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Great Lakes Airlines suspends air carrier operations indefinitely

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By Colin Van Westen, Staff Writer

Local air professionals call suspension of services by former Spencer-area airline a 'sad story'

Great Lakes Airlines, a regional airline that connected Spencer to destinations across the United States from 1981-2001, suspended its passenger flight service indefinitely March 26.

"You hate to see guys lose their jobs and that is what is happening," said Vernon Mickelson, chairman of the committee for the board of directors for Great Lakes Airlines. "It is a sad story, but you can't fly airplanes without pilots. It is hitting everybody. It is so sad when you see things happen like this. All of these people went to work in Spencer and many of them continued when we moved headquarters to Cheyenne, (Wyoming). Many of those people are getting laid off now. What the company is going to do at this point, I can't tell you. We are exploring many options. There is a possibility of converting to cargo planes."

Mickelson, who retired in 1988 from his position with the Federal Aviation Administration Flight Standards division, said a 2013 rule change requiring all commercial pilots, including co-pilots, to have 1,500 hours of flight time has created a shortage of pilots.

"The major airlines and the regional airlines are affected by this rule so badly," Mickelson said. "It is a major problem. When everybody is suffering, it hurts the industry."

"We knew it was coming. (Great Lakes Airline CEO) Doug (Voss) and I talked about this. We have been trying to figure out some way to make it work. We had submitted a letter to the FAA asking for an exemption to the rule while still maintaining fly standards under the 121 rule, but the politicians just sat on it."

Gayle Brandt, co-founder of the airline and currently director of airport services for Leading Edge Aviation, said the airline's roots began in Spirit Lake in 1977 when Brandt, her ex-husband Voss and a partner, Ivan Simpson, started managing the Spirit Lake airport. Brandt said even though she is not currently employed by Great Lakes Airlines, she has a "vested interest" in the company.

Mickelson said he soon encouraged Voss to expand his airline service to Spencer. By 1980, the team was managing both the Spencer and Spirit Lake airports offering charter services, flight instruction and aircraft maintenance.

"In the early days, we provided flights to Des Moines from Spencer Monday, Wednesday and Friday," Brandt said. "Our first flight was with a six-passenger airplane. Then we moved up into an eight-passenger plane. Then, we acquired our first Beechcraft 99 which allowed for 15 passengers. Until Monday, we ran Beechcraft 1900 which seats 19 passengers as well as the 30-seat Embraer Brasilia 120."

At its height, the airline provided service to many national and Iowa destinations.

"We had flights to Chicago, Minneapolis, Denver and many cities in the state of Iowa," Brandt said. "We also had services from many smaller cities from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin. Over the years the system has changed to focus on the Southern and Western regions of the United States."

Brandt, Mickelson and Spencer Municipal Airport board member, Tim Steffen, agreed Spencer's airport would not be the "first-class" facility it is without Great Lakes Airlines paving the way. Its legacy is still felt in the community today.

"The whole reason for what Spencer has today, the runway structure, instrument approach system, the size of the aircraft ramp, the hanger facility and the terminal building was all thanks to Great Lakes," Brandt said. "Because of the passenger numbers we boarded at Spencer which made us eligible for federal and state grant funding for improvements. The number of employees brought in and out of the community was phenomenal. The employment was huge for the community."

When Great Lakes moved its headquarters from the Spencer area to Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 2001, it left a lasting impression on the community.

"It was a very convenient method of travel," Steffen said. "I used to fly very regularly on trips to Chicago. Now I get to drive eight hours if I want to go to Chicago. From a business standpoint, it was wonderful to have it here."

Though Great Lakes has left the area, Brandt and Steffen said other entities have stepped in to fill some of the void left with its departure. Brandt has continued on at the Spencer Municipal Airport with Leading Edge Aviation which has taken over much of Great Lakes charter, flight instruction and maintenance business.

"We'll still have all kinds of air traffic that comes through Spencer," Brandt said. "Some of it is corporations, some of it is charter, a lot of it is personal travel where people own their own planes. CAMM Air and Spencer Avionics also have flights in and out of Spencer. We have 38 airplanes based in the airport at Spencer."

Brandt and Steffen agreed that passenger flights from Spencer are unlikely to return.

"It is possible that Spencer will have passenger flights again, but our population would probably have to at least double to support it," Steffen said. "At this point in time, I do not see that happening. As far as airline type passengers. Now, you do have the option to charter and go

anywhere you want which is very easy. Rather than going through a hub, you can go directly to your destination."