

Abilene Oral History Series  
*How Abilene got Dyess*  
Interview of W. P. Wright  
Interviewed by Jim Conley  
5/15/1975  
Length of tape: 26 minutes

*Mr. Conley:* This is a May 15, 1975 interview with Mr. W. P. Wright by Jim Conley in regards to how Abilene got Camp Barkeley and more specifically the Dyess Air Force base. [*Pause in tape*] First of all I wanted to find out who thought of the air base idea or was it something that just evolved out of the needing to replace Barkeley and knowing that it would be gone after a while?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, actually, I don't think any particular person who came up with a definite idea about the air base. The people in this community enjoyed the prosperity that had prevailed during the time of Camp Barkeley and they saw what an installation of that kind would do for a community. We were getting dry in need of additional industry, or government installation, or something to bring a payroll. And so at the moment looked like the need was some installation for defense. That was when a group at the Chamber of Commerce decided that they would actively pursue a program of trying to sell the proper people on an air force installation.

*Mr. Conley:* Was a particular committee formed or anything of that type?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, the Military Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Commerce was constantly worked since it was formed back in 1941 toward the defense program in this area.

*Mr. Conley:* Uh huh. That was one thing. I 'd heard that one thing that Camp Barkeley did was bring to light or give experience to a certain core of civic leaders who were then knowledgeable about how to go about this thing. Was that so?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, I'd say this, Camp Barkeley and Dyess Air Force Base efforts both taught the people in this community that working together as a unit they could obtain most any kind of goal they set out for and these people that participated in the different efforts, did so without idea of personal gain, and working for the benefit of the entire community and it's efforts of that kind that can't keep from succeeding most generally.

*Mr. Conley:* Did this idea of getting a base, I understand that must have been during the very early 1940s even right after Camp Barkeley came. Is that right?

*Mr. Wright:* Well this was a different project actually. See there was an Abilene-Tye Air Force Base.

*Mr. Conley:* A Tye air base.

*Mr. Wright:* Was during World War II. That was back when Camp Barkeley was in operation. However when the war was over that base likewise was closed. In fact that thousand acres approximately or whatever it was in the original site was sold to the city of Abilene for a municipal airport for about ten dollars. [*Mr. Conley: Huh*] And the government relinquished all control over it at that time. That was after the decision was made to go back and get an additional airport that they revived the idea of furnishing the land requirement. [*Mr. Conley: Huh*] And that was how it came back with a program to raise a million dollars to furnish the requirements for the government to make the installation.

*Mr. Conley:* This was for the air base?

*Mr. Wright:* For Dyess Air Base. Uh huh.

*Mr. Conley:* For Dyess. Huh.

*Mr. Wright:* They didn't raise quite a million. They raised eight hundred and some odd thousand. I'm not familiar with..., [*Mr. Conley: Hmm*] but I'm sure the *Reporter-News* will reflect the actual amount of the money raised that went to buy the additional land to make up the five thousand acres that now comprises Dyess Air Force Base. And we, in an agreement with Mr. Finletter who was then Secretary of the Air Force, agreed to buy and convey to the federal government for one dollar this five thousand acres of land provided they would build an air base.

*Mr. Conley:* What about the actual work of these various civic leaders, the Military Affairs committee people and whoever else going to Washington and wherever else you had to go to talk with the right people. What kind of steps were involved there? You start out on a local level and get to lower congressmen and then to senators or how did that work?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, it actually started, uh, to tell you the truth, I don't remember exactly how it started when the first calls were made or who they were made on, but they had to be made on the Department of Defense with the idea of getting the Air Force to take some particular requirement that they had and fill it out here. [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] And we didn't know whether TAC [*Mr. Conley: Yeah.*] would need it or MATs or SAC<sup>1</sup> or the Air Training Command or who. And first we had to show it to the air force people in Washington to sell them on the location, which was done. In other words, the Secretary of the Air Force sent a team to Abilene to survey it, which they did and approved it as a proposed location. Then they had to designate which service would use it. [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] So they then in turn sent several services here. [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] And we called on General LeMay in Omaha, when he was in command of SAC, to try to sell he and his staff on SAC because we felt like they were the most aggressive at the time. [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] It would mean more and a better installation for us.

*Mr. Conley:* So the Abileneans had surveyed the situation and even had in mind the command that would like to see in here?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, of course, that developed as... [*Mr. Conley: Oh okay.*] ...it went along. They didn't know which command to begin with, but as you got to checking into it, [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] reviewing the situation with each command then it was obvious that, at the time, SAC was the most logical one for us to approach.

*Mr. Conley:* Who are some of the Abileneans, I realize maybe, we wouldn't be able to mention everyone, but who are maybe some of the more influential ones or the hardest working ones regarding getting Dyess? And let me get to what was your position at that time? Whether you were Chamber president or head of the committee or what?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, I started out as Chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, then I was co-chairman with Harold McMahan and jointly, we worked together on it. And, uh, I imagine that I'm, was on most every trip that was made to Washington or elsewhere along with some of the others. [*Barnard?*] Hanks, oh he was back, when I was, eliminate that. [*Mr. Conley: Okay.*] He was back in the other.

*Mr. Conley:* Oh he helped with contacts for Barkeley, right?

*Mr. Wright:* Barkeley, yeah. It was Howard McMahan that [*mumbles*]...But each case, the existing mayor at the time was very active. [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh. .... About how man...*] Malcolm Meeks, Harold McMahan, Oliver Howard. [*long pause*]

*Mr. Conley:* About how many trips did these or did you folks make and how, what kind of period are we talking about there, approximately what years?

*Mr. Wright:* You're going to have to refer to your own files [*Mr. Conley: The files.*] to get an answer to that and....

*Mr. Conley:* This was in the early fifties?

*Mr. Wright:* Yeah, I would imagine. Your files at the *Reporter-News* would reflect a better story [*Mr. Conley: Right*] than I can recall...[*Mr. Conley: Well, maybe.*] just off-hand memory.

*Mr. Conley:* As far as dates and exact times and places, maybe yeah. Here I'll just check that part there out. Were there many problems involved in getting Dyess or things that you ran up against that you hadn't planned for? Holes in the road so to speak?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, uh...

*Mr. Conley:* Or maybe negative people that said "forget it" or something like that?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, you brought up one thing earlier with the telephone, when you was talking to me about the construction of the ... [ *Mr. Conley: Oh right.* ] ..of the base. This is somewhat of an interesting story. It is quite lengthy and I'm sure you wouldn't want to... ...

*Mr. Conley:* Well, the highlights at least.

*Mr. Wright:* ...to publish it, but you've got time, I'll tell it to you. [ *Mr. Conley: Sure. Great.* ] Back when the original proposal to Mr. Finletter was written they sent it down here, they sent a General Maddox down here to make the proposal to Chamber of Commerce group and the group that was going to get out and raise all the money and do all this. And it was agreed at the time that they'd permanently construct and permanently maintain a military installation provided that this community would buy and convey to them for ten dollars the five thousand acres which they had selected to make an air base out of. Then when they sent the contract, they did not say anything in it about permanently constructing and permanently maintaining. And I recall very vividly that I had taken this contract around to the presidents of the banks, and to the mayor, and the county judge, the different ones who were to sign it, the president of the Chamber of Commerce [ *Mr. Conley: Uh huh.* ] Everybody. Got to Malcolm Meeks and he hadn't signed it and he read it and he said [ *chuckles* ] he just didn't believe he wanted to sign that. He said, "Their agreement was that it would be permanently operated and permanently constructed and I think that ought to be put in it in writing." So the entire contract was rewritten and [ *Mr. Conley: Hmm.* ] I had to take it around again for everybody to sign [ *Mr. Conley: Hmm.* ] and sent it back. But then a few months later when they sent the original plans down here from the architects, it showed 25 year construction, which was asbestos siding sealed on the inside, which was 25 year life actually. And so quickly we realized that wasn't permanent construction. So there was a meeting. At that time, it was decided to try to do something about it. So French Robertson and I went to Washington and called on the, uh, John Conley who was Secretary of the Navy. Got him to take us around and introduce us to Mr. Talbot who was Secretary of the Air Force and intercede for us or have an interview with him. And we sat down and showed him the contract and showed him the plans. And told him that people in West Texas didn't think that anything that would burn was permanent. And kind of felt like that needed to change those to concrete or masonry or something. And informed us that this would have to be approved by Mr. Wilson, who was then Secretary of Defense and we ultimately got it approved there and that's the reason that all the construction at Dyess is that kind. However, this set a precedent for later air bases that were built about the same time, like the one at Little Rock and the one at Plattsburgh, New York. They were constructed similarly. [ *Long pause in tape.* ]

*Mr. Conley:* Do you remember how long that this took? This was several years that we're talking about, right?

*Mr. Wright:* I don't remember.

*Mr. Conley:* Not just months though?

*Mr. Wright:* I'm not too good on time.

*Mr. Conley:* Dates, I know what you mean. And the base opened up about, let's see, 1955, I guess, or a little later. Was a lot of this secret, do you recall? I mean, like Camp Barkeley, they said it had to be kept a secret from the general population, all these behind the scenes goings on?

*Mr. Wright:* Oh, there were a lot of things that never came to light, but there was no particular reason to keep it secret. There was nothing secret about it.

*Mr. Conley:* It wouldn't have spoiled, I mean people knew they were working to get a base like this here?

*Mr. Wright:* Well, the only, only reason that a soft pedal would have been put on publicity was to keep competitor cities and towns [*Mr. Conley: Oh yeah.*] in West Texas to know whatever. [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] we were put in force so they would try to get in get ahead of us. But by the same token, we've turned around and helped other communities since [*Mr. Conley: Hmm.*] to improve their situation, always have.

*Mr. Conley:* Was the relationship between the community and the base always just real good or did it develop better as the years went along?

*Mr. Wright:* It's always been real good.

*Mr. Conley:* To what do you attribute that, if you can? [*Both laugh.*] I realize we have a lot of dedicated people here who are...

*Mr. Wright:* I dedicate, I feel like that Abilene is fortunate in having the type of people here that it has. They are a friendly group and they like people. Certainly they're patriotic and I think the school spirit of all the schools we've got and the churches, our general school system means a lot to every community. And we've got just a large group of real civic minded people. [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] You take for a community to build a civic center, a coliseum, and all these county and city installations that we have in recent years is a pretty good indication of a community working for the betterment of the community.

*Mr. Conley:* Well, I was stationed out at Dyess in 1966 and then came back here in 1970 and I know when I was here this base seemed to have just an atmosphere in town let's say of being friendly. Somehow even maybe the so-called "man on the street" was quite different here than they were at most other bases. Do you feel that this is due to the leadership then of a lot of these other people? Well, you said the people, are in general, friendly and maybe that would explain it, but somebody has worked very hard to keep base/community relationships going very well.

*Mr. Wright:* Well, I think our newspapers have a lot to do with it. I think our Chamber of Commerce has had a lot to do with it. And certainly our county government and our City Commission and mayor and county judge have always worked hand-in-hand to help promote the welfare of the community from every angle.

*Mr. Conley:* Do you recall, I'm sure there was a day when there was a major announcement made, I guess in the early fifties, about a base coming, was this a much heralded event with a lot of fanfare and interest by people?

*Mr. Wright:* I really can't remember. [*Laughs.*]

*Mr. Conley:* Really?

*Mr. Wright:* I don't remember.

*Mr. Conley:* I was just wondering at the time if what came even exceeded what you had worked for, to have SAC and TAC at the time both come in and everything. Was, in other words, the base was, at least, all the community had hoped for apparently?

*Mr. Wright:* I think the base has certainly not been a disappointment to this community in any way and I think that today they're just as happy with having the base people as part of the community as they ever were.

*Mr. Conley:* And apparently...

*Mr. Wright:* You're a retired Dyess man that has come back to live in Abilene and I think you find this a lot. Did you marry an Abilene girl?

*Mr. Conley:* No, I was already married when I came, but....

*Mr. Wright:* You know I lot of those fellows get stationed out there [*Mr. Conley: Uh huh.*] marry our girls here.

*Mr. Conley:* Right. I've noticed.

*Mr. Wright:* Stay here.

*Mr. Conley:* Uh huh. I cover the retirement ceremonies sometime and it seems like maybe one out of every five or six people, at least, says they are going to stay in Abilene when they get out. And if you ask them why, they just say, "Well of all the places we've been the people are the nicest and we've enjoyed the city and all."

*Mr. Wright:* We want 'em to stay.

*Mr. Conley:* Uh huh. [*Pause.*] Had there been any times that you were involved in when it seemed like maybe the base was going to be pulled out or anything. Have there been threats of that at all as the years have gone along?

*Mr. Wright:* No serious threats of any kind along that line.

*Mr. Conley:* I'd like to get a little of your own personal background too. Are you from Abilene? And born in Abilene?

*Mr. Wright:* Oh, I was born....Now, well you've got my entire history.

*Mr. Conley:* We'll have all your history. Right. Oh, that's true. Okay.

*Mr. Wright:* You've got a write up down there I think a full page and a half. [*Mr. Conley: Oh good. Okay.*] I saw [?] it there myself.

*Mr. Conley:* A lot of times, I've looked in people's files and as much as they were in the news, sometimes there've never been their real background, but if that's been in then I'll just find out and look that up. And that'll be real good there. Oh, in regards to getting the Dyess land, did you say they started with a base of land already from the Tye Air Base that had been given to the city?

*Mr. Wright:* That's right. About a thousand acres.

*Mr. Conley:* And that's now part of what's presently Dyess?

*Mr. Wright:* That's right. Part of Dyess.

*Mr. Conley:* Then with the rest, they had to actually purchase this through a fund raising campaign or...

*Mr. Wright:* That's right.

*Mr. Conley:* ...or how was that done? [*Pause*] Was that primarily farm land or part farming and ranching?

*Mr. Wright:* Practically all was farm land.

*Mr. Conley:* Hmm. Were there numerous owners or did several people...?

*Mr. Wright:* Quite a few. Quite a few.

*Mr. Conley:* That's the conclusion of the interview.

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<sup>1</sup> MAT stands for Military Airlift Transport; TAC stands for Tactical Air Command; and SAC stands for Strategic Air Command.