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Eastern's Silver Fleet: Interstate Airline Passenger Service Comes to Bowling Green

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The weather was fair and warm on the afternoon of August 1, 1948 when a crowd of some 12,500 assembled at the Bowling Green-Warren County airport to witness an event the local paper called “one of the most important” in this Kentucky community’s history. At 3:27, Captain Elmer W. Reed was scheduled to touch down in his Eastern Air Lines “Silver Liner,” marking the beginning of air mail, air express and interstate passenger service for Warren County’s 42,000 citizens. The festivities on that summer day were gratifying for members of the local airport board, who could look back on many months of advocacy, planning, and (to paraphrase a state official) even some “feudin’ and fightin’” to bring air service to Bowling Green.¹

World War II had made possible the federally funded expansion and improvement of Bowling Green’s Scottsville Road airport site. Formerly the domain of private pilots and a flying school, in 1943 the airport became a training ground for U.S. Army Air Corps cadets studying at Western Kentucky State Teachers College (now Western Kentucky University). Toward the end of the war, the Bowling Green Flying Service provided civilian flight instruction and Bluegrass Airlines began carrying passengers to six other Kentucky cities, but no regular interstate service was yet available.

After Bluegrass Airlines ceased operations in fall 1946, members of the newly formed city-county airport board were anxious to maintain a presence for Bowling Green in the era of postwar civil aviation. Considered among the best of Kentucky’s 47 airports (and one of only nine that was municipally operated), the airport was well suited for growth. It housed about 20 locally owned planes and accommodated an average of 300 landings per month in 1946 and a record 575 in January 1947. For several years, the airport had also qualified as a bad weather landing site for commercial carriers such as Eastern Air Lines. Further support for expansion came from the state Aeronautics Commission, whose technical advisor urged Kentucky to claim its share of available federal funding for the modernization of airport facilities. Kentucky was “crying for airline transportation,” he declared, “both feeder line and transcontinental.”²

After optimistically embarking upon a program of runway and terminal improvements in order to lure a major carrier, Bowling Green’s airport board suffered a temporary setback. In April 1947, the federal Civil Aeronautics Board declined to authorize the expansion of feeder airline networks throughout Kentucky. Outraged, the chairman of the state commission called for a congressional investigation and declared that ‘all of Kentucky is afeudin’ and afightin’ with the C.A.B.” Local officials, businesses and aviation companies scrambled to gather more evidence that would help convince the Board of the state’s need to escape its “horse and buggy days” with a modern air transportation system.³

Fortunately, the feud was short-lived. On October 13, 1947, the Civil Aeronautics Board authorized Eastern Air Lines to make Bowling Green another stop on its daily, five-stop Chicago-to-Atlanta route. Pending the installation of radio and other communications
equipment. Eastern promised Bowling Green at least one northbound and one southbound flight per day. The Daily News proudly compared airport advocates such as Mayor Henry J. Potter and airport board chairman Dr. L. K. Causey to citizens in the 1850s who had fought for the city’s inclusion on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad line. The paper also dismissed an undercurrent of opposition that had claimed the airport to be a “rich man’s plaything provided at the expense of the taxpayers.”

The day of Eastern’s inaugural flight began at the airport with an 18-plane military air show and an American Legion Band concert. Prominent citizens, including Mayor Potter, Dr. Causey, County Judge G. Duncan Milliken, Sr., Duncan Hines and Dillard D. Williams, Causey’s successor as airport board chairman, had left that morning for Louisville in order to return on board the first flight. Upon landing, the Eastern crew, which included a photogenic female flight attendant elected by a vote of newspapermen, received souvenirs of Bowling Green: a package of locally manufactured Derby Underwear, ashtrays from the Yellow Cab Company, and a copy of Duncan Hines’s Adventures in Good Eating. Their time on the ground, however, was brief. After taking on some 6,000 pieces of air mail (many submitted by stamp collectors), the plane took off again for Nashville, its next regular stop. A second plane, which had arrived from Nashville, remained in order to treat local disadvantaged children to rides over the city.

Eastern’s Silver Liners were 21-seat DC-3s, which continued to be the workhorses of commercial aviation long after Douglas Aircraft ceased their production in 1944. Because the nose of the plane stood so much higher than the tail, passengers climbed a few steps to board through a door in the rear left side, then made an uphill walk to their seats. If time on the ground was short—as it was in Bowling Green, where stops lasted a mere six or seven minutes—only the left engine would be shut down during boarding. The plane’s cruising speed was under 200 miles per hour and its maximum altitude only 10,000 feet, but its plush seats and cabin service added to the convenience of traveling from Bowling Green to Chicago in about three hours, or to Atlanta in about two and a half.

In 1952, Eastern upgraded its service with the 40-seat “Silver Falcon,” a twin-engined aircraft capable of being adapted for the latest advance in civilian aviation, the jet engine. The decade was a good one for Bowling Green and Warren County air travelers: by 1958, the tenth anniversary of the inauguration of Eastern’s air service, they had access to four flights and 164 seats per day. The previous year, over 9,000 passengers and 126,000 pounds of freight had left the city by air, and airport authorities had begun a capital improvement plan which included resurfacing taxiways, adding lights, and lengthening the main runway to 5,250 feet.

Unfortunately, Eastern’s long-range planning began to diverge from the city’s. The airline cut the number of its daily flights to two in 1961 but, in response to the requests of local businesses, restored a third flight in 1966. Though it upgraded its service in 1967 to four-engined, 82-seat Lockheed Electra aircraft, Eastern continued to work toward an all-jet fleet, prompting airport authorities to plan another runway lengthening. At the same time, however, the airline made its first application to discontinue its Bowling Green stop as unprofitable. The Civil Aeronautics Board denied permission, but Eastern reapplied in 1969, citing low numbers of departures and arrivals and claiming that the airport facilities were inadequate for jet aircraft.
This time, Eastern was permitted to withdraw its planes and fulfill the remainder of its five-year contract by transferring its obligations to Air South, a smaller carrier, effective September 2, 1969.7

Hoping to keep the airport accessible to the newest generation of jets, the board proceeded with an extension of the main runway to 6,500 feet. Unmoved, Eastern, which was now subsidizing three smaller carriers in order to fulfill its contract, applied to the Civil Aeronautics Board on December 31, 1970 to be released completely from its obligations. The airport board strongly resisted, accusing Eastern of “intentionally” losing money on the route and of inventing a policy against serving airports without control towers—which, among the many cities in its network, happened to disqualify only Bowling Green.8

The tug-of-war continued a little longer. A Civil Aeronautics Board examiner gave brief hope by recommending in November, 1971 that Eastern be required to continue subsidizing service but, with the support of the C.A.B.’s own Bureau of Operating Rights, the airline moved to overrule his findings. On July 7, 1972, the full Board obliged. Bowling Green’s airport board remained convinced that poor service and inconvenient scheduling of flights were to blame for low passenger numbers; nevertheless, the clock ticked down toward the expiry date of Eastern’s contract with its remaining subsidiary, Wright Airlines.9

Recalling that warm afternoon 24 years earlier, when the first “Silver Liner” had appeared in the sky, the Eastern era of interstate passenger and freight service to Bowling Green ended just after 4:30 on September 10, 1972, when the last Wright Airlines flight lifted off the runway.

1 Park City Daily News (Bowling Green, Ky.), 14 September 1947; 1, 2 August 1948.
2 Kentucky City, August 1946, 16, August 1947, 9; Park City Daily News, 14 October 1947, 1 August 1948.
3 Park City Daily News, 14 September 1947.
4 Park City Daily News, 17 December 1947, 1 August 1948.
5 Park City Daily News, 1, 2 August 1948.
6 Park City Daily News, 1 August 1958.
8 Park City Daily News, 13 January, 10 September 1972.