strokes, was living with us. And actually, I was really getting fed up and tired of the work. I thought it was time to move on."

- Clyde Owen, on leaving the Air Force



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U.S. Senator Warren Magnuson, shown here with Don Morgan, president of Big Bend Community College, delivered the keynote speech at the 1966 Grant County Airport dedication.

From the Port's archives.

schedule, garnering oohs and aahs from the crowd of 3,500. The Moses Lake Sky Divers Club successfully performed several jumps throughout the day. Between attractions, spectators took public tours of the control tower, the terminal and a number of planes parked on the tarmac. Some lucky onlookers were taken on a flying tour of the Moses Lake vicinity in an F-27 prop-jet.

The dignitaries gathered at an outdoor stage in the afternoon. High school marching bands from Ephrata and Warden

played rousing introductory numbers.

The three Port commissioners each made speeches, followed by Bruce W. Johnson, the director of public affairs for Boeing, who served as master of ceremonies. He introduced Senator Magnuson, who took to the podium and congratulated all of the people who worked so hard to turn what seemed like an economic disaster into an economic opportunity.

“This ceremony represents a major milestone in the development of central



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The entire staff of Grant County Airport, along with its rolling stock, assembled for a one-year anniversary photo in 1967. Standing front and center are, left to right, Dan Dunn, Leon Bodie and Clyde Owen.

From the Port's archives (originally published in the Columbia Basin Herald)



Washington state,” said Senator Magnuson. “The ingenuity and persistence ... displayed by the people of Grant County set an example which all communities might exemplify.”

He noted that the Port of Moses Lake

still had plenty of challenges ahead in maintaining this massive facility and attracting new industry. But, said the senator known as “Maggie,” “your past achievements give every reason to expect a bright future.”





CHAPTER THREE



In 1968, the Port of Moses Lake welcomed Japan Air Lines, a company that would change the face of the airport for the next 40 years. Here, JAL dignitaries arrive for the dedication ceremony on Nov. 21, 1968.

(From the Port's archives)

JAPAN AIR LINES ARRIVES

It was an exhilarating day. Yet after it was over, the Port faced a sobering reality. It now owned a \$25 million facility, much of it badly in need of renovation, with not a lot of money to operate. Executive director Jones, a veteran of state and national port organizations, recently reflected on the unusual position of the Port of Moses Lake.

“It’s different from any other port district because of the scale of it, given its geographical location,” said Jones. “It’s way out of proportion to most rural port districts. Historically, port districts have used their taxing power to develop their capital facilities to generate investment and jobs. This port is quite different, because it had a very small tax base and yet a huge set of



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needs, inheriting these old capital facilities and massive plant.”

“We had no tax monies yet – it’s always a year late,” said Owen. “So Boeing said they would underwrite the operation to the tune of \$300,000 the first year of operation.”

The commission approved a \$447,308 budget that first year, with most of the revenue coming from Boeing. Boeing was booming and it was using the Grant County Airport even more than the Port had hoped. Here’s how it worked: When Boeing sold 707s to a domestic airline, that airline’s own instructors would come to Moses

Lake and learn how to fly and operate the plane. Those instructors would then fan out around the U.S. and train their own flight crews. For Boeing’s foreign airline clients, the situation for the Port was even better. Those foreign airlines didn’t just train their instructors in Moses Lake; they sent over their entire flight crews. In 1967 and 1968, the list of Boeing-related landings included China Airlines, Portuguese Airways, New Zealand National Airways, Piedmont Airways, United Arab Air and dozens of others. More than 300 foreign carriers would eventually participate in Boeing jet



Japan Air Lines vice-president Haruo Odagiri tells the Moses Lake crowd that flying from the Grant County Airport is like “suddenly finding yourself on an interstate freeway after being snarled in a downtown traffic jam.” Japan Air lines distributed dozens of traditional “happi” coats to the people in the audience and the officials on the podium, including Port commissioner Dan Dunn, left.

(From the Port’s archives)



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The early Japan Air Lines facilities at the Grant County Airport looked modest, but the airline had a profound effect on the entire Moses Lake community, culturally as well as economically.

(From the Port's archives)

training at Grant County Airport.

“They all went to Seattle first, where they went to ground school training and simulator training,” said Owen. “And then Boeing would fly them over here. It was all part of the ‘sell’ of the plane. It would include so many hours of training. Boeing paid the bill to us.”

At a meeting in October 1967, the commissioners learned that Boeing’s “most conservative forecast” for landings at the Grant County Airport in 1968 would be “in the neighborhood of 19,500.” That was about fifty-three landings a day, and

that guess was too low. For the first four months of 1968, the airport would set a record of 54,437 total operations (a take-off constituted one operation, a landing another), or about 453 per day. The landing fees generated by Boeing in 1968 would total \$372,099, making it easily the most important revenue source of the Port’s airport division that year. For comparison, the Port’s tax levy brought in only \$46,000 that year. Then in 1968, when the GSA put more former Larson facilities up for bid, Boeing purchased a large hangar, a tank farm, and fueling facilities to support its



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testing and training programs.

“This new facility should be an important part of Boeing’s complex for years to come,” Sen. Henry “Scoop” Jackson said in a press release announcing the purchase.

Meanwhile, the Port was about to acquire an even more crucial client: Japan Air Lines. In October 1967, Owen received a call from Boeing’s chief pilot. The pilot said that a group of Japan Air Lines executives were in Seattle negotiating the purchase of Boeing’s next big plane, the 747. After the meetings, they were standing around in a casual group when one of them asked the chief pilot, Thomas J. Layne, “By the way, do you know where we could do some training in the U.S.?”

“Yes, I do,” he replied.

He tipped Owen about their interest and Owen immediately put together an informational package.

“I sent it off to Japan and I sent it off real fast,” said Owen.

For months, he received no word. Finally, in March 1968, Japan Air Lines called and asked for more “detailed information” about Grant County Airport

and its facilities. Then, that summer, Japan Air Lines sent a survey team to Moses Lake to check out the airport. They were the first of hundreds of visitors from the airline that summer. Japan Air Lines was taking a

long hard look at Moses Lake because it had outgrown its training facilities in Japan and had run into local opposition with a training facility in Hilo, Hawaii. With the coming of the 747, Japan Air Lines needed a place with a long runway, plenty of unobstructed air space, minimal traffic, and few people to complain about noise. And it didn’t hurt that Moses Lake was convenient to Boeing headquarters in Seattle. But two serious problems had to be solved before the Port and Japan Air Lines could consummate a deal.

The first was housing. Japan Air Lines needed motel accommodations for at least fifty people at a time. Moses Lake had few motels, all small. The Port approached the motels but they were unable to commit to that many rooms. Finally, the Port brainstormed a solution: the former Larson bachelor officers’ quarters. The building had been purchased by a real estate man from Seattle, and Owen made a deal with



“This new facility should be an important part of Boeing’s complex for years to come.”

- Sen. Henry “Scoop” Jackson, announcing Boeing’s purchase of a large hangar in 1968



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Japan Air Lines' Shinzoh Ohara presents gifts to Miss Moses Lake, Marla Richens, seated center, and princesses Patricia Cardenas (left) and Norma Suter (right) during a JAL-sponsored visit to Japan in 1973. (From the Port's archives)

him to convert it to a kind of home-away-from-home for Japanese pilots and crew.

The second problem seemed even more daunting. To accommodate all of these training flights, Japan Air Lines would require fourteen million gallons of jet fuel a year. If the Port could not guarantee access to that much fuel, the deal would collapse. Jim Abram, the airport's fixed-base-operator and a key figure in the development of the Port, went to work on

acquiring this ocean of fuel. He negotiated with refineries in Montana and was finally able to make the complicated arrangements to guarantee the fuel. Abram's company, Jet Air, would go on to become the airport's longtime fuel and ground support supplier.

Commissioner Bodie later said, "there were times when we wondered if we could survive and pull it off." He said it was "amazing" how word of mouth can "make or break you." In the case of Japan Air



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Lines, it helped make the Port. Owen told reporters at the time that “we had them, we lost them,” but “at last they are here and we couldn’t be happier.” It all came together in September 1968.

“The minute we got the fuel, a date was set and we had a big dedication in November and they started training right then,” said Owen.

The November 21 dedication, held in the massive hangar recently taken over by the airline, featured hundreds of people wearing colorful Japanese “happi” coats – blue and white printed cotton coats with a Japanese character denoting “happiness” printed in red on the back. These colorful attendees were not part of the Japanese contingent. These were the Port commissioners, various local and state dignitaries, and the Moses Lake audience members. The airline had given all of them a happi coat (it was a Japan Air Lines custom to hand out such coats to all of its first-class passengers). Japan Air Lines vice-president Haruo Odagiri, the top JAL official at the dedication, was one of the few people on the dais wearing a plain business suit. He took the podium and concisely summed up why the airline loved Moses Lake.

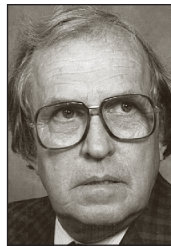
“Flying in and out of Grant County Airport is like suddenly finding yourself on an interstate freeway after being snarled in a downtown traffic jam,” Odagiri told the crowd.

Following the speeches, all of the 300 people in the crowd were given short scenic jet plane flights around the area.

“The lights that twinkled here and there made Moses Lake look like an early Christmas tree,” wrote Katherine Lewis, one of the passengers. “Even the U&I Sugar Co. looked glamorous from the air in the early dusk.”

Japan Air Lines immediately became the Port’s biggest client. By 1970, it was generating \$140,000

in landing fee revenue, more than Boeing and all of the other carriers combined. The airline originally made a commitment of three-to-five years at Moses Lake, but it turned out to be the beginning of a forty-year relationship. The airlines presence was substantial right from the beginning: between thirty to fifty crew members began training on Boeing 727s right away, and would grow over the decades. In 1999, for example, Japan Air Lines often had three Boeing 747s at the airport at any one time,



“There were times when we wondered if we could survive and pull it off.”

- Commissioner
Leon M. Bodie



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employing forty people in Moses Lake (not counting the hundreds of trainees who continuously came and went). JAL would record 11,256 landings a year, or an average of more than thirty per day.

This relationship would have immense positive repercussions for all of Moses Lake. By one 1990s estimate, Japan Air Lines pumped between \$8 million and \$16 million into the Moses Lake economy every year. Yet from the beginning it was more than just a formal business relationship. Japan Air Lines reached out to its Moses Lake neighbors in ways that many residents would never forget. Early on, it instituted a program in which every single sixth-grade student in Moses Lake was taken to the airport, ushered aboard a plane by a Japan Air Lines hostess and then taken on a scenic flight above the vast Columbia River basin. By the time the practice was discontinued thirty years later for cost-saving reasons, Japan Air Lines had launched 21,000 Moses Lake sixth-graders into the air, most of them for the first time.

Many Moses Lake residents took far more lengthy flights, courtesy of the airline. For many years, the winner of the town's Miss Moses Lake pageant was flown to the annual Uesugi Festival, honoring ancient warriors, in Yonezawa, Japan. At least

one Miss Moses Lake, Marsha Schlangen, who was seventeen years old in 1980, rode on horse in the Uesugi Festival parade. She told Spokesman-Review reporter Dan Hansen many years later that she made "quite a sensation, a blond girl on horseback," surrounded by men in sixteenth century warrior costumes.

By one 1990s estimate, Japan Air Lines pumped between \$8 million and \$16 million into the Moses Lake economy every year.

Yonezawa and Moses Lake became sister cities, thanks to arrangements made by Japan Air Lines executives. The airline also inaugurated another youth program, in which it sent five Moses Lake High School students a year to Japan, along with adult chaperones. About 190 students made the trip. Meanwhile, the hospitality went both ways.

Moses Lake's Big Bend Community College inaugurated a program in which it brought in Japanese farmers to learn American agricultural techniques, as well as polish their English skills. More than 2,800 Japanese farmers had participated in the program by 1986. Paul Hirai, a Moses Lake farmer of Japanese ancestry, helped to start that program, and he is now one of three Moses Lake residents who have received Order of the Sacred Treasure medals, among Japan's highest honors.

Moses Lake residents pitched in where they could to make the Japanese employees



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and trainees feel at home--not the easiest task in sagebrush country. One trainee admitted in a JAL employee magazine that it took him a while to adjust to the “quiet life of Moses Lake and the foreign food”: beefsteak, potatoes, and coffee. Rooms with Japanese amenities were set aside for them at local motels. Moses Lake schools offered bilingual programs for Japanese children. A fine boulevard on the east side of town was named Yonezawa Boulevard. About seventy-seven Japanese-American families in the area entertained trainees in their homes, and JAL later returned the favor by flying sixty-five local Japanese-Americans to Japan and Hong Kong. To this day, Moses Lake has a distinctive Japanese flavor. The Japanese Peace Garden, dedicated in 2005, includes a pagoda, stone lanterns, a koi pond, waterfalls, bridges, and a bamboo tea hut. About eighty-five ornamental cherry trees, donated by the airline, fill the city’s parks with springtime perfume. And right at the entryway to the airport itself, a cherry tree, a small bamboo fountain, and a stone lantern (donated by JAL) greet visitors.

Brenda Martinez, a Moses Lake native and former executive assistant with the

Japan Air Lines office at the Port, said that she was once on a Japan Air Lines flight when she wrote a note to the captain, mentioning that she was from Moses Lake. The captain sent back a note saying he considered Moses Lake to be his “second home.” Even Japanese soap opera fans were familiar with Moses Lake. A Japanese

television show sent a film crew to Moses Lake in 1974 to film a drama about the life and loves of Japanese Air Line pilots. One of its plotlines followed the fictional Captain Sugiyama, played by well-known Japanese actor Jiro Tamiya, who was doing 747 training at Moses Lake. Tokyo Broadcasting Company film crews shot a number of scenes featuring Tamiya at the airport and at a Moses Lake store, shopping for groceries. In 1981, another Tokyo Broadcasting

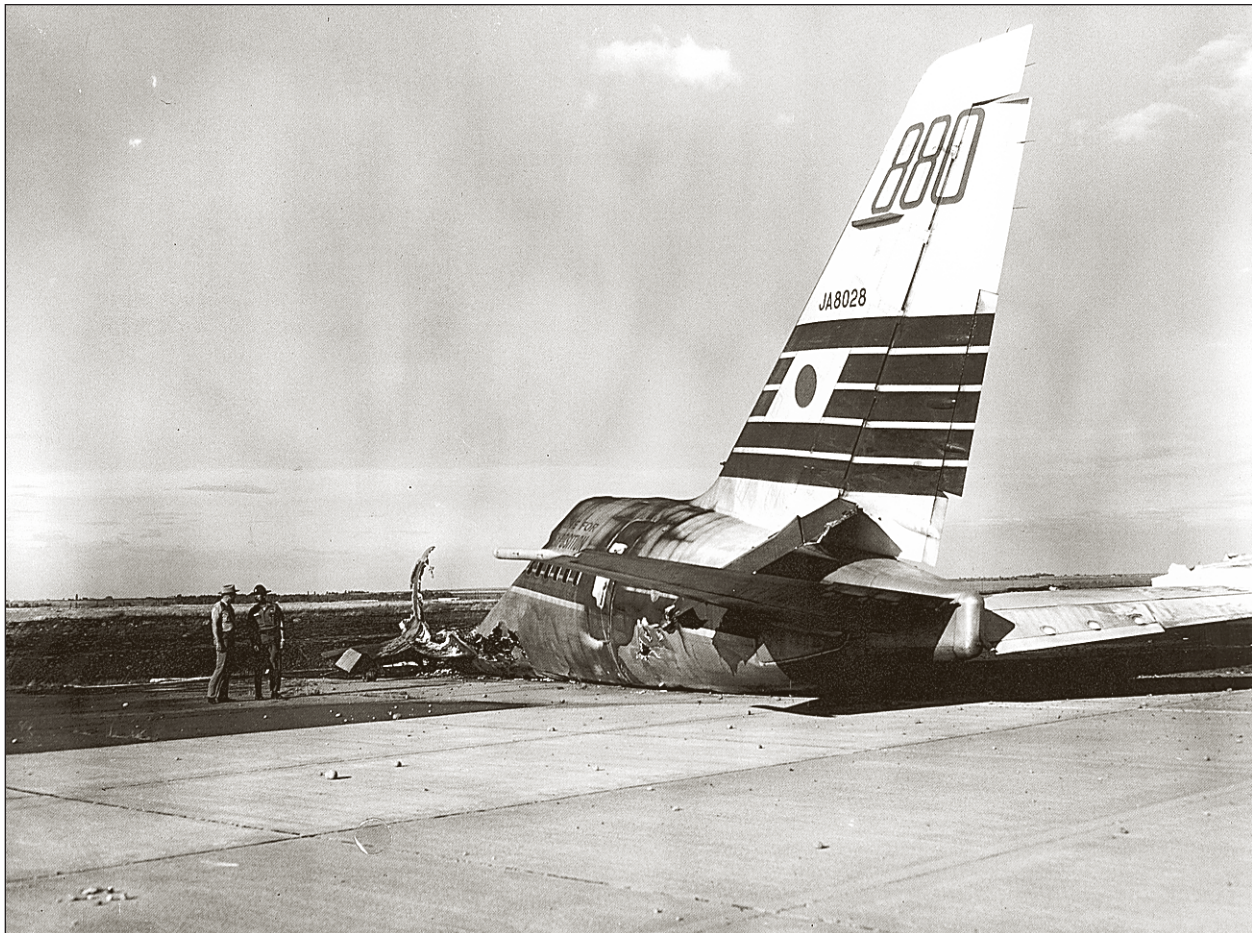
Company film crew came to film scenes for “Love on Runway 81,” with Japanese TV stars Muga Takewaki and Kohzo Moritsugu.

Sadly, a true-life Japan Air Lines tragedy was also set at Moses Lake. On June 24, 1969, a crew was training on a Convair 880 jet when it failed to achieve liftoff at Grant County Airport. The speeding jet dipped a wing, careened off the runway and plowed through a rocky sagebrush field. It came to

Sadly, a true-life Japan Air Lines tragedy was also set at Moses Lake. On June 24, 1969, a crew was training on a Convair 880 jet when it failed to achieve liftoff at Grant County Airport.



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Tragedy struck on June 24, 1969, when a Japan Air Lines jet failed to achieve liftoff during a training flight at the Grant County Airport. Three of the five crew members died. *(From the Port's archives)*

a stop on a taxiway about 3,000 feet away and burst into flame. Two of the five men in the training crew managed to stagger away from the wreckage, although they suffered serious burns. The three other men, all pilot trainees -- Junichi Murata, Kunitsugu Kawase, and Toshiaki Hoshida--died in the flaming wreckage.

Owen and airport fire chief Art Ribail arrived on the scene first, and found the dazed survivors.

“They were trying to get back into the plane to help the others,” Ribail later told the Wenatchee World. “At least, that’s the way it appeared to us.”

The flames were too intense. The main part of the fuselage burned for more than an hour, despite being doused with foam flame retardant. Both engines and other parts of the plane were scattered along the path plowed out by the plane. The two survivors, Capt. Kazuhiko Suda, 37,



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An investigation determined that a Japan Air Lines trainee was unable to control the jet during an “engine-out” drill and the jet careened across the field, crossed an adjacent runway and caught fire.

(From the Port's archives)



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Japan Air Lines loomed large over the Port. Every pilot for JAL between 1969 and 2009 trained in Moses Lake. The city even became a film location for two airline-themed Japanese soap operas.

(From The Spokesman-Review's photo archives)

and flight engineer Nobihuro Uematsu, 32, recovered after months of treatment and returned to Japan. A subsequent investigation showed that the crash occurred during a training exercise called an “engine-out” maneuver in which the training instructor, Suda, slowly reduced power on one engine to simulate an engine failure upon takeoff. One of the trainees,

Murata, was unable to control the plane, which yawed sharply. Suda, seated next to him in the co-pilot’s seat, took over the controls and commenced corrective action, but it was too late.

The three deceased pilots were given a Buddhist-rites funeral in a Moses Lake funeral home, attended by their families from Japan and many Moses Lake



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residents. The president of Japan Air Lines sent a special message to the people of Moses Lake thanking them for their “deep concern” and “thoughtfulness.” A memorial to the fallen fliers was later erected at the

spot where the fuselage came to rest. Over the next four decades – and over hundreds of thousands of takeoffs and landings – there were no other fatal accidents for Japan Air Lines trainees at Moses Lake.





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Curious crowds gathered at Grant County Airport in 1969 to ogle a new development in aviation, the Boeing 747. Note the number “1” painted on the fuselage, indicating that it was the first and, to that date, only, 747 in operation. *(From the Port’s archives)*

BOEING, SSTs AND A VOLCANIC ERUPTION

Throughout this era, Boeing continued to use the Grant County Airport as a key testing site for new models, including the biggest and boldest model of all, the Boeing 747. In March 1969, Boeing announced that it was planning to fly the 490-passenger jet from Everett, where it was built, to Moses Lake. After several tantalizing weeks, the big “Number One” (so named because it was the first 747 in operation) finally touched down on March 30, 1969 at Grant County International Airport along with 100 Boeing engineers and technicians. They spent a full day testing its weight-carrying capacity and its ability to



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take off and land under extreme conditions. The jumbo jet also became a considerable tourist attraction on that springtime Sunday. Boeing had made it clear that rubbernecks would be welcome.

“All the Port asks is that visitors to the airport respect security measures so the purpose of the plane’s program here will not be hampered,” a Port official told the Columbia Basin Herald.

The people of Moses Lake were treated to a spectacular show, as the giant jet made twenty takeoffs and landings in about eleven hours. The plane needed less than half of the runway’s 13,503 feet on its first landing. It rolled to a stop around the 5,000 foot mark. The Boeing test pilots and other officials were cautious in their statements to reporters, “but could not hide their obvious satisfaction.”

One passenger that day told the Columbia Basin Herald that the plane did so well that “we hesitate to say just how good this plane really is.” That passenger was Boeing’s president T.A. Wilson, who was aboard for most of the plane’s tests. The plane returned for more tests in April 1969 and by the beginning of 1970, at least four other 747s, fresh off the Everett assembly line, had paid visits to the Port of Moses

Lake. 747s made over 1,500 takeoffs and landing at Moses Lake in 1969, and testing continued as the 747 entered commercial service in 1970.

One test in 1970 at the Grant County Airport proved to be particularly thrilling. The 747 created a great deal of turbulence

in its wake, and Boeing needed to find out how far back other planes needed to stay. So they attached “smoke bombs” to the wings of a 747 and also set smoke devices along the runway. Then they took photos of the whirlwinds and vortices created in the jumbo jet’s wake.

Darrell D. Gray, a reporter for the Columbia Basin Herald said it looked like a “unique skywriting exhibition.” The most alarming moment came when a Boeing 737 trailed a 747 to see how close behind it could safely land. All was fine until the 737 attempted a landing forty-five seconds behind.

“The twin-jet dipped and flipped sideways precariously and brought yells from the observers as it dropped toward the runway threshold only 100 feet below,” wrote Gray. “The pilot responded quickly, however, and leveled off.”

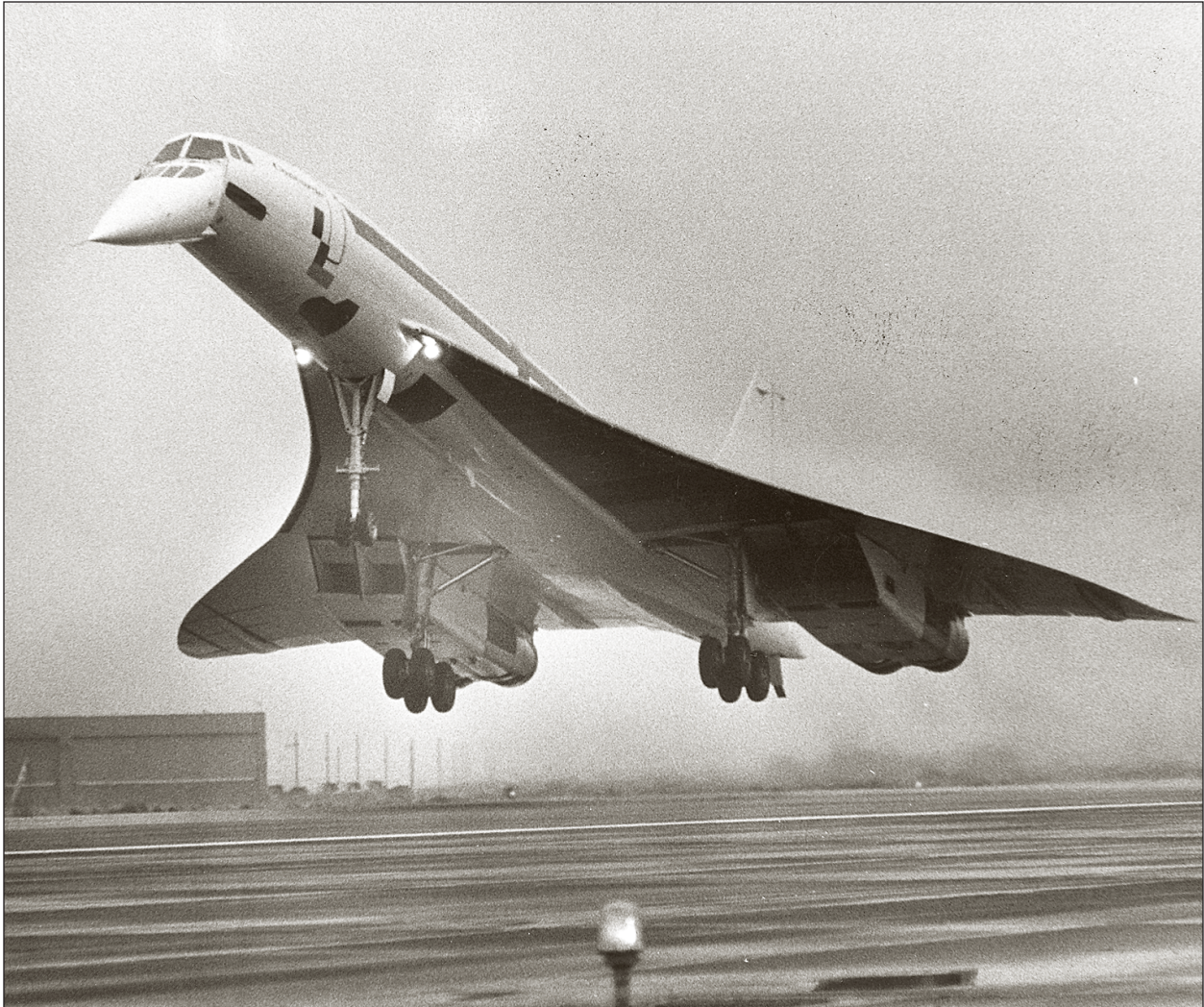
He quoted the 737 pilot as dryly remarking, “I think we have just established minimum separation.”

“We hesitate to say just how good this plane really is.”

- Boeing president T.A. Wilson following a test flight aboard the 747.



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The British Concorde, also known as the SST (Supersonic Transport), roared into the Grant County Airport in 1974 and stayed for more than a month. The crew re-christened the jet “Miss Moses Lake.”

(From The Spokesman-Review’s photo archives)

This was just the beginning of the 747 legacy at the Port. Jim Abram, the jet fuel supplier, subsequently embarked on a world tour to the headquarters of nearly all of the world’s major airlines. His sales pitch: come to Moses Lake to train your 747 crews. He hit twelve countries in fourteen days, and he later told the Tri-City Herald that he was

awed to find himself, a Missouri farm boy, making a sales pitch to airline presidents in their offices. That sales pitch must have been good: He landed twenty-four of the twenty-seven foreign purchasers of Boeing 747s.

Aircraft training and testing would prove to be a constant over the Port’s



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lifetime. In 1974, a British Concorde, also known as the SST (Supersonic Transport), thrilled onlookers at the airport for more than a month, while crews conducted high-altitude icing tests. The crew rechristened the sleek, needle-like plane “Miss Moses Lake” during the visit. The words “Miss Moses Lake” still adorn the Concorde at its current home, the Imperial War Museum in Duxford, England.

Grant County Airport was also designated as an emergency Space Shuttle landing site (although it never had to be used as such). In 1987, the nation’s two new presidential Air Force One jets were tested there. On a less spectacular scale, aircraft training continued almost every day at Big Bend Community College’s hangars and shops at the airport. This was the nation’s first college-accredited flight training course, with seventeen of its own planes and about fifty graduates per year. It attracted students from all over the world.

However, convincing a commercial airline to provide regular passenger service to Grant County Airport was proving to be more difficult. A small commuter airline, Commute-Air, based out of Spokane, provided service to Grant County Airport beginning in August 1967. However, it provided service only to Spokane and

Everett. In March 1969, the “mini-airline” hit financial turbulence and ceased operations, leaving Moses Lake with no commercial service. Another commuter airline, West Pacific, out of Seattle, attempted to fill the gap in 1970 with daily service to SeaTac Airport in Seattle and to Spokane. This service lasted only a year.

There would be no regular commercial service at Grant County Airport until Cascade Air arrived in 1977 and Horizon Air in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, the Port was having success with a different kind of air passengers: bovine passengers. In 1973, the Port launched its first cattle airlift – 131 head of living, mooing prime beef – to Japan. Holstein cattle

from Idaho and other western grazing grounds would arrive by truck, be inspected by the USDA, and then herded onto cargo planes, usually bound for Japan or Korea.

“We actually once did a 747 cattle charter out of here,” said David Bailey, the Port’s economic development manager at the time and later executive manager. “That’s a lot of cows on one airplane.”

The world was in the midst of a beef shortage in 1973, and Japanese firms were willing to pay “outrageous prices,” according to air cargo company Flying Tiger Line, to fly cattle to Japan. Flying

Grant County Airport was also designated as an emergency Space Shuttle landing site (although it never had to be used as such.)



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Thousands of flight crews from at least 300 airlines around the world trained at Grant County Airport because of its uncluttered airspace, reliable weather and immense hangars. *(From the Port's archives)*

Tiger said that cattle were quite docile on the flights and that it was “a lot easier on them than a truck ride.” For a few years, the operation became so big that the Port built holding pens and inspection facilities at the airport. Sometimes, the Port shipped other animals: horses, reindeer, and buffalo. It was good business for the Port; maybe too good, according to Bailey. Other regional airports began to shoulder their way into the business. Then, after three or four years, the market for airborne beef disappeared.

“Shipping cattle air freight was getting pretty expensive,” said Bailey. “It just became more economical to go by ship.”

Bailey, who was born in Iowa and brought up in the Bay Area, had arrived at the Port in 1972. He had spent the previous five years working for Boeing in Seattle as a tool engineer in flight test engineering. As part of that job, he had been to the Port of Moses Lake several times to do testing, but never to the town proper. He “didn’t have a clue what the town was like.” Then, he heard about an opening at the

Port for economic development manager, and he applied despite a background in engineering. He wanted to get into airport management and he had deduced, correctly, that the job was actually to be the number two man to Owen in running the entire Port and airport. He also realized that this was no typical small town airport. Grant County Airport was practically a behemoth, as measured by its quantity of takeoffs and landings. The Columbia Basin Herald ran a story that year pointing out that Grant County Airport had more “aircraft movements” (189,409) in fiscal year 1971 than London’s Gatwick Airport and nearly as many as Paris’s legendary Orly Airport. It was the second busiest airport in the Northwest, behind Boeing Field, and was generating plenty of aviation-related income. Between 1975 and 1997, the Port levied a tax only once on the district’s property owners, an exceptional record among the state’s port districts.

“It is a rare day in this nation when a tax-supported agency doesn’t collect the



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tax because it doesn't need the funds," said a grateful Columbia Basin Herald in a 1978 editorial.

Yet in 1972 it was increasingly clear to the Port commissioners and management that the Port's future was not only in running the airport, but also in using the vast acreage and infrastructure inherited from Larson to create new businesses and industries for Moses Lake. So Bailey's title was economic development manager, reflecting the Port's new mission.

"There was pressure from the local community, saying, 'The Port is doing really well, you're making a lot of money with Boeing and Japan Air Lines, but what are you really doing to promote new jobs into the community?'" said Bailey.

The Port had from the beginning attracted businesses and industries to its vast hangars and other buildings. Dozens of small companies, ranging from a commercial mushroom-growing operation to a mobile home manufacturer, had done business there. But as of 1972, the only companies of any size were Japan Air Lines and Braco, Inc., a manufacturer of potato



"There was pressure from the local community, saying, 'The Port is doing really well, you're making a lot of money with Boeing and Japan Air Lines, but what are you really doing to promote new jobs into the community?'"

- David Bailey, Port Executive, 1984-2002

harvesters. Braco filled an important niche in a county that would soon become one of the largest potato-producing counties in the U.S., but the company was not huge. It averaged under a hundred employees. Owen wanted new and bigger industries, and he enlisted the entire community's assistance in bringing in leads.

"I guarantee them we'll check out every lead, big or small," Owen told Columbia Basin Herald columnist Lyle Hicks.

Companies came and went, including Busby, Inc., a metal fabricating firm, which launched in 1975 and within seven years became the Port's biggest tenant (279,500 square feet) and largest employer (123

workers). But in its ninth year, the company hit a rough patch and liquidated. The maker of a startling new product called the Ski-Wheee had an even shorter life. The Ski-Wheee promised to free water-skiers from the need of a boat. Instead, skiers would be towed by their own Ski-Wheee, a self-contained jet-pump engine in a plastic hull, controlled entirely by the skier through a cable attached to the skier's "control unit."



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With acres of concrete and a runway stretching two-and-a-half miles, snow removal was occasionally a big project at the Port. *(From the Port's archives)*

It failed to catch on.

“Great concept,” said Bailey. “But they didn’t know how to sell it.”

Industrial development of any kind was a tough sell in Moses Lake in those early days.

“It wasn’t easy,” said Bailey. “If you take a look at the assets, low-cost energy was one of the prime recruiting tools we had. And land prices were much cheaper here, and the labor force was small but good. But that was typical of a lot of other communities. I always said there were 10,000 other

organizations nationwide that were recruiting just as heavy as we were. And we had a very small budget for economic development.”

Progress was slow, yet things began to change almost imperceptibly through the 1970s. One key factor was the Port’s 1973 purchase of an additional 707 acres of land, bringing the Port’s total to about 4,500 acres. This new acreage was former Larson land, put up for sale by the General Services Administration. It cost the Port about \$1.2 million, but the Port was able to pay for



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it with airport revenues – no tax monies. One big chunk of the new property was strictly to protect the runway’s approach pattern. Yet the Port Commission (which then consisted of Bodie, Dunn and the newly elected Dean Hagerty) said that seven other key parcels were purchased as “prime industrial development property, vitally needed to attract industry and especially environmental clean-type industry to Moses Lake.”

The purchase included a number of buildings, including the huge eight-place hangar complex, once used for B-52s, and another massive building called the Paint Hangar.

“The Port really started adding to its inventory of not just land, but facilities,” said Bailey.

One of the Port’s first big industrial success stories came in 1978 when Western Kraft Co., a manufacturer of cardboard boxes, proposed moving to Moses Lake. However, a lack of water at the proposed site caused the company to start looking elsewhere. The Port worked out a deal in which it helped extend an 11,000-foot water line to the site, which cemented the deal. The plant, now part of International Paper Co., has been a significant Moses Lake employer ever since.

The Port – and the entire region –

would have to endure a massive test of its resiliency when Mount Saint Helens erupted on May 18, 1980. Moses Lake was more than one hundred miles away from the big volcano, but as fate would have it, the winds blew the enormous ash plume straight in its direction. A sight resembling a black thundercloud appeared on the horizon that day. With every minute, it

Moses Lake was more than one hundred miles away from the big volcano, but as fate would have it, the winds blew the enormous ash plume straight in its direction.

loomed darker and more massive. Before long, it had dumped three inches of ash on the runways of the Port. Operations shut down immediately. The Port – along with the entire region to the east, toward Ritzville and Spokane – was paralyzed. People were afraid to step outdoors, as nobody knew if the ash was toxic or not. As it turned out, it was relatively safe (it actually enriched the soil) but

as the Port soon learned, it was diabolically difficult to remove. When trucks tried to plow the runways, the ash flew up in clouds and settled back down on the tarmac.

Citing dangerous conditions, Boeing moved its training operations to Glasgow, Montana and Japan Air Lines moved its operation to Roswell, New Mexico. Within a month, the Port had spent \$200,000 trying to rid the runways of ash, but ash was still billowing in the wind. The Port spent \$30,000 lining the runways with irrigation



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The eruption of Mount Saint Helens on May 18, 1980 proved a massive challenge to not just the port, but the entire region. *(Courtesy of the USGS)*



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pipe in an attempt to wet down the ash to keep it from blowing.

“Water is the only thing we can do,” Owen told reporters in June 1980. “It’s likely a way of life until it blows away or we get a snowfall.”

The Port received monetary help from

two quarters: The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which reimbursed the Port \$260,005 for cleanup costs, and Japan Air Lines, which donated \$50,000 to the Moses Lake community. Both Boeing and Japan Air Lines returned to the Grant County Airport later that summer.





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REC-Silicon, originally known as the Renewable Energy Corp., makes silicon solar energy products and is now one of Grant County's biggest employers. *(Photo by Greg Becken, Port of Moses Lake)*

AN INDUSTRIAL BOOM

It might have seemed like a low point for the Port at the time, but its investments in industrial land and infrastructure were about to pay off in a big way. In quick succession in 1981, three big firms announced plans to move to Moses Lake. The first was somewhat of a mystery client at first. Bailey said an engineering company from Portland called and said they were working with a unnamed company that was interested in relocating to Moses Lake. A week later, Mt. St. Helens blew.

“I called and said, ‘I got your inquiry, but we have these issues with ash,’” said Bailey. “They said, ‘Take your time.’ So we got the ash issue under control and I called again. I still didn’t have a clue who they were ... We finally realized they were Union Carbide, and they were making high-grade



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polycrystalline silicon for the electronics industry.”

Moses Lake won out over two other undisclosed sites in the Northwest. The \$85 million plant was finished in late 1984.

Demand for its silicon, used in computer semiconductors, was so high that the plant doubled in size by 1986. By the company’s own estimation, it was spending “over \$24 million in local purchases, payroll and taxes.”

The second big company was Sundstrand Data Control Group, a high-tech avionics company which already had a big presence in Redmond, Washington. Sundstrand was seeking a facility to manufacture electronic data recording boxes for aircraft and other related components. A company vice-president said that they were attracted by Moses Lake’s cheaper work force. The Moses Lake plant opened in May 1981 and initially employed about seventy-five people, but that later grew to 125.

“We’ve been working on it since before the ash hit,” Bailey told reporters in 1981. “I think this is a vote of confidence. It shows we overcame our problems.”

The third company was International

Titanium, Inc., which built a \$25 million plant to manufacture titanium sponge, a metal widely used in the commercial and military aerospace industry “for highly corrosive application in the

chemical industry.” The plant employed 125 people, with an annual payroll of about \$2.5 million. Moses Lake’s long-established record of Asian cooperation helped land both this plant and the Union Carbide plant. International Titanium was owned by a group of Chinese investors and the Union Carbide plant had a key relationship with Komatsu Electronic Metals of Japan. Sen. Henry “Scoop” Jackson and Gov. John Spellman were both present at the groundbreaking of the International Titanium

plant in 1981 and Jackson returned for the dedication in April 1982. Gov. Spellman was present for the groundbreaking of the \$85 million high-tech Union Carbide facility in July 1982.

“Moses Lake has set the tone with joint operations with Japanese corporations and has capitalized on its opportunities,” said Spellman, who also praised the Port for helping put together the package that lured



“Moses Lake has set the tone with joint operations with Japanese corporations and has capitalized on its opportunities.”

- Gov. John Spellman,
April 1982



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Clearing volcanic ash was an eye-stinging chore at Grant County Airport after the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980. Japan Air Lines was forced to move its operations temporarily to New Mexico.

(Photo courtesy of David Bailey)

the company to Washington. Neither the Union Carbide or International Titanium plants were located on Port land proper, but were within the confines of the port district, which meant they boosted the Port's tax base. Sundstrand leased Port facilities on Port land.

Why this sudden industrial boom?

"The Port got more active in marketing," said Bailey. "More people were aware of

the assets: low-cost power, availability of land, good work force, good weather. People were just anxious to get out of the high-rent district of Puget Sound. That was typical of Sundstrand ... they needed to get out of Puget Sound for their manufacturing."

The rest of the region looked on with barely disguised envy.

"Moses Lake's success is the sort of thing that repeatedly will evade Spokane



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until a port district is established [in Spokane],” said a 1982 editorial in Spokane’s Spokesman-Review. “The Port of Moses Lake played no small part in luring Union Carbide to the Basin area.”

The Port itself went through some key transitions over the years. Clyde Owen announced that he would retire on Jan. 16, 1984, after eighteen years as executive manager. It was an emotional moment when he turned in his resignation letter. At age sixty-five, he said “somewhere along the line, you have to quit.” In characteristic fashion, he deflected the praise heaped upon him and said, “people in this town may never appreciate all that the original commissioners did to keep this thing going.” Owen was awarded the Japanese Emperor’s award for meritorious service, the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Gold Rays with Rosette, in 1989. He had been nominated by Japan Air Lines officials in recognition of his many years of cooperation.

Owen’s obvious successor was already in place: David Bailey. The Port commissioners immediately announced that Bailey would take over and it became official on January 16, 1984. Bodie, the Port

commission president, said that Bailey had been groomed for the job for ten years. Economic and industrial development continued to be the Port’s emphasis under Bailey. Other firms, including Tama Chemicals (now doing business as Moses

Lake Industries) and Chemi-Con Materials, both Japanese firms, would commit to Moses Lake in ensuing years. The Port’s main selling point continued to be affordable electrical power. That was crucial to attracting both Chemi-Con and the Renewable Energy Corp. (REC-Silicon), which makes silicon solar energy products and has become one of Grant County’s biggest employers. The power comes from the Grant County Public Utilities District, which Bailey said “had the vision” in the 1950s to build two dams on the

Columbia River: Priest Rapids Dam and Wanapum Dam.

Another main attraction harkens back to the Port’s air base roots: plentiful covered space. Two of the giant aircraft hangars, totaling 500,000 square feet, became ready-made sites for manufacturing firms that needed plenty of elbow room. Still, Grant County Airport remained at the core of the Port’s operation. Boeing, Japan Air

Another main attraction harkens back to the Port’s air base roots: plentiful covered space. Two of the giant aircraft hangars, totaling 500,000 square feet, became ready-made sites for manufacturing firms that needed plenty of elbow room.



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Lines and Big Bend Community College continued to be major users. The Air Force star reappeared on the runways periodically as well, most notably when Fairchild Air Force Base near Spokane shifted its operations to Moses Lake in 1983 while its own runways went under repair. Planes from Joint Base Lewis-McChord and the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station were also familiar sights, attracted by the wide-open airspace.

Cascade Airways started providing regular commercial service to Grant County Airport in 1977, giving passengers an alternative to driving to Seattle or Spokane. Cascade was taken over by Horizon Air in 1985. Both service and

traffic increased. This became one of the reasons that, in 1995, the Port of Moses Lake finally decided to go ahead with a long-delayed project: building a modern airport terminal. The old terminal building, inherited from Larson, had plenty of structural, maintenance, and wiring problems. The FAA had already committed to replacing its old tower in the terminal building with a new \$3.3 million air traffic control tower, 2,000 feet north of the terminal. The Port considered other alternatives, including renovating the old building, but eventually concluded that it would cost almost as much as building a new terminal. The final price tag for a new 30,000 square

The old terminal building ... had plenty of structural, maintenance, and wiring problems.



Chemi-Con Materials, known originally as USKDK, benefited from the Port's Foreign-Trade Zone Status designation in 1994 and from the construction of the Industrial Wastewater Treatment Facility in 2000.

(Photo by Greg Becken, Port of Moses Lake)



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foot terminal: \$5.7 million. It would put an end to the Port's record of not having to levy taxes, since it was paid for with bonds financed by taxpayers over the next twenty years. Construction began in 1996 and was completed in February 1998. The new terminal was dedicated on April 2, 1998 in a ceremony attended by former Gov. Mike Lowry. The Columbia Basin Herald said the contrast between the sleek new building and the old Larson building was like "night and day."

"The new facility makes the Port a world-class facility," said the Herald.

Speaking of world-class, the airport had acquired a new name: Grant County International Airport. In 1997, the Port applied for and received permission to add the word "International," reflecting the fact that it had acquired a U.S. Customs Service office and Foreign-Trade Zone status.

"It's kind of unusual to see a Foreign-Trade Zone this far inland," said Bailey. Washington has thirteen, but only one other east of the Cascades.

The Port first started exploring this idea in 1987 when it became clear that Foreign-Trade Zone status would help Chemi-Con Materials and other manufacturers. A

Foreign-Trade Zone allows manufacturers to bring in the necessary foreign materials they need to make their products without paying a duty on them. It's a significant incentive for firms that are working with raw materials from around the world. But

getting Foreign-Trade Zone status was not easy. The Port first had to work with the U.S. Customs Service to become a "user-fee port of entry," meaning, the Port and its tenants must foot the bill for a resident customs office. Then the Port had to apply to the U.S. Foreign-Trade Zone Board and meet a number of complex requirements. The 316-acre zone was finalized in October 1994. For a while, only Chemi-Con took advantage of it. That first year, the Port's U.S. Customs inspector admitted that business was so slow he felt a little "like the Maytag man."

Yet in later years, other companies joined in, including REC-Silicon and Moses Lake Industries. The Foreign-Trade Zone is now a key component in the Port's economic development strategy.

Outside accolades were pouring in. In 1993, the Federal Aviation Administration named it Airport of the Year for the Northwest region. In 1998, the Port was

In 1993, the Federal Aviation Administration named it Airport of the Year for the Northwest region. In 1998, the Port was named the Port of the Year - out of all sixty-eight port districts in the state - by the Washington Public Ports Association.



CHAPTER FIVE



The Port of Moses Lake completed a new \$5.7 million terminal in 1998 and the airport acquired a new name, Grant County International Airport. *(Photo by Greg Becken, Port of Moses Lake)*

named the Port of the Year – out of all sixty-eight port districts in the state – by the Washington Public Ports Association.

The association cited the Port of Moses Lake’s success in recruiting business and industry, its innovative intergovernmental partnerships and its construction of the new terminal. The association especially singled out the Port’s work in developing a \$3.8 million Industrial Wastewater Treatment Facility for industrial tenant Chemi-Con (known at the time as USKDK), which would allow the company to “hire

another fifty employees and invest an additional \$20 million in the county.”

The idea of building an Industrial

Wastewater Treatment Facility began in 1995 when the City of Moses Lake and the state Department of Ecology ruled that the old Larson wastewater plant and the city’s other treatment facilities did not have the capacity to handle a USKDK

expansion project. This was a major setback for USKDK, which sent a letter to the City of Moses Lake, saying that the situation was at a “critical junction.” It said a failure to

The final price tag for a new 30,000 square foot terminal: \$5.7 million.



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resolve the issue would cause the company “to reconsider their future expansion in Moses Lake.” The city changed its wastewater regulations in 1996 to address the problem.

However, it soon became evident that a long-term solution was necessary, not just for USKDK, but to make the Port more attractive to other industrial tenants. In 1997, the Port proposed a new Industrial Wastewater Treatment plant near the airport, which would vastly increase capacity. Grant County commissioners were immediately enthusiastic about the idea. County commissioner Helen Fancher called the proposal “one of the most exciting things I’ve seen in Grant County in a long time.”

“If we don’t do anything about wastewater, I don’t see any industry coming in,” said county commissioner Tim Snead.

In the end, the county and the city partnered with the Port in building the 27-million-gallon capacity facility. The plant was dedicated in 2000 and accomplished a complex, yet fundamental, task.

“The idea of this type system is simple,” said Albert Anderson, the Port’s industrial

development manager at the dedication. “Take a wastewater substance and turn it into a usable product.”

The wastewater is treated, put into storage ponds and then pumped into irrigation circles that water 105 acres of alfalfa and wheat. The manager of Chemi-Con (the former USKDK) said that “now we can safely discharge our wastewater and continue to stay in Grant County.” The facility went on to attract other industries and it remains, in the words of Patrick Jones, “a foundational building block in our industrial infrastructure.”

The Port had also received plenty of national media attention over its lifetime. Radio legend Paul Harvey delivered a national radio salute to the Port in 1977 following a visit to Moses Lake and the New York Times wrote a feature in 1988 describing how “this

remote little town survived and prospered” following the departure of Larson.

In 1999, the Port attracted Genie Industries, the Redmond-based scissor-lift manufacturer, which eventually employed more than 800 people. A Genie spokesman said at the time, “We need space, people,



“The Port’s industrial wastewater treatment facility remains a foundational building block in our industrial infrastructure.”

- Patrick Jones,
Port Executive



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Genie Industries, a Redmond, Wash.-based scissor-lift manufacturer, has been one of the Port's success stories since 1999. *(Photo by Greg Becken, Port of Moses Lake)*

and a good work force. Moses Lake has all of that and more.” Moses Lake was also attractive to companies looking for more stability, in the geologic sense, than the Puget Sound area could offer. Moses Lake is

far less prone to earthquakes.

The new airport terminal continued to be a source of pride for the Port, yet by 2000 some ominous signs were appearing. Horizon Air reduced the number of flights.



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The Port launched an initiative to increase boardings, but too many travelers found it cheaper to simply drive to Seattle or Spokane airports.

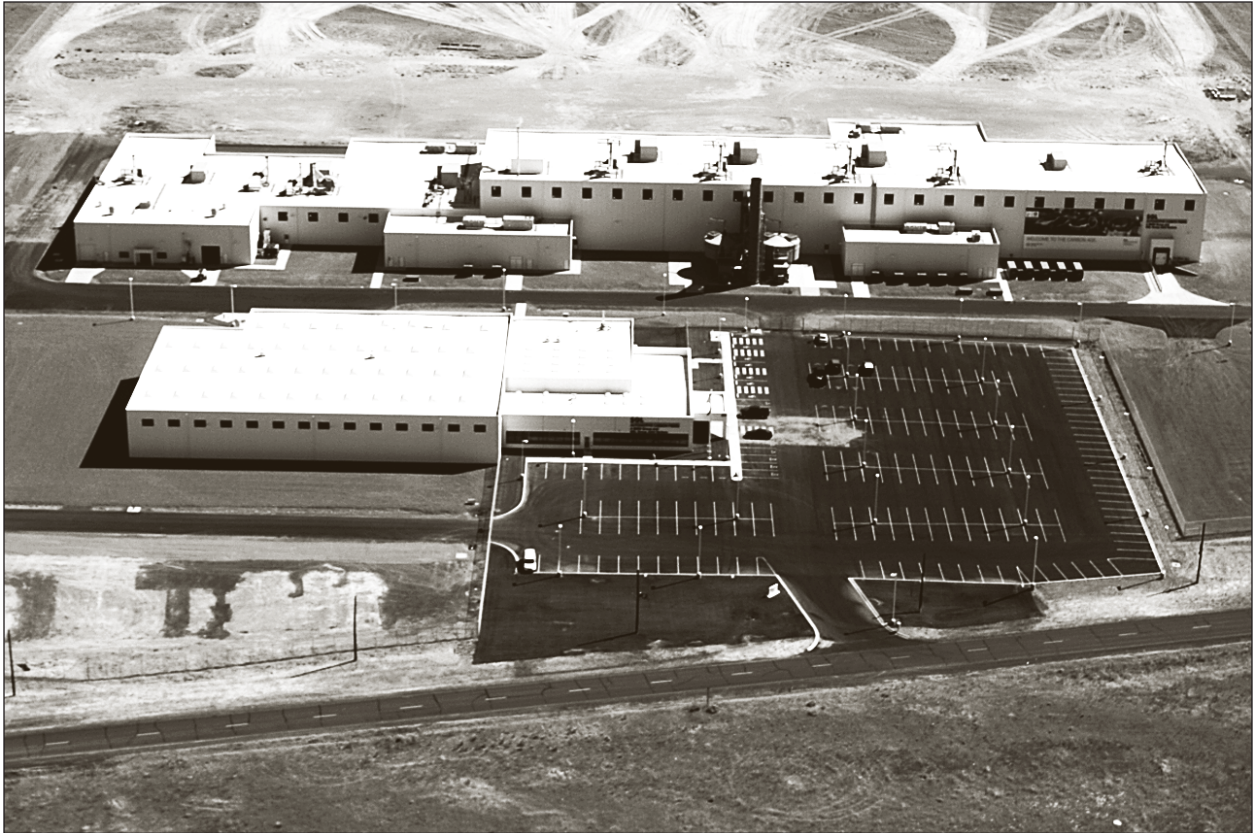
By 2001, that service had dwindled

to only twenty-seven passengers a day and Horizon pulled out for good. Big Sky Airlines and SkyWest/United Express came in to fill the void sporadically over the next decade.





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The Port was influential in luring the SGL Automotive Carbon Fibers Group/BMW carbon fiber parts plant to Moses Lake in 2010. The plant manufactures lightweight materials for use in BMW's upcoming all-electric cars. (Photo by Greg Becken, Port of Moses Lake)

CENTRAL WASHINGTON'S INDUSTRIAL CENTER

As the Port entered its thirty-seventh year in 2002, it had known only two executive managers: Owen and Bailey. The Port also had remarkable longevity in its commissioner ranks. Bodie had served for thirty three years before his death in 1998. Larry Peterson, a former manager with the Grant County Public Utilities District, served from 1987 until his death in 2008.

“There has been very, very good stability in this district over time,” said Jones, who has worked with many port districts over his career. “For many years, it was the same group of guys, and in my observation, that matters. It



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makes for a better-run port district.”

In 2002, Bailey retired after eighteen years as the executive manager and thirty years with the Port. Bailey was replaced by David Senne, who was director of the Hattiesburg-Laurel Regional Airport in Mississippi. Senne left in June 2004 to run for mayor of Hattiesburg, and was replaced by Craig Baldwin, who came to the Port from the Rogue Valley International Airport in Medford, Oregon, where he had been the administrative manager. Baldwin was replaced by the current executive director, Patrick Jones, in 2011. Jones arrived with a wealth of experience, having been the executive director of the Washington Public Ports Association for seventeen years. He had also has worked for the Port of Seattle and the American Association of Port Authorities in Washington, D.C.

In February 2003, the port’s taxing district nearly doubled in square miles, through annexation. Voters in an area northeast of the original Moses Lake Port District--one of the few parts of Grant County not already in a port district--voted 214-169 to become part of the Port of Moses Lake. This added another 360 square miles to the 380 existing square miles.

The Port of Moses Lake Industrial Park (as the Port now called its development

around the airfield) continued to grow.

In 2007, the Port was able to announce that its space was “entirely leased,” which prompted the commissioners to talk about adding even more warehouse space. Most of the tenants were industrial or high-tech--but not all. That year, the Port began leasing space to a company with a product as old

as civilization: wine. Kyra Wines, owned by winemaker Kyra Baerlocher, moved in and started bottling a number of varietals from central Washington’s world-class vineyards. Today, you can taste them at Kyra’s tasting room at the Port. Another award-winning winery, Dry Falls Cellars,

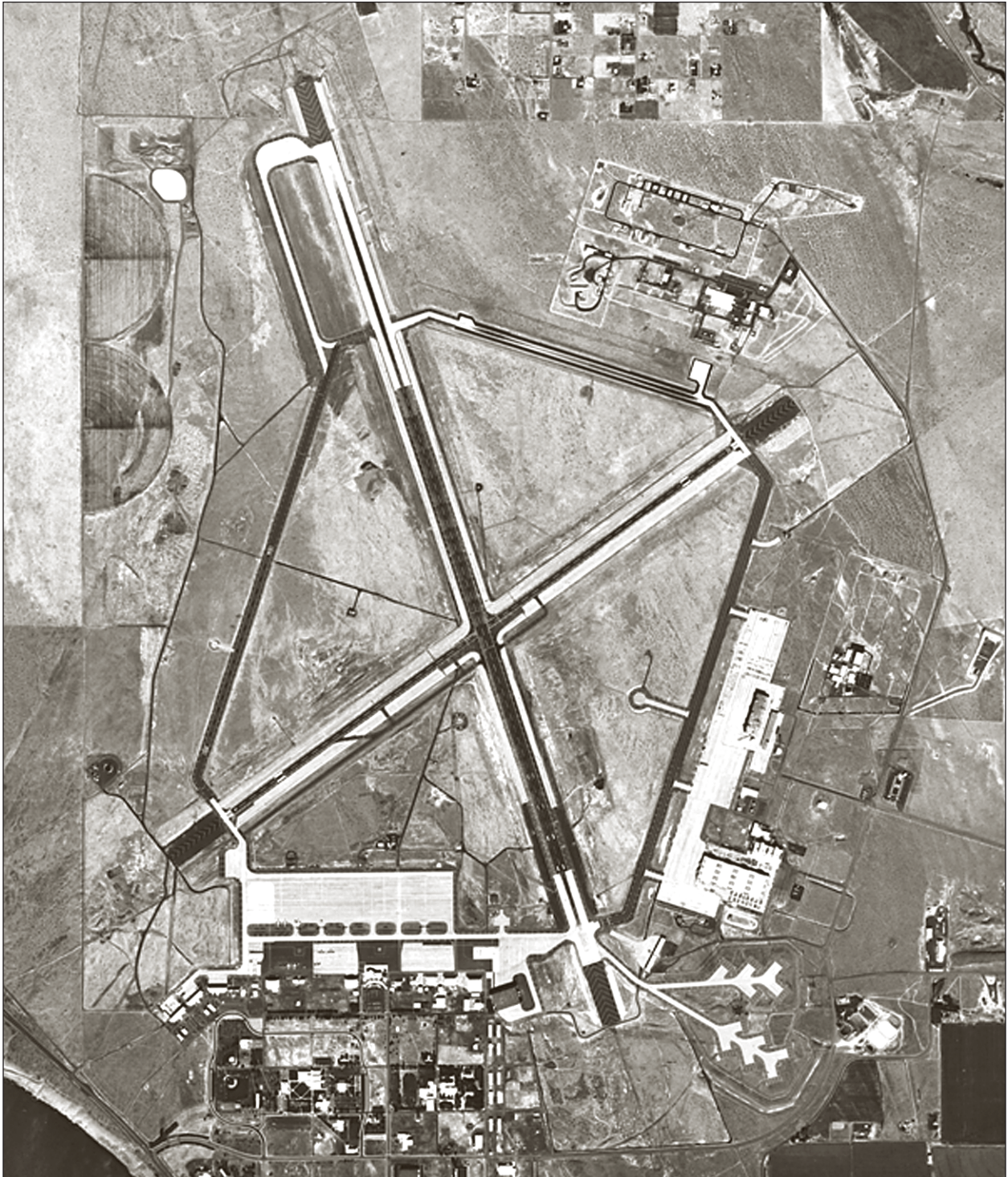
owned by the prominent Englar family of Moses Lake, established a tasting room at the Port in 2008.

Later in the decade, the Port weathered two big shocks. The first was the loss of Japan Air Lines, the Port’s most significant client for forty years. With the new generation of Boeing 787s, Japan Air Lines was able to move its training program to Oita Airport in Japan in 2009, thus saving the expense of sending every flight crew to Moses Lake. It made economic sense for the airline, but it was an undeniable blow to the Grant County International Airport and to the entire community. More than 10,000 crew members had trained in

In February 2003, the port’s taxing district nearly doubled in square miles, through annexation.



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This 2012 aerial view shows the Port of Moses Lake's huge runways, vast hangar complexes and surrounding industrial development. The terminal complex is toward the bottom of the photo.

(From the Port's archives)



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Moses Lake over the decades. Hundreds, if not thousands, of relationships had been formed.

“Forty years is a nice run for any relationship, and we’re just glad we’ve had them,” said Doug Sly, president of the Moses Lake Sister City Committee.

“I’ve got tears in my eyes just thinking about it,” said one Moses Lake resident.

Then on June 8, 2010 came the second blow. All commercial airline service to Grant County International Airport ceased when SkyWest/United Express canceled their Moses Lake operations. The terminal had shiny new gates, waiting areas and arrival-departure signs--but no flights

However, the airport has made up for these losses in many ways. The Port’s first and most important tenant, Boeing continues to use Moses Lake as a training and testing site for its jets. Also, the airfield has made a return to its old airbase roots. Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma stages a large number of C-17 cargo plane training flights at the airport, because the airspace is so much less congested than JBLM. It also practices their assault landings on one of the runways.

“It’s essentially a dedicated runway for training all C-17 pilots throughout the world,” said executive director Jones.

In 2011, Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane once again moved almost all of its



PASSING THROUGH

Famous visitors to Grant County International Airport:

- ❖ President **John F. Kennedy** landed at Larson Air Force Base in September 1963 to visit Hanford
- ❖ **Prince Philip**, Queen Elizabeth’s husband, made two touch-and-go landings in 1982
- ❖ **Bruce Willis** came to film portions of “Die Hard II” in 1990
- ❖ **Tom Selleck** came to film scenes from “Runaway” in 1984

air refueling tankers to the Grant County International Airport. Fairchild stayed almost the entire year while its runways were being repaved. Fairchild rented four buildings, including the former Japan Air Lines hangar, for \$94,670 per month.

“It was a sensational deal,” said Jones. “They were terrific tenants. I think we got pretty high reviews from them.”



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The Antonov 225, the world's largest airplane, paid a refueling visit to Grant County International Airport on March 12, 2012. For comparison, note the size of the pickup truck in front of the plane.

(Photo by Jim Kershner)

The Port also played a key role in acquiring for Moses Lake the SGL Automotive Carbon Fibers Group/BMW carbon fiber parts plant, which makes parts for auto giant BMW, in 2010. The plant is adjacent to, but not on, Port property. The Port is providing access to its wastewater treatment facility, as well as access to the Foreign-Trade Zone, which was another incentive for SGL/BMW to locate in Moses Lake. REC-Silicon has also undertaken massive expansion. The Port has also been instrumental in attracting several other industries to Moses Lake over the decades. The Port assisted Eka Chemicals, Inc., with site selection and helped provide industrial revenue bonds and other assistance to National Frozen Foods and Basic American Foods. These plants are not on Port property but they have been key contributors to the region's economic base.

In 2011, the Port's other industrial

tenants included Chemi-Con; Kyra Wines; Dry Falls Cellars; Crown Moving Company; Inland Mechanical; Takata, a manufacturer of the propulsion units for auto airbags; the Moses Lake School District; and many other aviation-related businesses and industries. Sonico, an aircraft maintenance, storage and spare parts company, has been a Port tenant for thirty-plus years, and has serviced nearly all of Boeing's family of jets over that time. With these lucrative industries, the airport is no longer subsidizing the economic development mission of the port. In fact, the opposite is true.

"The revenues from these industrial and commercial leases have allowed the port to keep the airfield open and fully operational," said Jones. "While Japan Air Lines generated enough traffic to generate significant revenues during its heyday, as it began to reduce operations, the commission



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had to rely more on lease revenues. The Port was very successful in attracting those lease revenues, particularly from Japanese companies, and today those provide a significant revenue stream for improving the capital facilities and building new ones.”

“What has been great over the past few years is that with REC-Silicon investing over \$1.5 billion and SGL/BMW investing hundreds of millions in their carbon fiber plant, the assessed valuation in the port district increased quite dramatically in short order,” said Jones. “Now, it’s giving the community – not just the port district but the school district, the city, the county, and the other public districts--an opportunity to maintain the current level of services when most other districts in the state are really cutting government services.”

The Port has capital to invest. In 2012 it plans “the most aggressive capital budget the Port has ever adopted,” said Jones. The goals: rehabilitate the old hangars, restore the warehouse space, and double the size of the industrial wastewater plant. The Port also has ambitious goals for the airport itself. Jones would love to attract at least eight more aviation-related businesses. Most of all, the Port would love to put airline passengers back in its terminal.

“We’re not giving up, but we’re very

realistic now,” said Jones. “We’ve had three various commercial air providers over the last decade. We want to find a carrier that can fit, and that can make money independent of federal or local subsidies.”

So what lies in the future for the Port of Moses Lake? For Jones and the present commissioners--D. Kent Jones, Michael B. Conley, and Stroud W. Kunkle – it appears obvious.

“Given the infrastructure that’s in place here, given the low-cost green power in Grant County and the transportation infrastructure adjacent to our facilities, I believe that Moses Lake and this port district will become the industrial center of central Washington,” said Jones. “That’s the vision.”

An ambitious vision, certainly, but hardly out of the question considering the legacy the Port has built over nearly a half-century. Perhaps the best perspective on that comes from the Founding Father of the Port, Clyde Owen.

“We constantly receive letters from all over, asking information about how we did it, and which consulting agency did the work for us,” said Owen, in a 1976 interview. “That’s the best part – because we didn’t have any consultants. It was just a lot of hard work by many.”



A NOTE ON SOURCES

The files and archives at the Port of Moses Lake headquarters proved to be rich troves of information, especially its “Minutes” and “Resolutions” books. I am especially indebted to the anonymous staffers who vastly simplified a historian’s task by diligently keeping scrapbooks of every news article about the Port from 1968 to the present. These scrapbooks contain hundreds of articles, arranged chronologically, from the Columbia Basin Herald, the Grant County Journal, The Spokesman-Review, The Wenatchee World, the Tri-City Herald, the Seattle Times, and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. I want to especially acknowledge the many Columbia Basin Herald reporters who have covered the Port so diligently and professionally over the decades, including Dick Lowry, David U. Andrews, Michael Sear, Doug Sly, Clyde A. Small II, Matthew Weaver, and many others.

The archives of The Spokesman-Review in Spokane have also been particularly helpful. I would especially like to thank reporter Dan Hansen for his coverage of the Japan Air Lines departure. I must also thank HistoryLink.org, The Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History, which is a treasure trove of information about both the region and the state’s legacy of port districts.

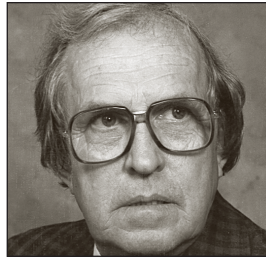
Most crucial of all were the oral interviews I conducted with three men who have shaped the district over the decades: Clyde Owen, David Bailey, and Patrick Jones. Their memories and insights were indispensable for bringing a personal touch to this story. I am especially grateful to Col. Owen, who made this story come alive.



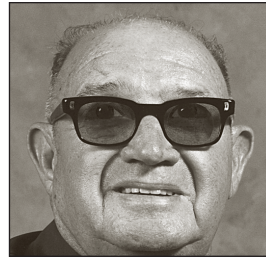
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Floyd W. Rigsby
1965-69
1980-90



Leon M. Bodie
1965-98



Dan B. Dunn
1965-73



Dean S. Hagerty
1969-82



Frank P. Shinn
1974-80



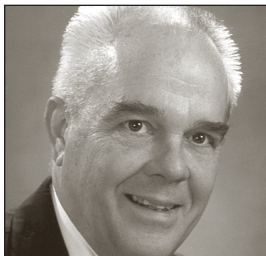
Donald C. Worley
1983-86



Larry D. Peterson
1986-2008



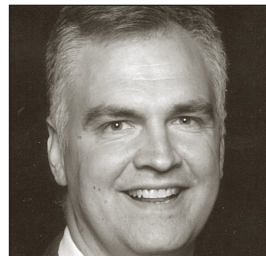
Delone D. Krueger
1991-2009



David Kent Jones
1999-2007
2010-present



Michael B. Conley
2008-present



David J. Plate
2009



Brian P. McGowan
2009-11



Stroud W. Kunkle
2012-present



EXECUTIVES



Clyde Owen
1966-84



David Bailey
1984-2002



David Senne
2002-04



Craig Baldwin
2004-11




Patrick Jones
2011-present



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4

For nearly half a century, the Port of Moses Lake has been a visible presence in central Washington – not only to the residents of Moses Lake and Grant County, but to thousands of cross-state drivers startled by the sight of a Boeing jetliner gliding high above the lonely sage flats on a training run. The Port, sprawling over 4,700 acres north of the city, consists of a huge airfield with one of the longest runways in the U.S. (13,503 feet); a modern airport terminal; extensive facilities for aircraft testing and training; complete aircraft repair and service facilities; and numerous multi-million dollar industrial plants and factories. It has become one of the key economic drivers for all of central Washington.