

REAL Rural Elgin Agricultural LIVING

WINTER 2023
Issue 15



CRASH SITE of the FLAGSHIP ERIE

American Airlines Flight 1 crashed into this farm field, killing all 17 passengers and crew of 3 on October 30, 1941



The plane, being flown to Detroit, had on the flight from New York to Chicago on a 10-hour version of the airline, Captain David Chase was at the controls, along with a newly licensed pilot, Richard O'Brien, on his first flight. There was 1 stewardess, Mary Blalock, and 17 male passengers, mostly business executives flying to or from meetings.

LAWRENCE STUBBS CRASH
About 12 of the plane was spotted near Lawrence Station where several residents noticed as the aircraft performed a series of banking circles and slow landing turns, as the pilot fought to bring the aircraft under control. The plane finally crashed through a fence and into a corn field that may have precipitated a stall contributing to the aircraft plunging into the ground at a steep angle and then tumbling into flames. Chase, the first on the scene, told his wife, Marie, to call the RCMP near to flight. After a search, on the section beyond in time, released the call to the RCMP and the police, and placed at the spot of right-angled wreckage of parts to end from the wreckage.

WRESTLING BROTHERS IN CONFRONTED UNKNOWN
This disaster would lead to a lasting impact on the small farming community with many of the residents witnessing the final moments and the crash. Those arriving on the scene were met by burning wreckage and charred bodies, a scene few ever forget. The backroad fire department tried to bring the blaze under control until the RCMP fire crew whose team was finally arrived the flames. Once it was out, the grisly search for bodies began. They were removed to 2 different funeral homes in the area where their identification was made. The bodies were then placed in caskets for return to their home towns by rail.

CAUSE OF CRASH REMAINS A MYSTERY
There were several investigations but the cause of the crash was never officially determined. Possible causes considered were a bird or lightning strike, or mechanical failure. The one lawsuit seeking damages from the airline was dismissed for lack of evidence.



- DEW MEMBERS**
- CAPTAIN**
David I. Cooper, 58, Flushing, NY
- FIRST OFFICER**
Richard L. Chase, 30, New York City
- STEWARDESS**
Mary E. Blalock, 27, New York City
- 17 PASSENGERS WERE PASSENGERS**
- Joseph Bacon, Detroit, MI
 - Erwin Benz, Ann Arbor, MI
 - Edward Braggs, Thompsonville, CT
 - Walter Conwell, Detroit, MI
 - Frank Fisher, Detroit, MI
 - Robert Fiskewitz, Hastings, NY
 - Thomas Fraser, Detroit, MI
 - James George, Buffalo, NY
 - John Kipp, La Porte, IN
 - Arthur Lewis, Warsaw, PA
 - Raymond Root, Niagara, MI
 - George Rustell, Niagara Falls, NY
 - Ernest Scott, Royal Oak, MI
 - Frank Snyder, Buffalo, NY
 - Douglas Stone, Three Rivers, MI
 - George Van Norman, Detroit, MI
 - Eugene West, Royal Oak, MI

This plaque is dedicated to the 20 souls who perished in this tragedy. Made possible with contributions from:



Bringing Local History to Life

It is a late Thursday evening in Lawrence Station; the date is October 30th, 1941. You and your family are likely nestled into bed getting ready for a busy Friday afternoon and BOOM! American Airlines Flight 1 “The New Yorker” has crashed in a wheat field just outside of town and is now ablaze. All 20 on board have lost their lives.

What, you had no idea there was a horrific plane crash in your own backyard? Me either! But this crash is the subject of a new play called *Lawrence Station: The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie* written by Len Cuthbert, now a local and founder of Fridge Door Live Theatre Company. It is directed by Adam Corrigan Holowitz.

I spoke with Len about how the play came to be, and he says it all began with a bike ride. “I was training for a ride, and on my way back to Melbourne I thought I could go right or I could go left to get home: right is the quick way but left -- I’m not really sure where I’m going and this might be longer than I expected. So, I went left. Turning down third line, I came through this little town called Lawrence Station. I remember seeing a sign that says this is a historical site but paid no attention and kept on riding. When I finally got home -- a lot later than planned -- I thought I would look up Lawrence Station and I find this story about a plane crash. I thought this must be the wrong Lawrence Station, so I kept looking and sure enough, this plane crash happened in this little town back in 1941. ‘Holy smokes,’ I thought, and because I have a background in flying and aircraft maintenance, this story was all the more intriguing. I discovered that the historical plaque was installed in 2018 and I started gathering information on the crash and I thought, I should write a play about this.”



Of course, writing a play requires either deep pockets or acquiring grants, Len points out. “I had applied for a grant through the Ontario Arts Council but I was declined. I went up to Ottawa, to the museum there and I discovered all kinds of Canadian aviation stories. I then reapplied for another smaller grant to write several short 10-minute plays about the Canadian aviation events and I was given the grant for that.”

With the funding in place, it was time for Len to start his in-depth research, and he discovered that at the 2018 ceremony, Ken Howe, on whose family’s land the plane had crashed, was in attendance, so now he needed to find Ken. Len found a Ken Howe locally but wanted to be cautious in his approach. “I thought I’d do it the old-fashioned way,” says Len -- “I’ll write a letter. I mailed a letter off to Ken and couple of days later, I got



Ken Howe and Len Cuthbert looking at old articles of the crash.

a phone call. He was very cautious, and the conversation was short as I suspected it might be, but we had made a connection. A few days go by, and I get another phone call. This time it is Ross Burgar of the Southwold History Committee, who had spoken to Ken and was very excited about the project and asked me lots of questions and arranged a meeting.”

The meeting took place at Ken’s home with Len, Ross and another member of the committee. The four discussed the story, and Ken shared with Len a box of materials pertaining to the accident that had belonged to his mother, who had served as a witness at the aviation hearing. Len gathered his information and started writing what he had originally intended to be a 10-minute

play. However, the more he researched and the more he asked questions, the more people told them their own stories of that day. “It just starts taking off because there’s all these stories galore that I’ve discovered. It turned into a 90-minute play that is over 70 pages long.” Meanwhile, Ross Burgar had reached out to some of the Southwold Council who decided to give Len a grant to create this full-length play which will debut right in Southwold at the Keystone Complex, April 14th and 15th and tour to both Strathroy (April 22nd) and London (April 28th-29th).

Lawrence Station: The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie has taken just over a year to write, and Len is excited to bring to the theatre his story of this event. He says he has received a wealth of local information on it and has added just a touch of artistic flare to fill the cracks. Len would like to thank Ross, Ken and all those who have helped turn this idea for a story into a reality.

To purchase tickets to *Lawrence Station: The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie* go to www.onstagealive.ca.



Photo of American Airlines Flight 1