

## **How Curious – TAT Waynoka**

### **How did Waynoka, Oklahoma, become a center of pioneering jet set travel?**

**MUSIC:** How Curious theme

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Hi. Welcome to How Curious. I'm Rachel Hopkin.

JAUNTY MUSIC FROM VIDEO

#### **TAT Promo Video Excerpt**

Male narrator: Gentlemen and friends of aviation. Travel by train and airplane from California to the east or from the east to California is the modern achievement in transportation. To save time, to see America first, and to enjoy the real fun of flying, I recommend it to you.

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

It's 1929, and a group of prescient investors have banded together. They have a vision of getting people across America far quicker than is possible by train alone by creating a service that combines rail travel at night with flying during the day.

#### **Dale Wares**

And they laid out a route going from New York to Los Angeles that included airports and train stations

#### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Thanks How Curious listener Dale Wares who suggested this story. Back in the 1920s, the idea of airplanes carrying passengers was pretty novel. Tom Wikle and Dale Lightfoot are both scholars and aviators.

#### **Tom Wikle**

After World War One, very few people had ridden in an airplane. The very early commercial service really began with airmail. Passengers would ride in airmail planes. It wasn't really very comfortable because you'd be riding with bags.

SEGUE

#### **Dale Lightfoot**

It wasn't like there was an airport or a site where you could go buy tickets or something like that. It would be an ad hoc arrangement.

#### **Rachel-in-Situ**

So when did this idea of transcontinental air transport come about?

#### **Tom Wikle**

You know Charles Lindbergh is such a big figure. He was a rock star after his 1927 flight across the Atlantic. He was the driving force with what happened in Oklahoma with the Transcontinental Air Transport and he was the main planner for that route so he's a huge figure in

aviation in Oklahoma and in the US in general. But it was this idea of “hey, we would like to have a system that you could get across the country in much less time than trains.”

SEGUE

### **Dale Lightfoot**

Keep in mind that at that time, night flying was considered to be really risky and they wanted this to be a safe, and that’s why they combined rails overnight and flying during the day.

### **PROMO FILM EXCERPT**

Male narrator: In the heart of New York, a great railroad station is the start of your transcontinental rail and air journey from coast to coast.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

The Transcontinental Air Transport company or T A T’s route plan would take just 48 hours - a considerable improvement on the 3, 4 or more days that the train alone would typically take.

### **PROMO FILM EXCERPT**

Male narrator: There’s a new kind of spirit in the air each day when this train departs. It’s like that moment before a smart deluxe liner sets sail for Paris and the Riviera.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

And as you might guess from that deluxe liner analogy, this service was marketed to the very rich, with a one way ticket costing around six and a half grand in today’s money.

The route, as planned by Lindbergh, took advantage of pre-existing rail facilities. Three locations were selected to be the points where passengers switched from air to rail or vice versa: Columbus Ohio to the east, Clovis New Mexico to the west, then they needed somewhere right in the middle of the country. And that’s where the small town of Waynoka, Oklahoma came into play.

### **SOUND OF MODEL TRAIN SET RUNNING**

### **Rachel-in-Situ**

Omigoodness.

### **Mary Lou Goucher**

This is downtown Waynoka back in the thriving days.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

When I visited Waynoka a short while back, I was met by residents Neil and Mary Lou Goucher, along with Charlene Bixler from the local Historical Society. And shown a delightful award-winning model train replica of the town.

### **Charlene Bixler**

This was our Santa Fe depot or ticket office and you can see a little person in the window who would sell you a ticket.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Waynoka's in the northwest of the state, up towards the panhandle.

### **Charlene Bixler**

It began in 1887 when the railroad put the first siding and called it Keystone. A couple of years later it was determined that there was another Keystone in Oklahoma already so they changed the name.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

It's rumored that Waynoka means sweet water. What is sure is that water played a big part in the development of the town.

### **Charlene Bixler**

In 1907, the railroad changed its division point from Woodward, OK, to Waynoka, because of our abundance of water. The railroad's steam engines, of course, had to have water to function. When the change was made, Waynoka started growing by leaps and bounds. And in 1910, this building was a result of all that railroad activity.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

It was built to house a Harvey House restaurant. Harvey Houses were a big deal back in the day: A series of high end eateries established by Fred Harvey in concert with the Santa Fe Railroad and located at stops on the line across the US.

### **Charlene Bixler**

Beautiful arrangement because he had the capability of serving fresh food every day that the railroad would bring in. If he wanted to serve seafood, they would ship it to him. If he wanted fresh flowers on the table, he could get it off the trains.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

That Waynoka had this upscale venue already in place was a factor for the T A T, but first and foremost what it needed was a place where planes could safely land and take off. Here's Tom Wikle again.

### **Tom Wikle**

It was actually Lindbergh who landed in a wheatfield close to the place where the airfield was built and just said "this is perfect" and it was only about 5 miles from the city of Waynoka where the Harvey House was.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

With the site now chosen, the T A T pulled out all the stops to turn it into fitting location for their grand transcontinental hub.

### **Chet Olsen**

This is the edge of the hangar.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

The land where the airport was built is now owned by farmer Chet Olsen. He showed me the concrete slab on which the T A T hangar once stood – at the time, the third largest in the US and pointed out two small buildings – one used to house a fire engine, the other was the communications hub.

### **Chet Olsen**

As a young kid, I would drive the tractor, and sometimes I would pull up cable that they would run out to the runway. I never saw the actual runway, but it was lighted.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

In fact, the T A T was really operating at the cutting edge, according to Tom Wikle and Dale Lightfoot.

### **Tom Wikle**

It was really very advanced because they had things like obstruction lighting. That had never been used before. What that is, that's like if you have a taller building like a hanger, you put a red light on the top. It was a safety measure.

SEGUE

### **Dale Lightfoot**

In addition they had two-way radio communication, and not only meteorological facilities and an on-field meteorologist at Waynoka and the other airports that TAT used, but they had them at regular intervals all across the United States, so that they could get weather updates along the way, because that just improved the safety.

SEGUE

### **Tom Wikle**

One other thing I might mention: they were very proud of their pilots. They had a minimum requirement of 3000 hours, and that's a lot of flight hours. Today an airline transport pilot has to have 1500 hours to fly a commercial airliner, but 3000 – that's a lot of experience. And one of the things they had when you got on board the airplane, they had a brochure, it was sort of a description and biography about the pilots.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

In addition, the TAT gave out maps that highlighted landmarks which could be spotted along the way. After all their planes were travelling at a far lower altitude than passenger jets do today.

### **Dale Lightfoot**

They were flying at 2500 feet off the ground, so you were low and slow, you could see everything below you. You had these panoramic views of the whole landscape, and you could just watch that unfold as you flew along, so that's why they provided these maps.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

In a 1929 promo film for the company, viewers were assured that ...

### **TAT Promo Video Excerpt**

Male narrator: ... airliners nowadays are as snug and comfortable as your own private yacht.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Yes, exactly, just like your yacht, so there were all kinds of niceties to make the experience as luxurious as possible. Each passenger was seated in a roomy individual wicker chair next to a window.

### **Dale Lightfoot**

They had meals that were served in insulated boxes that were the early precursor for what food service is on airlines today.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Back then those were new and exciting.

### **Dale Lightfoot**

They even had inflight movies. They would pull a screen down behind the cockpit and have a projector in the back. So very innovative, and the passenger experience was, for its day, really quite comfortable.

SEGUE

### **Tom Wikle**

There were some passengers who, because of weather, had to ride the train on a segment when they would ordinarily have been in an airplane, it was a big disappointment.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Today, airplanes are often touted as the safest form of travel. But this was not the case back in the 1920s. As a result, alongside ensuring a lavish passenger experience, the TAT execs did everything they could to make safety a priority, including buying a fleet of the highly reputable Ford Trimotor aircraft, and they sought to reassure the jitters of potential fare payers in their promo.

### **TAT Promo Video Excerpt**

Male narrator: These motors, incidentally, are looked after as carefully as a fine watch. After being in use for a specified number of hours, each motor is completely overhauled by a core of experts working under the supervision of Colonel Lindbergh. As technical advisor to the airline, Colonel Lindbergh has instilled his own insistence upon perfect motor performance, overhauling, and frequent replacements, which from his experience is the way to safety in flying.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Such efforts evidently satisfied the editor of a local newspaper who trumpeted in its pages the words:

**Sentence read by Robby Korth**

Flying safer than standing behind a mule.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Hmm. I'm not sure that would have convinced me to get on board. In any case, amid much fanfare the airport was dedicated in June of 1929 and the inaugural trip took place the following month. So began a period of great excitement in the town of Waynoka. Here's Charlene Bixler again.

**Charlene Bixler**

It was such a glorious time, those 18 months, because the community started to build and grow and there was even a high rise hotel built downtown. It was so fascinating because of the people that were in and out, the celebrities that were here. Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart herself spent several nights in our Harvey House, right here where we're sitting.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Like Lindbergh, Earhart was an aviation superstar, and she'd been employed by the TAT in part to promote the airline to female customers.

**Charlene Bixler**

She was invited to be the guest of the local ladies' club. One of those meeting times, she was invited to my husband's great grandmother's home for their meeting that evening and she spent about two hours at her house, so it's pretty exciting for our family.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

Charlene's kept a tally of some of the other celebrities who graced the town. They include:

**Charlene Bixler**

Mary Pickford, Irene Dunne, John Gilbert, then we had Lionel Barrymore, Will Rogers, Greta Garbo, Lady Vanderbilt was here, Lon Chaney that used to play the old scary movies, Gloria Swanson, Mae West, Wallace Berry, and Jackie Cooper. It was a pretty good list of the rich and famous, actually.

**Rachel Hopkin Script**

But perhaps the most celebrated of them all was still Charles Lindbergh. So the fact that he made repeated trips to Waynoka, was really a boon for the town's people.

**Charlene Bixler**

When Lindbergh had a meal downstairs, people would watch and wait for him to leave; they would grab his plate, his fork, his napkin, whatever they could get their hands on, sometimes breaking the plate in two, so they could share a piece that Charles Lindbergh had eaten out of. Another time, he and his wife were both here having dinner in the formal dining room. The cornbread that evening happened to be just exceptional, and he asked to meet the baker, and I

keep thinking to myself that if I were that baker, I'd be bouncing out of the kitchen to come meet him.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

In turn, the town made quite an impression on Lindbergh's wife Anne, as noted in a letter she wrote at the next main stop on the line in Clovis, New Mexico.

### **Anne Lindbergh letter excerpt read by Stephanie Royse**

Waynoka! I have *never* been in a place like it. It is smaller than this – has four or five paved streets and a hotel [...] painted white with a large sign, "Bath," over the front door. One big room downstairs for meeting, eating, registering, buying, and smoking cigars, spitting and talking. At least I presume all this – I only looked at it through the open door. We got a room at the Harvey House [...] and slept well in spite of two or three trains going under our window.

It all felt very, very Western: the quiet, the lack of pressure or touch with progress (not that Western towns aren't progressive, but a small, distant, country town isn't).

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

That statement is rather at odds with what she goes on to write about the new facilities.

### **Anne Lindbergh letter excerpt read by Stephanie Royse**

T A T has built a magnificent field and hangar, [...] the equipment being the most modern, efficient, progressive, down to the last detail. All the town came out to see the dedication. Some townsmen said there hadn't been such a crowd since the dedication of the pavement!

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Yet despite all the fanfare and precautions, the TAT venture did not do well. Partly they were just unlucky in launching only months ahead of the Wall Street Crash with the markets already in turmoil. Then – and this broke my heart a little – there was an actual crash. One of those bright new Trimotors came down in New Mexico with the loss of all crew and passengers.

### **Tom Wikle**

It set the airline back in a significant way and the number of empty seats was pretty high on these planes. So they were trying to get more people interested in flying, they had discounts. They even used company employees, they would fly TAT employees to make it look like the airline had a few more people.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

But what really sealed the fate of the TAT's presence in Waynoka was actually advancing technology, as local history buff Neil Goucher explained.

### **Neil Goucher**

Time moved on and we find out that we didn't need to have all of these airplanes landing and taking off because they had bigger and better airplanes, planes that could flight clear across the country.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

In October 1930, the TAT quietly closed its Waynoka operation.. Later the company merged into the enterprise that would become TWA.

### **Charlene Bixler**

They sold that hangar for \$10,000 to a company in Little Rock, AR, and the hangar was rebuilt and is still there and still in use. Somehow, we survived before and during and we're still here, relying on tourism now. So essentially that's what that was too.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

One of the visitor attractions is the Waynoka Air Rail Museum which is housed in its historic Harvey House, and which documents the TAT's association with the town, which though short, remains significant.

### **Dale Lightfoot**

It was the start of all of these technologies that later expanded and became more available to other people. It was just a relatively brief period of time where they combined the old and the new, the rail travel overnight, the planes during the day.

### **Rachel-in-Situ**

And it really was such a moment.

### **Dale Lightfoot**

And Waynoka was involved in the middle of it all. I mean that's what's remarkable. Little Waynoka, Oklahoma, was at the center literally and figuratively at the center of all that. And so Waynoka's place in aviation history is sealed.

### **Rachel Hopkin Script**

Dale Lightfoot there. Thanks to him and to all the contributors to this episode, including readers Robby Korth and Stephanie Royse. And a huge shout out to listener Dale Wares for bringing this story to How Curious.

You can see photos of Waynoka both then and now on the episode web page – search for KGOU and How Curious.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

And if you too have an idea for How Curious, please drop us a line at [curious@kgou.org](mailto:curious@kgou.org).

### **Theme Music**

Ends