

# REMEMBERING LEE

by FRED FLANDERS

## PREFACE

Lee Wagener is widely known for his thirty-three years of directorship over Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, a major contributor to the growth and development of south Florida and Broward County in particular, from a very early stage to its prominence on the world air scene. Lee retired as Aviation Director of Broward County in 1982; he died in December, 1992.

I shared with Lee the first two years of nursing the metamorphosis of the former Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station into a public air facility, a period of fond memory.

The following episodes in Lee's emerging career are related especially for Lee's wife Anne, daughter Carol, and son David.

Fred Flanders  
1993

A Mrs. Wagener called to say that her son, due in town within a few days, had a background that should well fit the position for which

we had advertised, a financial assistant for a new undertaking just named "Broward County Airport." There was no doubt in Mrs. Wagener's mind that this son was *exactly* the person we were looking for, so I encouraged her to have him apply. A few days later he walked this gangly blond guy with very white skin overlaid with fresh sunburn,

who said he was from Chicago, had a Bachelor's degree from Northwestern University with a major in accounting, had worked in the cost accounting and forecasting division of Western Electric in Chicago and had served as communications officer on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific Theater during "the War" (World War II). This was Lee Wagener. After a brief

*Of the many significant Broward County institutions to arise from decommissioned World War II military training facilities, none has had a greater impact on the region's history and development than the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. The success of transforming the field from an unused navy airbase to a county-run civilian airport was largely the work of two men — first airport manager and former assistant county engineer Fred Flanders and financial assistant and later longtime airport manager and aviation director Lee Wagener. In this colorful reminiscence, Mr. Flanders recalls with fondness and humor the ups and downs of starting a county airport from scratch.*

*Mr. Flanders served as Purchasing Director of Broward County from 1950 to 1970, at which time he became Purchasing Director for the Consolidated City of Jacksonville. He is a resident of Plantation and has been honored as a Broward County Pioneer by the Plantation Historical Society.*

interview, I knew that Lee was the applicant I would recommend for the position at the next meeting of our employer, the Board of County Commissioners of Broward County.

The five male Commissioners met once monthly, the meetings rarely lasting beyond 1:00 p.m., martini time—votes on major agenda items having been decided before meeting day, the concept of a “sunshine law” decades away. Several months earlier, in late 1947, the U.S. Navy Department had offered the recently deactivated Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station to the county on a one-dollar-per-year lease with three principal provisos: that the county (1) operate the facilities for public purposes, (2) maintain the integrity of the airfield, and (3) agree to vacate upon ninety days’ notice in the event of need in a “national emergency.” The county had no statutory authority to undertake a proprietary venture of this nature. Such an action would require a special act of the state legislature the following term. After some comforting assurances from Washington, Tallahassee, and the local legislative delegation, the board had decided, by January 1948, to accept the offer.

I had come to Broward County a year earlier as Assistant County Engineer, and, somewhat bored with bridge and road design, applied for and was appointed Airport Manager when the county assumed control in February. The seemingly nice aspect of this adventure was that it was something new, without restricting precedent and no timetable. Not so. County Attorney John Lloyd sternly advised that because this was not budgeted or with statutory authority, the board was *lending* the operation \$25,000 from the general fund which *had* to be reimbursed in full before the end of the fiscal year, less than nine months hence. This posed a scene of urgency and was why I asked for a financial assistant early on. Lee was appointed in March or April. Our salaries were \$300 and \$250 per month.

We made a good, frictionless team and had a lot of fun. Lee’s first task was to design an accounting system which would give a clear and



Lee Wagener (left) and Fred Flanders.  
(Both photos c. late 1940s, courtesy of Fred Flanders.)

practical handle on daily to monthly operating costs, provide a base for forecasting, meet Navy reporting requirements, and interface with the county’s antiquated but statutory bookkeeping system. He savored this opportunity, sculpting his own design, a masterpiece that with little refinement was to guide the operation into multi-million dollar future years, far beyond our fondest dreams at the time. I concentrated on renovation of facilities badly damaged by two hurricanes and many weeks of flood inundation in the fall of 1947. We had a small but skilled maintenance crew, most of whom had previously worked for the Navy. A six man fire and security force were to remain on Navy payroll for several months.

Keeping the place closed to the public for a while, we prioritized preparation of facilities for use in order of probable income: (1) 136 single family housing units which would provide instant income as there was a severe post-war housing shortage, (2) buildings suitable for non-aviation use and (3) the airfield and air-service buildings and equipment. I asked Lee to make preparations for

opening the housing area. With this, his bent for entrepreneurship became obvious. He prepared written management procedures, designed documentation forms and a separate bookkeeping system, selected a housing manager, and steered the occupancy, section by section, as completed. The Board had reduced our recommended rental rates to \$48, \$52, and \$63 per month for one, two, and three bedroom units. We were miffed because this reduced our projected revenue. When a couple of tenants failed to pay their rent, we wanted to evict them, but the Board chided us to be more patient and think of the consequences of a family being on the street. Thus, we two fiscal idealists came face to face with some of the realities and the fact that we were not the final decision makers. (Lee remembered our early lessons like these throughout his career, but I must insert here about his famous lapse. After many years of growth and profit, there came a couple of lean years in which he was scrounging for revenue to protect his carefully guarded bottom line. He had coin slots put on the doors to the air terminal restroom

toilet stalls. Within twenty-four hours the flak hit the fan, the Board had him on the carpet and the newspapers on the front page. His tailfeathers smoldered for quite a while, and I thoroughly enjoyed joshing him over the years about his pay-to-go backfire.)

Next we concentrated on preparation and occupancy of facilities available for non-aviation purposes and were pleasantly surprised with demand. A Wyler Military Academy leased a large former officer quarters building which we thought might be a white elephant. A research group took the round, three-story, windowless Link Trainer building. An outfit running lobsters from the Bahamas grabbed the ice and cold storage plant. A beer distributor took over the former Navy supply warehouse. A company that made automatic heating elements for coffee percolators converted the former infirmary for their manufacturing and assembly line. Lee negotiated most of these and many subsequent leases, and relished each opportunity.

Taking over the Naval Air Station was a major event in the

Broward community at the time. The total countywide population was about 77,000, and many interests were drooling over those 1,100 acres full of goodies with the thought of something free. The School Board, struggling to accommodate the crop of "war babies" reaching school age, requested use of ten or twelve barracks and a cafeteria for several "temporary" schools. The County Commission of course granted this without rental, but at our urging asked the School Board to assume all preparation and maintenance of those buildings and grounds and a pro rata share of street maintenance, fire protection, and sewage treatment. Lee quickly came up with some hefty but realistic figures to which they reluctantly agreed. What we didn't reveal was that our sewage treatment plant needed an ample load of sewage to function efficiently, and several hundred kids did the trick. (The temporary use for schools turned into many years. Stranahan High, Rogers Middle and Edgewood Elementary had their beginnings there, followed by several others.)

The Fort Lauderdale Little The-

ater group went directly before the Board unannounced, and, led by a prominent young lass, requested free use of the base theater building, citing their cultural contribution to the community. Lee and I had big hopes for good revenue from this building. There was even a bowling alley in one wing and a snack bar in another, but be damned if the Board didn't let them have it for *free*. I was upset, but Lee viewed it with total disbelief — another early lesson for both of us. Soon after, I invited the Board members on an inspection trip of the entire facility and asked Lee to prepare some income and expense projections to reveal the importance of exacting all possible revenues and cautioned him that their attention span for academic exercises was fifteen to twenty minutes, at most. Lee had some figures and graphics on flip charts and made a very impressive presentation, emphasizing that as activities and income increased, so would expense. Further, that when we would later get into air facility operation, the expense potential would sorely need the non-aviation income for years to come. Thereafter, the Board refrained from granting freebies and generally respected our efforts to generate all reasonable revenues.

The Navy Department's Jacksonville office was responsible for watching our behavior under the lease and soon became quite zealous, asking that we submit all leases for their prior approval, not only a pain to us but causing second thoughts by potential tenants. I called the office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, and they agreed to hear our complaint. John Lloyd called Representative Dwight Rogers, Sr., who set up the appointment and accompanied us to the Deputy Chief's office. I simply stated that if we strictly adhered to the three basic provisos of our lease that additional "mothering" by the Jacksonville office was not necessary and was indeed an impediment. Mr. Rogers was amused; the Admiral smiled and said that he agreed. We had traveled to Washington for essentially a one-sentence meeting. Jacksonville soon backed off, and Lee slept better.

There were some offbeat things



Broward County Commission, c. 1948. Left to right: J. B. Wiles, Tony Salvino, Sylvester C. Fox, Luther Remsberg, C. B. Smith.

IN REPLY ADDRESS  
THE BUREAU OF YARDS AND DOCKS

AND REFER TO  
ND7/11-13  
W10-48-Fb.L.  
B-413.5/Cs/vv

## NAVY DEPARTMENT

BUREAU OF YARDS AND DOCKS  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Board of County Commissioners  
Broward County, Florida.

Attention: Mr. Fred A. Flanders,  
Manager, Broward County Airport.

Gentlemen:

You are advised that the following sub-leases between  
Broward County and various sub-lessees are approved:

Leroy Alexander	Bldg. No. 158
Bethany Presbyterian Church	" " 6
Delta Air Lines	" " 23
Wm. E. West	" " 66
G. & L. Watkins, Inc.	" " 24
Richard L. Ritchie	" " 75
Rulan Beverages of Lauderdale, Inc.	" " 42
United Labor Import Company	Hangar No. 4
Robert A. Burns	Bldg. No. 5 and 84
Grauers Aviation Industries, Inc.	" " 78

It is noticed that the proposed lease with Roy C. King  
and William A. King for Building No. 158 provides for a  
rental of approximately \$14.00 per month. The assumption is  
that the rental is in error. It is requested that this Bureau  
be advised as to the proper rental charge which is to be made  
in this case.

Very truly yours,

Jack E. Cochran  
By Direction of Chief of Bureau



Upper left: letter from the Navy regarding airport leases; lower right:  
advertisement from the *Broward Sun*, August 12, 1948 (both courtesy  
of Fred Flanders).



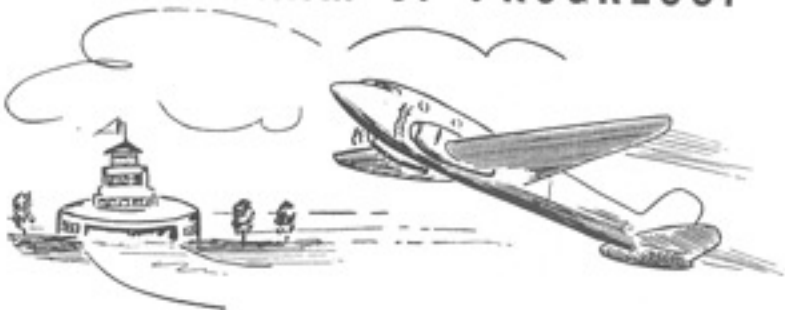
Broward County Attorney  
John U. Lloyd.

that brought us more amusement  
than problems. Along the east bound-  
ary in an interim growth of weed  
jungle were some kennels used dur-  
ing the war for military K-9 dog train-  
ing. On our first visit there, an old-  
timer told us this higher ground was  
once known as "rattlesnake ridge," so  
Lee wouldn't get out of the car. In a  
grove of melaleuca trees inside the  
south boundary was a recently ar-



U.S. Congressman  
Dwight L. Rogers, Sr.

## Broward County Airport: A PROGRAM OF PROGRESS!



### From A Wartime Project To An **INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT**

MORE THAN 15 BUSINESS FIRMS NOW OPERATE FROM FACILITIES AT THE ONE TIME NAVAL  
AIR STATION—WITH 200 FAMILIES OCCUPYING THE HOUSING UNITS



**The Broward County Airport as it appeared in the late '40s (courtesy of Fred Flanders).**

rived squatter with several goats. He wasn't receptive to our request to move along, "because my goats like the shade and don't bother nobody." The fire chief was looking for a place to tow a derelict fuselage for aircraft fire drill. Lee suggested the field adjacent to the "goat farm." Shortly after the first drill the squatter and his goats vamoosed. The same situation today would involve several social agencies and a support group for the goats. Then there was the "hog farm" down by the inlet off the Dania Cutoff Canal. The Navy officers' mess had acquired some hogs during the food shortage years of the war and had them penned next to the inlet with the fencing arranged so the hogs could drink and wallow in the shallows along the shore. The oft-told story was that periodically a hog would simply disappear. Suspecting thieves, a guard was posted and soon caught the varmints in the act—alligators. So we enjoyed using semi-official designations of various locales within the airport such as rattlesnake ridge (aka dogpatch), goat farm, hog farm, land crab slough, cattaill pond, and the dump.

The hog farm story reminds me of the inlet off the canal which had been dredged for some purpose be-

fore acquisition by the Navy. It is several acres in area and deep enough for small pleasure boats. Early on we were approached by the Fort Lauderdale Small Boat Club, who wanted to put in dockage and service facilities to serve as their marina. Lee worked up an equitable lease deal, and they're still there today, forty-four years later, and undoubtedly the airport's oldest tenant.

In late summer Lee confided that we were in a position to pay the \$25,000 back to the County's general fund. We debated whether to do this with fanfare or quietly, deciding on the latter. Some business people in town were complaining that competitor tenants at the airport had unfair advantage with lower rental rates and no ad valorem tax. The Tax Assessor had announced that he was going to appraise and tax our business properties until John Lloyd quickly obtained an Attorney General's opinion that the federally-owned, county-operated facilities were not subject to real estate tax. In spite of our sore need for funds for repair and restoration, the \$25,000 would be interpreted by the weepers as "profit." Lee quietly arranged for the transfer of funds, and Board members quietly expressed their

pleasure.

That fall (1948), following a wet, rainy season, two wet hurricanes came through, nearly repeating the flood conditions of 1947. The airport had a fair drainage system provided the Dania Canal still had remaining capacity to receive our runoff. At the peak our crews were working around the clock unclogging ditches and culverts. A paved patrol roadway in the southwest area was blocking part of the runoff from the airfield. I got two picks and shovels and told Lee it was up to us to dig a trench through the road. I had to show him how to swing a pick and push the shovel with his foot. Every few minutes he would mutter something like, "This is not what I had in mind when I took this job." After a number of blisters and appropriate profanity, we hacked a small trench, and the rush of water did the rest. The next day it was about forty feet wide and several feet deep. I had promised Lee that we wouldn't involve ourselves again like this, but by that time he was bragging about it and taking people over to see what "we" had done. We had avoided major flooding, but the cleanup set us back many weeks. We got help from a large County prisoner crew, then a true chain-gang, many in leg chains and guarded by shotgun-toting, tobacco-chewing prisoner guards in ten-gallon hats.

It was probably early 1949 by the time most non-aviation facilities were in use and we decided to try our wings at operating an airport. The only inquiries we had were from a handful of local small plane owners, most looking for a free tie-down arrangement "in all that empty space." Lee had a lot of insight from his service in the Navy. I had very little and asked the Miami office of the Federal Aviation Administration to channel their steerage through Lee. Initially we would only be able to accommodate daylight eyeball activity, as the floods had left the runway lighting system in need of extensive and expensive repair. The Navy had stripped the control tower of all communications gear, leaving only a rudimentary red/green hand held signal light. So we blanked out the huge CLOSED letters painted on the runways and an-

nounced we were open for business. Nothing happened. It was several weeks before a lone single-engine plane landed and we all ran out to see who and why. Flying out of Opa Locka, another war-surplus airfield, he was hoping to base with us. A few days later he returned with Jim Graneer. They knew about the former City of Fort Lauderdale Merle Fogg Airport hangar and service facility that the Navy had used and left intact in the northeast corner of the field. Jim said that he might be interested in leasing these and some ramp space but needed a "from scratch" deal. It was a mutual situation, so Lee worked up a proposed lease with rental slowly ascending from near zero. Graneer liked it, the Board approved it, and we were in the airport business. Jim brought several customers with him, and these soon decoyed others. One hitch that worried us was that his one-person ramp crew and assistant mechanic was also his live-in girlfriend. They had quarters in the hangar. Such an arrangement was quite taboo in those days, especially at a public facility. However, her long blond tresses and shapely figure accented by snug coveralls, along with good aircraft savvy, earned much admiration and little scorn.

Soon an outfit came along that called themselves "United States Airways." Two men had acquired two or three war surplus DC-3 airplanes and had a contract to carry Puerto Rican farm laborers between San Juan and New Jersey, obviously a shoe-string operation, but we weren't picky. All they needed was a refueling operation and a restroom for stopovers. Lee negotiated an acceptable deal. The part that I remember best is how we carpentered an opening in the outer wall of the main hangar building to provide access to a restroom and had it spic and span for the maiden flight, after which it looked like a herd of cattle had been through. The cleaning crew used shovels and a fire hose. However, the deal made for good publicity — "international passenger flights via multi-engine aircraft," etc. — and we made the most of it.

Signs of other aviation interests

began to show. The F.A.A. was talking long-range planning for resurrection of the runway lighting and control tower. We were able to initiate some runway and taxiway repair on our own. Yes, we were in the airport business, and Lee and I were as happy as two kids on a ball field; he was twenty-nine, I thirty-one, each with big dreams of what may lie ahead. We had each been in the right place at the right time to share the fun of nurturing a high-potential asset in a community of great promise. However, deep beneath my ego was the realization that Lee was more cut out for the entrepreneurship role for this thing than I.

Then the bomb dropped! John Lloyd relayed word that the Navy Department had called to advise that official notice of their intent to reactivate the Naval Air Station within ninety days was on the way due to the imminent conflict in Korea. Lee and I took the rest of the day off to drown our sorrows and ponder our plight. It hit the papers the next day, and our tenants were furious, many desperate. All leases, both housing and commercial, contained the same ninety-day cancellation clause as ours with the Navy, so as soon as the Navy's formal notice arrived, we had the very painful task of delivering same in writing and in person to each occupant. The evacuation would be slow.

One day, recently-elected County Commissioner Bill Groene called and said that he was coming out to see me and that it was "official but personal." On arrival he explained that the Board had just received authorization from the Legislature to establish a central purchasing department for the county and that they would like for me to set it up and become the director. Dumbfounded, I told him that I didn't even purchase my own socks. A retired industrialist, and a man of few words, he said, "The Board knows you and you know county government; you can learn the purchasing." My wife Helen, Lee, John Lloyd, former boss County Engineer H. C. Davis, and friend and advocate Ted Cabot, then Clerk of the Circuit Court, all counseled in the affirmative. So I called

Mr. Groene and gratefully accepted the offer, still wondering how the hell you go about buying the needs of the diverse elements and egos of county government without spending most of the time in hot water. When the appointment became official, I moved back to the courthouse, leaving Lee to go down with the sinking ship.

Lee had hopes of getting a worthwhile job with the Navy as a civilian when they would take over, riding out their emergency use, and that perhaps the facility would eventually revert back to the county. The Board designated him Acting Manager.

When half the housing and commercial tenants had evacuated, the Navy reversed its decision; the base would NOT be reactivated. They were quick to try to assure the county that they would not reverse again, but the Board was leery. After a period of limbo, Congressman Rogers and Senator Spessard Holland were advised that the former Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station, along with a number of other World War II military installations, was being placed on a list for reversion to local ownership, a long process requiring congressional approval, but apparently to be believed. With this and Lee's optimism, the Board agreed to hang on. Lee proceeded to bootstrap the facility back to life. Early on, air activity started to perk, and Lee was off to a wonderful and rewarding career. He and what was to become Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport were made for each other.

When the *Miami Herald*, on February 7, 1993, published "The 100—A Ranking of the Most Influential People in South Florida History," it included "Lee Wagener—the main force behind the development of Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport," a fitting tribute to a great guy.

The purchasing endeavor turned out to be a fun career for me, so throughout the years until our respective retirements and beyond, we frequently shared glee and pain over lunch and often drifted back to memories of rattlesnake ridge and the goat farm.