

THE SASKATCHEWAN FEEDER LINE

1938 to 1957



Regina Airport Terminal circa 1948 with a Trans-Canada Airlines Lodestar on the ramp.

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IN EARLY 1937, TRANS-CANADA AIRLINES LIMITED, A CANADIAN GOVERNMENT CROWN CORPORATION, WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN *scheduled airmail and passenger air services from Toronto, Ontario, to Vancouver, British Columbia – with stops in Winnipeg, Manitoba; Regina, Saskatchewan, and Lethbridge, Alberta.* Civic and business leaders in various Saskatchewan cities, encouraged in part by a growing public interest in aviation, saw this as an opportunity to open up the province to air travel. They began to lobby for the creation of a 'Saskatchewan Feeder Line' that would connect, in Regina, with the new Westbound and Eastbound Trans-Canada Airlines flights.

by William J. Cameron



Left to right: Dick Ryan, Grant McConachie, Captain Ted West, First Officer Ted Fowler and Jim Bell, 1943, on the proving flight from Saskatoon to Edmonton, with Beechcraft S-18 CF-BKN.

TED WEST





Beechcraft S-18D, formerly CF-BKN, photographed by the author at the Pima Air and Space Museum, Tucson, Arizona in December 2005. Inset; CF-BKO at the Staggerwing Museum, Tullahoma, Tennessee resplendent in her original Prairie Airways Ltd. red with blue and white trim.

In 1937 travel by automobile within Saskatchewan was uncomfortable, difficult, time-consuming, and often uncertain. Only the 70 kilometers of No.1 highway, between Regina and Moose Jaw, was paved; all the rest of the extensive Provincial road-network was just graded dirt, with an occasional gravel topping. Winter road conditions were not only difficult, but often dangerous because of drifting snow, and there was very little— if any— snow removal equipment available. A reliable air transport service, connecting the cities of Saskatchewan, was seen as highly desirable.

In late 1937, in response to the extensive lobbying from private individuals and authorities in Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert, the Canadian Post Office De-



Above: Tire repairs brought about by Saskatchewan road conditions, 1937.

» The company did not consider the fabric-covered Dragon Rapide to be a suitable aircraft for the Saskatchewan route. «

partment put to tender a demand for the operation of an airmail / passenger service from Regina to North Battleford, with stops in Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. The Canadian Post Office Department framed the tender around the operation of de Havilland DH-89 'Dragon Rapide', an aircraft with a very low operating cost. There were several bids on the Air Mail Tender; including a submission from well-established Canadian Airways of Winnipeg with a bid of 47 cents per mile based on using the Dragon Rapide and, as a back-up, included a bid price of 62 cents per mile using Beechcraft Model 18 airplanes.

Another bidder on the Post Office Tender was a small company called Prairie Airways that had been formed in 1935 as a charter air service operating out of Moose Jaw. The company had its early origins in a very active Moose Jaw Flying Club. It was incorporated through the efforts of several prominent local businessmen, one of whom, Harold Thorne, became the first president of Prairie Airways, Limited. The former Chief Flying Instructor of the flying club, Richard W. (Dick) Ryan, a Royal Flying Corps pilot in World War One, became the general manager of the new company.

In 1937, the world was still in the depths of the Great Depression, the effects of which

were exacerbated in Saskatchewan by extremely severe drought conditions (1931 – 1939) that played havoc with the agricultural economy. Although it was not a particularly auspicious time to start any new enterprise in the province the management of Prairie Airways sharpened their pencils, held their breath, and submitted a bid on the Post Office Tender. Their bid stipulated an operating cost of 42 cents per mile, but did not specify an aircraft type. Management hoped that if they were successful in their bid that they might be able to acquire Lockheed 12A aircraft.

Concurrently, the Directors of Prairie Airways made application to the Canadian Department of Transport for a license to operate a daily-except-Sunday, scheduled passenger air service originating at Regina, through Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, Prince Albert to North Battleford. The flight would depart in the morning from Regina, with flights returning in the early evening. The proposed service planned to connect at Regina with the new Trans-Canada Airlines scheduled services.

The operating license was approved and the Post Office Department airmail contract was awarded to Prairie Airways in April of 1938. However, Prairie Airways management soon discovered that acquiring Lockheed

» ...the Saskatchewan Feeder Line service by Prairie Airways was the only **regional, daily scheduled air service in Canada** operating very modern aircraft. «



CPAL Boeing 247D, Saskatoon, 1945



Another view of CPAL Boeing 247D CF-BVT showing the fuselage and wing livery.

both photos A. GOODRIDGE

12A aircraft would not be possible due to priority orders from other Lockheed customers. Undaunted, they revised their estimates to be based on the operating costs of the very new Beechcraft Model 18. The Company did not consider the fabric-covered Dragon Rapide to be a suitable aircraft for the expected traffic and conditions on the Saskatchewan route. The Dragon Rapide was configured to be flown by a single pilot and Prairie Airways management believed that the distances involved, the length of the operating day, and the expected weather challenges required the operation of an aircraft flown by a two-pilot crew.

The first Beechcraft Model 18A aircraft had flown on January 15, 1937, and a few months later a Model 18B, with Jacobs L-4 engines, took to the air. However, the Beechcraft Aircraft Company standardized production of the Model 18D in late 1937 with Jacobs L-6MB radial engines (330 bhp). The Model 18D was configured for two pilots and carried six passengers, with a maximum gross weight of 7,200 pounds.

The Beech Aircraft Company did not have a large backlog of orders for the Model 18 airplane, and on June 24, 1938, Prairie Airways signed a contract for its first Model S-18D aircraft to be delivered by July 1 of that year. The 'S' in the designation of the Model S-18D indicated that the aircraft was designed for ski, float, or wheels, but the two aircraft ordered and subsequently flown by Prairie Airways remained as wheeled aircraft throughout their long flying career.

The first Beechcraft S-18D, registered CF-BKN, was picked up at Wichita, Kansas on July 7, 1938, by Prairie Airways Captain Gillard, and Dick Ryan. The airplane arrived at Moose Jaw on July 9 amid considerable local applause. The second aircraft, CF-BKO, arrived a couple of weeks later. The first scheduled flight of the new Saskatchewan Feeder Line Service departed from Regina on August 2, 1938.

In preparation for the new air service, facilities for the maintenance of the aircraft in Regina, and a terminal for staff and passengers at each of the airports on the route, had to be constructed. As Prairie Airways had been born at the Moose Jaw Flying Club, most of the pilots, mechanics, and air engineers had received their training there. Passenger agents, dispatchers, and radio operators needed to be hired and trained which the Company accomplished in the short space of three or four months. One must remember though, that in 1937 employment opportunities of any kind, let alone in the aviation industry, were few and far between. As a result, Prairie Airways had no difficulty quickly filling all their employee requirements with competent people.

The feeder service was well received, by business travelers in particular, as the all-metal, twin-engine aircraft was fast and was considered to be the state-of-the-art for air travel comfort and safety in 1938. A flight manifest of Flight 22, flying from Saskatoon to Regina on August 16, 1940, lists one of the passengers as a "Miss Gracie Fields". Miss Fields, a famous English singer, created a lot of excitement at both airports and gave Prairie Airways some good publicity.

Not unexpectedly, there were 'teething' troubles with both the airframe and the engines of the Beechcraft S-18D in Prairie Airways service. During the first two years of operation, several engine failures were experienced until problems were identified and rectified. The Jacobs Engine Company, successful in solving the problems with the L-6MB, put their knowledge to good use. The engine, now largely trouble free, was used in great numbers of Avro Anson Mk.II and Mk.V training aircraft in support of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) during World War II.

Prairie Airways operated the two Beechcraft S-18D aircraft on the Saskatchewan Route from August 1938 until July of 1942 with only minor incidents. During

Saskatchewan Feeder Line Starts Daily Passenger Service Today
THE SCHEDULE IS AS FOLLOWS:

NORTH BOUND FLIGHT:
 Leave Regina 5:30 a.m.
 Leave Moose Jaw ... 6:05 a.m.
 Leave Saskatoon ... 7:30 a.m.
 Leave Prince Albert ... 8:14 a.m.

SOUTH BOUND FLIGHT:
 Leave N. Battleford ... 8:01 a.m.
 Leave Prince Albert ... 8:37 p.m.
 Leave Saskatoon ... 8:21 p.m.
 Leave Moose Jaw ... 8:36 p.m.

ARRIVE:
 Arrive Moose Jaw ... 5:50 p.m.
 Arrive Saskatoon ... 7:05 a.m.
 Arrive Prince Albert ... 7:59 a.m.
 Arrive N. Battleford ... 8:01 a.m.
 Arrive Prince Albert ... 8:12 p.m.
 Arrive Saskatoon ... 4:05 p.m.
 Arrive Moose Jaw ... 4:21 p.m.
 Arrive Regina ... 6:00 p.m.

FARES:
 Saskatoon to: Regina Single \$8.00
 Moose Jaw Single \$7.00
 Prince Albert Single \$5.50
 North Battleford Single \$5.50

Return \$14.00
 Return \$12.00
 Return \$9.29
 Return \$9.50

Passengers may take twenty-five pounds baggage on each ticket, any excess of this will be taken at express rate.
 Schedules and fares are subject to change without notice.
 For reservations or information phone:
AIRPORT, 5952 OR 3838
PRAIRIE AIRWAYS LTD.
 HEAD OFFICE: MOOSE JAW, SASK.



Barkley-Grow T8P-1 CF-BMW in Canadian Pacific Airlines livery. Like most of the CPAL T8P-1s, this one came from Yukon Southern Air Transport, one of the ten small carriers bought up by Canadian Pacific Railway to form CPAL in 1942. From there, it went to Associated Airways in 1949. It flew for the last time in 1965.

those four years the Saskatchewan Feeder Line service by Prairie Airways was the only regional, daily scheduled air service in Canada operating very modern aircraft. In fact, Trans-Canada Airlines provided the only other comparable level of service. The safety record and commercial success of the Saskatchewan route, during the depression and well into the war-years, was a significant accomplishment by the management and employees of that small airline.

A great deal of the credit for the success of Prairie Airways was due to the skill of the General Manager, Dick Ryan. In the early years of the Second World War – from 1940 to 1942 – Ryan not only directed the operation of the airline, but at the same time organized and managed No. 3 Air Observer School at Regina for the RCAF.

CPAL is Born

However, like many other small regional air carriers in Canada the challenges of retaining skilled pilots, mechanics, radio operators, etc., and of obtaining materials and restricted aircraft parts in the early years of the Second World War, eventually necessitated an amalgamation of some of the smaller Canadian air companies. With the approval of the Government of Canada, Canadian Pacific Railway bought ten small air carriers in 1942, from all across Canada – including Prairie Airways – and created a wholly owned subsidiary, Canadian Pacific Air Lines (CPAL), in July 1942.

Dick Ryan, was appointed the Executive Vice-President of CPAL, and became the ‘right-hand’ man for Grant McConachie, the President. McConachie was the ‘larger than life’ visionary who created an international airline, but Ryan was the skilled administrator who was to a large extent responsible for the successful integration of the variety of airplanes and personnel from the ten small carriers into the main-line, international carrier that CPAL became by 1955.

After Prairie Airways had been absorbed in CPAL, the much larger company continued to operate the two Beechcraft S-18D aircraft on the Saskatchewan Route until 1944, when they were both sold to Transportes Aéreos Centroamericanos (Central American Air Transport or TACA). After many years of operating in harsh Canadian-winter conditions, and in semi tropical Central America, both aircraft have survived and eventually returned to the United States under private ownership. They are now located in museums in Tucson, Arizona and in Tullahoma, Tennessee.

The end of the war resulted in additional aircraft types becoming available. CPAL replaced the two Beechcraft S-18D’s with Barkley-Grow T8P-1 (fixed undercarriage) aircraft, and later in 1945 with Boeing 247 aircraft. Our family home in 1945 was very near the Moose Jaw Rosedale airport, and it was an amazing sight to see the Boeing 247, with its very large chord wings, floating over our house on landing. By 1947, two years after the Second World War, CPAL began to fly Lockheed ‘Lodestar’ and war-surplus Douglas DC-3 aircraft on the Saskatchewan Feeder Route. The latter aircraft would continue to be a familiar sight in Saskatchewan skies until CPAL relinquished these routes in 1957.

Inset, top to bottom:

Lodestar CF-CPT suffers damage due to the soggy turf field at Prince Albert in 1947.

CPAL’s Prince Albert Terminal looking from the aircraft parking ramp point of view in the winter of 1950. This is the original terminal building constructed by Prairie Airways in 1938 for the operation of the Saskatchewan Feeder Route. (It was hard pushing those passenger steps through the deep snow!)

Avro Anson CF-EFZ (formerly RCAF 12124) at the same airport in 1953.





**CPAL Douglas DC-3
CF-CRX at Prince Albert,
Saskatchewan in 1951.
Note the turf field.**

In 1947 a Lodestar accident at Prince Albert was caused by the landing gear dropping into a mud hole while taxiing on the turf field. It was not until 1955 that the runway was finally paved. Rather amazingly, both an Air Observer School and an Elementary Flying Training School operated at Prince Albert during the Second World War without the benefit of this convenience.

There were several route changes to the Saskatchewan Feeder Line in the early 1950's – some good, some bad. There was an extension of the daily-except-Sunday service from North Battleford through to Lloydminster, and then to Edmonton. As well, for a short period of time in 1953 and 1954 the company operated a daily service with an Avro Anson Mk.V aircraft in a six-passenger configuration between Saskatoon and Prince Albert, and return. Unfortunately, in 1953 service to Moose Jaw was terminated because of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) re-activation of the former BCATP

station at that airport. CPAL flights then operated Regina – Saskatoon direct. However, regardless of the changes the backbone of the service continued to be the regular DC-3 service to all points on the route.

The author was an employee of Canadian Pacific Air Lines for thirty-eight years, with five of those years as Radio Operator/Agent at Prince Albert Airport, on the Saskatchewan Feeder Route. I went to Prince Albert as a twenty year old in 1949, and left for a new assignment as a flight dispatcher at Prince Rupert, British Columbia, in early 1955. During my time with CPAL one of the notable, and frequent, travelers to/from Prince Albert in the early 1950's was The Right Honorable John Diefenbaker. At that time he was a high profile Conservative Member of Parliament, who lived in Prince Albert, and had not yet become the Prime Minister of Canada. Mr. Diefenbaker departed from Prince Albert on CPAL Flight No. 62 on September 5, 1952 – the day our first son was



**Double duty plus; radio
operator and agent Bill
Cameron standing by
with fire extinguisher as
CF-CRX starts up at
Prince Albert.**

born. The limousine driver that brought him to the airport informed him of that event, and when 'Dief the Chief' arrived at the airport, he congratulated me and gave me a cigar!

Another personality that travelled frequently was Jon Vickers, the international operatic tenor, whose home was in Prince Albert. There was always an entourage of a dozen or more people greeting Mr. Vickers on arrival, or wishing him 'bon voyage' on departure.

In the early 1950's all the airports on the Saskatchewan Feeder Line – Regina, Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, North Battleford – had paved runways as a result of having had BCATP Flying training bases during the war. As noted above, the sole exception was Prince Albert, that for some reason did not get paved runways during the war, in spite of having two Flying Schools operating at the airport from 1940 to 1944. As a result, one of my responsibilities was to determine when the compacted ice/snow runways surfaces were no longer safe for the DC-3 opera-

tion; and then to make the same call for a safe operation when the turf field dried out in the spring each year. From the inception of the first Prairie Airways flights in 1938 until 1955 – when a paved runway was built – Prince Albert was deprived of scheduled air services for a period of two or three weeks each spring, until it was safe to land a large aircraft on the turf field.

The Saskatchewan Feeder Line provided the population of most of the major centres in the Province of Saskatchewan with regular, dependable air service; and was flown by Prairie Airways and Canadian Pacific Air Lines with an excellent safety record, and moderate commercial success – for almost twenty years – from 1938 to 1957. I know of no other similar regional air service, using comparable modern aircraft equipment and with daily scheduled regularity, that operated continuously and safely in any other Canadian province during those same twenty-five years.



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CPAL radio operator-agent Bill Cameron and Christine Cameron en-route to Regina on their wedding day, September 2, 1950, on CPAL Flight 62. Left to right: First Officer Ken Sorko, the author, Stewardess Morely Farrant, the new Mrs Cameron, and Captain Doug Gall.