

ROBERT HECK: A 40-YEAR LEGACY OF SERVICE TO RHINELANDER

By Ryan Matthews of The Northwoods River News

A Delta Airlines connection flight circled through the big azure sky before landing effortlessly on runway 9/27 at the Rhineland-Oneida County Airport at 3:15 p.m. July 23 as airport commissioner Robert “Bob” Heck and chief maintenance technician Gary Johnson looked on from the parallel taxiway.

“It doesn’t look like it, but he’s coming in at about 120 es per hour,” Johnson said. Passengers stood inside the 32,300 square-foot terminal waiting for the plane to taxi and arrivals to deplane. They will join the more than 1.14 million others who have taken flights out of the Rhineland-Oneida County Airport since 1975.

From takeoff to landing, the passengers will be in the air about 30 minutes before arriving in Minneapolis-St. Paul and connecting to cities around the world. The flight is one of two daily flights between the Rhineland-Oneida County Airport and the Minneapolis- St. Paul International Airport. A third flight comes from Minneapolis-St. Paul in the evening before traveling on to Ford Airport in Iron Mountain, Mich.

Through this connection, travelers are able to connect to about 500 cities across the U.S. and internationally.



Travelers on a 7 a.m. flight from Rhineland can be in New York City for lunch; travelers on a 3:45 p.m. flight from Rhineland can make it to Las Vegas in time to see a show.

The 6,799 foot-long, 150 foot-wide runway 9/27 at the Rhineland-Oneida County Airport was a crowning achievement in 1979 that secured the airport’s position as a major regional hub connecting Northwoods residents to all major U.S. cities in a matter of hours.

To date, Heck said the airport has brought in more than \$400 million in economic development and resulted in tens of millions of dollars in secured federal grants.

Remarkably, the airport is completely debt free. But, the whole thing almost didn’t happen.

In 1975, the 27 year-old airport was equipped with a 3,482 square-foot terminal (little more than a 10th of the size of the current terminal) and an International Harvester Cub Cadet tractor. For those unfamiliar with Cub Cadets, they were about the size of a modern-day riding lawn mower with modest plowing and mowing capability.

The airport was serviced by North Central Airlines at the time, but airline board chairman Arthur E.A. Mueller was starting to wonder whether the aging regional airport was worth it. Modern jet technology meant passenger planes

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were bigger and faster and required longer, wider runways and bigger terminals to service a growing number of customers. The Rhinelander airport was woefully unprepared for the jet age.

What followed was years of negotiations, meetings, travel, salesmanship and vision to bring fresh ideas to the airport and make it what it is today. It is safe to say that, without the work of one man, the whole project may never have occurred.

Bob Heck's mantra and selling point over the years has been that "airports build cities; cities don't build airports." Had Heck not taken the initiative to work toward a better future, Rhinelander would look quite different today.

Heck's work on the Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport Commission stands as testament to what great things can be accomplished with the right combination of hard work and civic spirit.

'A chance' and a legacy



Heck has an eye for detail. It is a quality that has no doubt aided him as a salesman. On a tour of the Heck Capital headquarters in Rhinelander, he proudly points out pieces that would easily elude the untrained eye, corners that some lesser builder may have cut.

Each element of the building is deliberate and remembered - the restroom faucets, the blue-tinted conference room windows, the plantings outside the windows, the 132 local builders employed in the project, the six ultraviolet water filters.

If Heck takes pride in aesthetics, it is only in the evidence of his care. He talks of his building in terms of how a cared-for building helps reflect well on the community.

That pride in responsible care is evident in Heck's demeanor. It is impossible for him to talk about himself without speaking also of his family, in particular his wife, June. Where other men have office shelves of awards, accolades, recognitions and degrees, Heck displays photos of his five children and 19 grandchildren. Twelve of those grandchildren live within a block of Bob and June Heck; some work in the office.

The Hecks will celebrate their 54th anniversary this month. The two met in high school, but did not date until college. Bob studied economics and history at the University Wisconsin-Madison, and June went to Marquette University, majoring in dental hygiene.

The couple was married in 1961 and moved back to their shared hometown of Wausau where Bob found work in sales at the brokerage firm The Marshal Co. in the Mueller building (now the location of Dudley Tower) where he was first exposed to the world of aeronautics. The head of the Mueller building was Arthur Mueller, chairman of the

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board of North Central Airlines.

The family moved to Rhinelander in 1962, but Bob continued to occasionally meet with Mueller in Wausau to discuss business. The two struck up a familiar rapport from these meetings.

It was during one such meeting in 1975 that Mueller divulged to Heck that North Central Airlines was considering halting service to Rhinelander. Nothing had been done to modernize the aging airport and North Central Airlines saw the writing on the wall with planes getting bigger, jets getting faster and cheaper airfares leading to more enplanements. Airports had to modernize or risk losing service.

“Don’t do that,” Heck said. “Would you give me a chance to see if I could do something that would prevent that from happening?”

“He looked me right in the eye and said, ‘Bob, we trust you. We’ll give you that chance.’”

‘A breath of fresh air’

When asked what qualities make an effective salesperson, Heck points to two main characteristics: dedication and a reliable network. Heck had started his Rhinelander business from scratch in the 1960s. He did not have a lot of contacts, but he did have an unwavering work ethic and was not afraid to reach out and meet new people to establish relationships.

In 1975, Heck would have been the first to tell you that he had no experience running an airport. He had never piloted an airplane. He was not aware of airport fire response codes. And he did not have large sums of money to donate to a philanthropic airport project.

What he did have to give was time, salesmanship and an uncanny ability to network.

Heck knew that he was going to have to work with everyone from the Rhinelander mayor’s office to Washington D.C. to get this project done. He started on the local front with Rhinelander Mayor Claribel Prosser.

He explained to Prosser what was at stake, that North Central Airlines was considering pulling out of Rhinelander if the airport did not modernize. He had a simple message for the mayor: if there’s a way I can help, I’d sure like to do so.”

Airports build cities.

Prosser, recognizing Heck’s drive, appointed him as the new head of the airport commission. From there, Heck assured Mueller and North Central Airlines that he was going to do “everything in my power” to modernize the air-port to accommodate jets with a first-class facility and brand new runway.

To do that, Heck needed to raise a significant



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amount of capital and get the right people on board with the project. He had already met with Mayor Prosser, and he was close with Arthur Mueller, but he needed a couple more players for a full team.

He went straight to Ed Vie at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in Minneapolis. Vie was used to people demanding things of him. Heck took a different approach. He went to Vie asking for help. Heck showed Vie the plans and enlisted his help to “get our airport into the 21st century.” Vie vowed to do everything in his power to help Heck get the airport project off the ground.

Heck said he ended up becoming close with Vie over the years in a mentorship-type of relationship. He said Vie “took me under his wing.”

Next, Heck went to the Wisconsin Division of Aeronautics in the Department of Transportation in Madison. Fritz Wolf was the Division of Aeronautics administrator in 1975. Heck also worked with Aviation Development Director Joseph Abernathy and Bureau of Aviation Operations Director James Ash. In Madison, Heck took the same approach he did with Vie: Lay out the plan, show the gentlemen what he had already accomplished, and ask how they might help see it to fruition.

“They later said that it was like ‘a breath of fresh air,’” Heck said. They told him the Department of Transportation had been looking for someone to be a catalyst to get things moving in Rhinelander.

From there, Heck met with Vice Chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board Richard O’Melia, a Rhinelander native working in Washington D.C.; U.S. Representative David Obey (who happened to be an old classmate at Wausau East High School and UW-Madison); and Lee Dreyfus, then Chancellor of University of Wisconsin- Stevens Point.

Back home, Heck assembled reporters from multiple news outlets and told them about his plan.

“We need a new airport facility, new grounds, new equipment, you name it,” Heck said. “We’ve got basically nothing. We’ve been told we’re going to lose an airline if we don’t get it together.”

Heck told them he was willing to do the work and pick up the challenge, but he needed everyone’s help, including the media.

“Either we all work together or the project could fail,” Heck said.

One key player stepped forward: Bill Behling, publisher and editor of The Rhinelander Daily News, now The Northwoods River News.

“Bill put it front and center,” Heck said. “He really was an ally, and I needed someone like that to be there.”

Heck had assembled his team, but the project still required funding.

Heck built the airport that built a city

No city or county would have been willing to foot the \$9 million bill to get the project up and running in the ‘70s. To put that price tag into modern context, \$9 million in 1979 when the project was completed would be the equivalent of almost \$30 million today.

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Rhinelanders did not have that kind of money. Oneida County taxpayers weren't going to be stuck with the bill, either.

In the end, 90 percent of the project funding came from federal grants, five percent came from state grants and the remaining five percent came from the airport sponsors, Rhinelanders and Oneida County.

Heck worked his connections at the state and national level to secure the federal and state grant support, but he still needed to convince both the city of Rhinelanders and Oneida County to support the project. Heck visited every single person serving on the county board and the city council, spending hours with each person, to explain why the Northwoods needed this airport. He wanted to express the gravity of the situation and the need for modernization of the airport. It wasn't just the threat of North Central Airlines leaving the airport, it was the loss of all future jet aircraft service if the airport did not modernize.

Without an airport, it could be devastating," Heck said.

It's impossible to predict what Rhinelanders would look like today had the airport never modernized. In 1980, there were no companies around the airport. There were two by 1990. Today, there are 14 companies located near the Rhinelanders-Oneida County Airport employing approximately 1,150 people. It is possible that many of those companies and jobs would not exist if not for the airport.

"It's really been a big plus for Rhinelanders. Not only in jobs but in the economic benefit ... that's been obtained because we have the airport facility," Heck said.

From 1948 to 1975, the airport received \$3.5 million in federal grants. From 1975 to today, the airport has received \$32.5 million in federal grants.

Ultimately, both the city and the county approved the project and gave the commission the green light to begin work on the terminal.

"That was a monumental day, and I'll never forget it as long as I live," Heck said.

The 'monumental day' arrives

The airport terminal grand opening ceremony was held July 28-29, 1979 under clear blue skies.

Speakers included the recently elected Gov. Lee Dreyfus and Richard O'Melia of the Civil Aeronautics Board. Other guests included U.S. Senator (and former governor) Gaylord Nelson, Representative David Obey, Fritz Wolf, Wayne Barlow from the FAA and Republic Airlines Vice President of Route Development J. Kenneth Courtney.

The dedication featured an air show with stunt-flying sky-divers, aerial acrobatics, military planes, biplanes and wing walks. There was a community auction, flea market, raffle, Saturday night dance, fireworks, pig roast and live music throughout. Heck rolled out the proverbial barrel. One local newspaper reported it as "one of the largest events in (Rhinelanders's) history." Pages were filled with stories of the event and businesses took out ads supporting the airport.

"A right to be proud!" exclaimed an advertisement by Lassig's Ready Mix Inc.

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“We are proud to have been part of the new airport facilities,” read a Birchfield Nurseries Inc ad.

The Rhinelander Daily News estimated 25,000 people attended the two-day event. Gov. Dreyfus was quoted in the Rhinelander Daily News saying, “There is no ‘crisis of confidence’ in Wisconsin. You can say that to the president or anybody else who asks. We’ve got hope in the future.”

“You have my congratulations. You’ve shown an extraordinary commitment to this community,” Gaylord Nelson said.

“He may be a ‘Hodag’ now, but he showed the tenaciousness of a ‘Wausau Lumberjack,’” Obey said of Heck, his former classmate.

Later that year, Heck received the 1976 Aviation Award at the 21st annual Wisconsin Aeronautics Conference, “For his activity in promoting the programs to update the airport to accommodate jet service on a year ‘round basis.”

Millions serviced by airport

North Central Airlines merged with Southern Airways in 1979 to become Republic Airlines. Republic Airlines eventually merged into Northwestern Airlines in 1986 which merged into Delta Air Lines in 2008. Delta services the Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport today.

Airports see a ratio of about 2.5:1 of airport visitors to enplanements. The reason being that those departing and arriving are often met by family and friends at the airport. By that ratio, around 2.85 million people have passed through the Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport in the last 40 years.

The airport has been the first and last impression of the Northwoods for millions of travelers. All the more reason for the grounds and the facilities to be of uncompromising quality, Heck thought.

Even in the middle of July when most of the Northwoods is lush and overgrown, the Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport grounds support nary a weed. A median of plantings was recently simplified to maximize a garden on the airport’s façade.

The interior of the terminal is as carefully ordered. The baggage claim and boarding lanes are situated to minimize cross traffic between arrivals and departures. A waiting area is equipped with Wi-Fi and a calming cascading blue-tile fountain under a vaulted ceiling and full windows overlooking the runway.

Heck visited 12 airports in 1975 that North Central Airlines serviced to note what other airports were offering. He didn’t want just a “run of the mill” terminal, he wanted something that was going to be beautiful and would fit in the Northwoods. He worked with Becher-Hoppe Engineers Inc. to design the terminal which looks just as contemporary today as it did in the 1970s.

Several changes have occurred at the airport since 1979, but most of them have been behind the scenes, making the whole process of flying more comfortable, safer and more efficient.

The old International Harvester Cub Cadet has been retired and replaced by a fleet of modern machines that transport the airport’s five maintenance employees anywhere on the 1,440-acre property in any weather.

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An additional aircraft rescue and firefighting (ARFF) building was added onto the terminal three years ago, housing the airport's Rosenbauer Panther 6x6, a fire tanker specifically designed for airports. The Rosenbauer holds about 1,500 gallons of water, which Gary Johnson said can be emptied in less than two minutes from water turrets mounted on the front bumper and roof. The machine can reach speeds of 70 mph, handles both foam and chemical spray and has a FLIR Systems thermal imaging camera to identify the hottest part of a fire or quickly find people in emergencies.

In order to meet safety protocols, the maintenance staff are trained and undergo annual ARFF recertification.

"Before we had our own equipment, Rhinelander's fire department was our backup," Johnson said.

Now the airport has its own equipment and manpower to take care of all contingencies in all weather. It has storage for tractors, plows, buckets, snow throwers, sanders and everything else required to keep a runway clean and safe throughout northern Wisconsin's four seasons.

The airport also has more than 20 hangars for general aviation. There are 16 private hangars and a Department of Natural Resources hangar.

All of this is organized on a property roughly half the size of the city of Rhinelander and is managed by a staff of fewer than 10.

In addition to the five maintenance personnel is Joe Brauer, who has been airport manager for 25 years. Heck said Brauer is the best airport manager he has ever worked with. Brauer's assistant, Sherrie Williamson, has worked at the airport for 27 years.

The other two commissioners are Wilbur Petroskey and Bev Long. There are 130 years of experience between the staff members; 68 years of experience on the three-person commission.

'It wasn't easy'

Heck has donated thousands of hours to the Rhinelander-Oneida County Airport - all on a volunteer basis. That act of service was no doubt trying in ways he never could have predicted, and he is grateful for his family sticking with him through it all.

"It wasn't easy," Heck said. "I give my family so much credit because they paid a dear price for me being gone so much. They stuck by me, and they knew it was the right thing to do for our community, and they backed me. I give them all the credit. Without their support and their backing, we - the Rhinelander area - would not have an airport."

Bob Heck doesn't mince words. "Airports build cities, cities don't build airports."

He has the numbers to back up that claim: 1.14 million enplanements (does not count arrivals); and \$400 million in economic development including 14 companies nearby with more than 1,150 jobs.

Without Bob Heck's leadership and the support of his family, the community of Rhinelander would be unrecognizable.