

Interview with Jess and Ann Bachner by William Schneider in Fairbanks, Alaska on January 12, 1985
H85-08, Part 2

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: So, so you, that was on that same trip at Norman Wells you had the problem too, huh?

JESS BACHNER: Yeah, it was about 72 below, I think. The guy said, well, you'd better put those airplanes in the hangar. They had a great big hangar there that was abandoned by the military. So we, there was 4 or 5 of us there, and so we put all these airplanes in the hangar. But in the hangar, they had a hockey rink, and a curling rink. And so sitting in the hotel this night, a guy calls up, and he says hey, he said, "You own that Tri-Fisher that's in that hangar?" And I said, "Yeah." Well, he says, "You got a little problem," he said, "We were having a hockey game," and he says one of the guys drove a hockey puck right through the middle of the tail end of it. And a course with that cold weather, it'd just exploded, you know. It made a hole about 10 times big as a hockey puck. But we went and got a heater, and patched it up, taped it up, got it home. But the guy was sure, he wanted to pay me for it and everything else. Who would ever think that they'd drive a hockey puck through your airplane, it was clear across the hangar, too. Clear on the other side of the hangar. But it had a great big hole in the vertical fin.

JESS BACHNER: Oh, we were there ...oh, another thing, yeah, we were stuck there, let's see was that at Norman Wells. No that was at...

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: That was Edmonton?

JESS BACHNER: Yeah, we came into Edmonton, and it was cold. It was about 40 below. And foggy. Real foggy. There was a friend of ours that got there the day before, couple days before I guess. So we went in, asked him, and said hey, how come you're still here? Gee, we thought the weather was good yesterday. Oh no, he says, the weather was no good yesterday, and no good today, and he says how'd you guys get in here? Well, we said we just come in, it's kinda foggy, but we made it, it's getting colder. Supposed to, we were stuck there for 4 days. But anyway, this guy come to find out he went to check the weather, and he raised up the window blind and about a foot from his window was another building that was whitewashed. So he'd been looking out there at the whitewashed wall all the time, checking the weather. He'd been sitting there 3 or 4 days checking the weather on the whitewashed wall. So we had to go someplace else to check the weather after that. But it was cold and foggy. I think we were there 3 or 4 days and finally got out of there. That trip was cold all the way, all the way.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: You went the inside route?

JESS BACHNER: Oh, yeah. Yeah we come...

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: And, why were you bringing that plane up, was that to sell, or...

JESS BACHNER: Oh, it was a new one yeah, sell it.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: So did you normally ferry planes up to sell 'em?

JESS BACHNER: Well, I just went to the meeting. They used to have yearly conventions in them days, you know. Which they've quit nowadays. But I went to 2 or 3 of 'em. You'd always bring an airplane home, when you come home.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: When you were learning to become an airplane mechanic in the early days, how did that happen?

JESS BACHNER: Well, you just got a job scrubbing parts, or working on airplanes. Helping the mechanics, and watching what they do, and they taught you. Like Hutch, and Eldred Crom and Ernie Hubbard. Worked for them for years, at Wien's, and Pollock's, and eventually Ernie Hubbard and Crom worked for me, for 11, 12, 13 years. But it was just a matter of watching. Fred Seltenrich, he taught me a lot. But you just picked it up by watching and doing, like the welding. Of course in the old days you used to have to be able to splice cable, which you don't do anymore, they use copper clamps nowadays. But compressed sleeves they call them. That was the toughest thing I think that I had, was learning how to splice that cable. I still don't know how. I did know for awhile, but you forget it. It's pretty tough. Some guys it was automatic, you know they could just do it automatically. It was tough for me to learn how to splice cable, but welding was easy, and all the rest of it was easy. Course I worked on cars and trucks before too, you know, which helped a lot, with the basics of it. Mostly just a matter of watching, I never ...I studied some manuals, I had the Ross manuals, but they didn't help much. All you could do was get some of the general ideas out of the manuals. You had to do it, mostly experience.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: Let's talk a little bit of the future of aviation, and what you see.

JESS BACHNER: Well, I don't know, I don't see very much, but, course, we're kinda fortunate, everything we've got here is paid for, and we can just sit here and grind along, as long as the taxes don't eat us up. Which they're trying to do. But, we got people on one side of us folding up, and people on the other side trying to start up. So, I don't know where it's going. I know the business is gone way down. We used to have, at one time we had as many as 17 people working here. Now we're down to 4. It's hardly, it's pretty hard to even pay the heat and light bill. With only 4 people working. But, now the highway department, the State claims they're going to put a 4 lane highway right down the middle of our runway, so that'll finish that off. So, I don't know what'll happen, I don't, I haven't any idea. They don't talk to us, all they do is talk to the newspapers and the radio people, and scare all our customers off, but they don't come and talk to us, so we don't know what's going to happen.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: How about your own feelings, what do you have in mind? I know you told Debbie, when she did an interview with you, that you wanted to go to Circle Hot Springs...

JESS BACHNER: Well fishing and hunting and trading and trapping, like Fred says.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: Scare some bears away.

JESS BACHNER: Yeah, that's right. I got a cabin at Circle Hot Springs, got one up the Richardson Clearwater, got a good boat. We can trade off back and forth. The bird season up at Circle, summer season on the Creek. Winter you just have to do whatever comes along.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: Well, that's good, thank you. So Jesse, there's been some change in terms of general maintenance here at the Wood Aircraft, is specialized?

JESS BACHNER: Oh, yeah, you see, we used to do everything, we used to do a lot of fabric work, and rebuilding wreck, just everything general maintenance. But it's got to the point now where it's pretty well specialized. It's a, like I say, all them guys run around with a tool box in the back of their pick-up, doing all that kinda stuff. And when the customer gets to the point where he finds that the guy he's had working on it can't fix it, then they bring it to us. We get to fix it. So it's kinda a specialty shop. We've still got a few steady customers, people that have depended on us for years. Bud Helmerick, Tom Classen, Mike Hartman. Few though, stand by us you know, don't fool with those other type of people. I don't know. Maybe it's enough to keep us above water. So far this winter luckily the weather's been warm enough so it doesn't eat us up in fuel in cool bills, but course then the big snow come so that ate us up in plowing. So, it's one thing or another.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: You had to do apprenticeships?

JESS BACHNER: Oh, yeah, you had to have 2 years of apprenticeship signed off by a licensed mechanic before you could even qualify to take the test for a mechanic's license. And then you had to take a written test, and what they call a practical test, from a licensed mechanic which consisted of welding and splicing cable, wood splicing, and fabric work, just the general maintenance, and the knowledge of engine, magnetos, carburetors and valve systems and so forth. But nowadays they go to school, for 6 months or a year, or whatever the course is. And read the books, and if they can pass the test away they go with a ticket. They don't have to know anything, except memorize the stuff in the book so they can pass the test.

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER: Okay, well thank you very much, I think that was good.

JESS BACHNER: Yeah, very good.