

8-13-1968

Interview no. 20

R. L. Andrews

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Recommended Citation

Interview with R. L. Andrews by Wilma Cleveland, 1968, "Interview no. 20," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: R. L. Andrews
INTERVIEWER: Wilma Cleveland
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 13, 1968
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 20
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Pioneer in the aviation field.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Aviation in the early 20th Century; experiences as a barnstorming pilot; training pilots for revolutionary activities in México.

Interview with R. L. Andrews on August 13, 1968. Interviewed by Wilma Cleveland.

C: Mr. Andrews, would you tell us how you started your flying career?

A: In 1910, I paid \$500 for the patent rights and the blueprints for the Curtis head-type pusher airplane and built it in Coffeetown, Kansas, then I learned to fly it by myself. I learned to fly it on the ground. When it would get 10 feet off the ground, the motor would cut off and I would come down and generally break a landing gear. I did that all summer on little grass-cutting flights.

C: This was before you came to El Paso?

A: Yes, this was in 1910. I didn't come to El Paso until the first week of January, 1919. During World War I, I started flying exhibition flights around fairs. That's all there was to flying in those days.

C: Mr. Andrews, as a pioneer in the field of aviation, what were some of your experiences, and what were the feelings that you had about flying?

A: The first time I took off in one, I think I probably felt like these astronauts do when they take off for a flight around the earth. Of course, that first time I only got 10 feet off the ground before the motor cut out, but that was all right. Well, anyway, I had a little oil business up there with a preacher, Fuller Swift, who used to be in this town. Everyone here knows him. He was rector of the St. Clements Church when I came. He and I had this oil business, and we drilled oil wells and had leases outside of Coffeetown. I sold one of them and got enough money to buy an airplane motor. I bought a Hall-Scott V-8 motor, and that was enough to fly the plane. Well, I learned enough about aerodynamics when making those grass-cutting flights all summer that I could fly the thing, and then I flew exhibition flights. I was

21 years old in 1910. I was always interested in flying. I helped the Wright brothers get started. In 1898 and 1899, I lived in Dayton, Ohio. My father had a music store there. We lived right by the Wright brothers' bicycle shop, and they used to fix my bicycle. I was just a schoolboy then about 10 years old. In the summer, they were out flying those man-carrying kites. They were learning aerodynamics. All the school kids were out there helping them fly those kites because that was right up our alley. All the neighbors talked a lot about the Wright brothers being ne'er-do-wells because they were out flying kites like kids. Well, strangely enough, when I learned to fly it was with the Curtis outfit and not the Wrights. I was in the Service in World War I, and after the war I came to El Paso to cure the TB I had contracted during the war. We weren't very careful about what we ate and drank, mostly what we drank. As a result, I got TB, and when I got out I weighed 103 pounds. So I came to El Paso to either die or get well. I hadn't been here very long when I acquired myself a plane--it was a government surplus plane--and started barnstorming. I was connected up with a number of other flyers--Charlie Mays, Bill Atwell, and others. We just barnstormed up and down the country, and we went down to México. I flew the first airplane to México City in 1919. I went down to México for the inauguration of General Obregón as President. I had some funny and different experiences down there on that first trip. In fact, anywhere we went, we had to stay two or three days; they wouldn't let us get away. I got down to Torreón, and they had several banquets for us. I took some of them up for their first plane rides. It was the first airplane that had ever been in the country. And there was a general down there by the name of Andrés Almezán. He was commanding general of the military down there. I took him

for a ride and he liked it very much. Well, he got a wild hair. He had to go to Monterrey--that was his hometown--and he was the "big boy" over there. He asked me if I would fly him over there. So I said sure I would, and we took off for over there. I had just gotten a little new plane and it had a gasoline tank that was egg-shaped, and I didn't have brains enough to figure the capacity of the tank--how many gallons it held. I said, "Let's go," anyway. Previously, we had wired over there for them to put four bed sheets on the ground in the form of a cross so we could land. So we got over to Monterrey all right, and I spotted the cross. It was inside a ballpark with a big board fence around it, and that's where I was supposed to land. Well, I couldn't land there, naturally. I noticed that the grandstands were full of people. I figured that they had come out to see us land. So I went on down and almost touched my wheels in a couple of times. Then I went up 12,000 or 14,000 feet high and gave them a show. Then I spotted a place to land over by the brewery and landed. Well, the military came up and they were pretty sore because we hadn't landed in the ballpark. But then they saw that General Almezán was with me and then everything was all right, because he was their "boy" in that country. He was just tickled to death and was boasting that he was up there doing those varenas, those loop-de-loops; but that was all right, too. We stayed there a few days and went back to Torreón. From Torreón we went on down and eventually we got to México City. While we were in México City, General Almezán stuck with us. All the generals were there for the inauguration of General Obregón. Well, another day General Almezán got another wild hair, and he wanted to go to Tampico, and he wanted to know if I would take him. Well, sure; I'd take anybody anywhere in a case like that. Well, I still didn't know the capacity of the gas tank.

I never had it run dry and there were no gauges or anything like that. So I said, "We'll try it anyway." We took off right over Pachuca, the roughest country in the world, and finally got over into that banana jungle country by San Luis Potosí. We went on hour after hour. Pretty soon, I commenced to get uneasy because I didn't know how the gas tank was or how many hours I had left. I kept going and finally spotted the Panuco River or something like that, and it goes down to Tampico. Well, I figured I'd follow the course of the river. If I did run out of gas, I could set it down in the water because I couldn't set it down on land since it was all a banana jungle. There I was, sweating about it, and Almezán was up there, happy and contented; he didn't know. Finally, I could see the ocean over there, and I was about 12,000 or 14,000 feet high and knew that I could coast in on that. So I got over Tampico and found a good spot of sandy beach where I could land, and I proceeded to give them a stunting exhibition over town. Then I went down and landed. That was the way we had to do things all the time. Finally, I got back to México City. While I was there, I had a new gas tank put in that went from the floor to the ceiling. Then I went down to Vera Cruz, then over to Mérida, Yucatán, right across the gulf. I figured that I had enough if I didn't get a head wind. But I did have enough gas and it was a nice trip. I went back to Vera Cruz and then back up to México City. I did a lot of barnstorming in México, and then I came on back up to El Paso. I had gotten to be a good friend with the governor of Chihuahua, Ignacio Enríquez, and he was very strong about aviation; he liked it. I took him for a lot of rides and nothing would do but that I come down and take charge of the Mexican Air Force during the 1924 Revolution. I had a lot of experiences during that revolution and one is really worth relating.

I was stationed at Jiménez, south of Chihuahua. It was high in the mountains. It was February and very cold. This was in the de la Huerta revolution. I had to drain the motor every night because it would freeze if I didn't do so. It was a water-cooled engine and that was very inconvenient. Also, I had to run it about an hour to let the oil warm up before I could fly it. Well, I would drain the oil out of the tank into five-gallon cans and set it on the edge of the fire that the guards kept near the railroad tracks. They would build the fire out of coal right there on the ground, and I would set the oil in it to keep it hot. So I decided to do something about the water. We went over to the corner saloon and confiscated all the alcohol--cane alcohol--and filled it half way in a five-gallon barrel and the rest with water. I had two of these. I took it back to the ship and that way I wouldn't have to drain it every night. That was the first night. The next morning about 4 a.m., they woke me up saying that the rebels were coming in, and I had to up with the airplane. So, I was rushed out there, and there was no fire on the ground. The guards were lying around. I thought to myself that I hadn't heard any firing, and I didn't think there had been any attack. Well, I found out that these guards had drawn all the alcohol water out of my tank and had gotten drunk. And that was it. It was way after daylight that I got started. I ordered them all to the guardhouse and was going to have them shot next sunrise. I was sure mad! But I got out that day and had pretty fair shooting all the way around, and when I got back I commenced to see the humor of the situation. I called these guys up, and they all swore that everything was all right and that nothing had happened during the night. That was the end of that. One thing I would like to tell you about was our first trip to Chihuahua in 1919. Going

down I wanted to spot some emergency landing fields between here and there. Well, I saw a pretty good place called Los Mochis. There was just one rock house where some of the railroad-upkeep men had lived. There was a nice level place there. I decided to go and see it since it would be a good landing field. Well, it looked really smooth, but it wasn't smooth. The grass was great big rocks. I went bouncing around there and broke one of the wooden launch rods on my tail section and jerked out the tail skids. Well, there I was out there. Of course, we carried all sorts of things with us, such as bailing wire, etc., but I didn't have anything to repair it with. So, I went down to a house and there was a woman who had a broom that was about six feet long and a couple of inches wide, with straw tied around it. It was just a native broom. I gave her a dollar for that. I took it up to the plane, lashed it alongside of the launch rod, and tied it down good and tight, and went on down to Chihuahua. I was in Chihuahua for a while, and I thought I'd do that woman a favor. So I bought a new broom for her when we went back. When I got over Los Mochis, I dropped a new broom to her. After I left Jiménez, I went to Parral, and I was partolling every day out of Parral. I had to go over that big canyon down there, the Barranca del Cobre. It was a canyon that I thought was bigger than the Grand Canyon, and so it turned out to be, I guess. It was full of vegetation, and I was over it every day. I told José Gándara, who had a fine arts shop in El Paso, about this canyon. Later on, he was made _____ for the Mexican Oil Company. He organized an expedition to go down and explore that canyon. He had heard other tales about it. So, that's how that got started. I would go over the canyon way down in the southwest point of Chihuahua where there was a waterfall called the Basaciachi. It was

about a 1,8000-foot drop, and I would fly right up close to it. I couldn't land there because it was rebel territory anyway. I took pictures of it and everything. I would like to get to that someday on foot, but I guess I never will. After the Revolution, I came back to El Paso and then over to Tucson with my old flying buddy, Charlie Mays. We had a flying field over there and for a while we carried passengers up and down the western coast of México to all the fishing spots down there. We were doing very well. We used to go down to Los Mochis where there was a tomato planter there who came up to our field. He bought a plane, and we taught him how to fly. We used to go down there and fish. They had an island down there in Topolobampo Bay, about a mile long and half a mile wide. I'd set that plane down in there and go fishing. The little town had about an 800 population then. An old man named Johnson, who built the sugar mill there and got things started, had built a little hotel. That was all that was there. The last trip I made down there was in 1930 or 1931. This was after they had built this new railroad, Chihuahua al Pacífico. My wife and I and some friends went down there. When we got to Los Mochis, I didn't recognize it because when I saw it it had 800 people, and now it has 60,000. It has fine hotels. It's a wonderful trip to take. After spending several years over in Tucson with Charlie Mays, barnstorming and flying up and down México and different places, I came back to El Paso. In the meantime, the 1929 Revolution was taking place, and I again was asked to take command of the Mexican Air Force, which I did. During that revolution, I was stationed at Nacozari, Sonora, most of the time. After the 1929 Revolution, I came back to El Paso and have stayed here pretty regularly ever since. However, as I said, I came to El Paso because I had TB, but I got better.

But what I was thinking about El Paso was that downtown looks very similar to me as it did when I first came here. But there are only a few things down there that were here when I landed. The change has come so slowly and gradually that I haven't noticed the difference like I would have if I had gone away for a couple of years and then come back. I have a telephone directory from 1933 and when I get to looking at it, those stores aren't here anymore. Sol Eidberg had his big store up here; Lightbody had his store and it's gone. Well, they are all gone except a few like the Popular and White House.