The following informal highlights about early aviation history, by Mr. Denham S. Scott, was sent in by Cindy Macha-Skjonsby, President of AWSAM (Association of Western States Aviation Museums), who found it in the correspondence files of Dr. Ira E. Chart, retired Northrop historian.

This talk by Mr. Scott about “The Acorn Days” was given as a prelude to a surprise testimonial presented to him on 19 March 1968 by the AIA Spare Parts Committee in San Francisco. His remarks reflect the spirit of the aviation pioneers who made this industry into the giant that it is now.

This is absolutely “must” reading. It’s fun to read, and gives information about the origin of those wonderful names... Martin, Douglas, Northrop, Lockheed, Vultee, Bell, and others. Note that there’s been major mergers and acquisitions within the industry since Mr. Scott gave this talk in 1968.]

Provided to the SRA by Terry Emig)

**THE ACORN DAYS**

(by Denham S. Scott, 19 March 1968)

I am grateful to Ralph Emerson for this opportunity to burst into a swan song. When he asked me, I happened to be working with the Northrop Institute of Technology as we were putting together an aviation history event where 1386 people sat down to dinner while Clete Roberts interviewed DonaldDouglas Sr., Jack Northrop, Allan Lockheed and Claude Ryan about their early days. I was in a nostalgic mood, and full of new knowledge about bygone days. I asked Ralph if I could speak about “The Acorn Days”. You know the quotation, “The lofty oak from a small acorn grows”. Ralph said any subject was fine as long as it was about spare parts and provisioning. I promised to mention both of them and I have just now discharged that obligation. Now, how many of you know that in 1910 the mighty Martin-Marietta Company got its start in an abandoned church in Santa Ana, CA, when the late Glenn L Martin with his mother “Minta” Martin, and a mechanic Roy Beal, built a fragile contraption with which Glenn taught himself to fly.
It has often been told how the Douglas Company started operations in 1920 by renting the rear of a barbershop on Pico Blvd. in Los Angeles. The barbershop is still there. The Lockheed Company built their first Vega in 1927 in what is now the Victory Cleaners and Dyers, 1040 Sycamore Ave., Hollywood.

Claude Ryan, who at 24 held a Reserve Commission as a flyer, had his hair cut in San Diego one day in 1922. The barber told him how the town aviator was in jail for smuggling Chinese across the border. Claude investigated and stayed on in San Diego to rent the old airfield from the city at fifty dollars a month and replace the guy in the pokey. He agreed to fly North instead of South. In 1928 the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company, Transcontinental Air Transport (now TWA) and the Douglas Aircraft Company, chipped in enough money to start North American Aviation, a holding company.

The present company bearing the Northrop name came into being in a small hotel in Hawthorne. The “Hotel” was conveniently vacant and available because the police had raided it and found that the steady residents were a passel of money-mined gals who entertained transitory male guests.

After Glenn Martin built his airplane in the church, he moved to a vacant apricot cannery in Santa Ana and built two more. In 1912 he moved to 9th and Los Angeles Streets in downtown Los Angeles. Glenn Martin was then running a three-ring circus. Foremost, he was a showman who traveled the circuit of county fairs and air meets as an exhibitionist aviator. Secondly, he was an aeroplane manufacturer. He met his payroll and bought his lumber; linen and bailing wire from the proceeds of his precision exhibition flying. His mother “Minta” and two men ran the factory when Glenn was risking his neck and gadding about the country. One of these was 22-year old Donald Douglas who was the whole of his Engineering Department and the other was a Santa Monica boy named Larry Bell who ran the shop.

The third circus ring was a flying school. It had a land plane operation in Griffith Park and later at Bennett’s Farm in Inglewood; and a hydroplane operation at a place that’s now part of the Watts District. A stunt flyer named Floyd Smith ran it. One of his first pupils was Eric Springer, who later became an instructor and then Martin’s test pilot, and still later the test pilot for the early Douglas Company, and then a Division Manager.

Between Eric and Floyd, they taught a rich young man named Bill Boeing to fly. Having mastered that art, Boeing bought a Martin biplane, hired Ross Stern, Glenn’s personal mechanic, and shipped the airplane to Seattle. Later, when it crashed into the lake and Boeing set about a repair job, he ordered some spare parts from Martin in Los Angeles.
Martin, remembering the proselyte incident of Ross Stern, decided to take his sweet time and let Boeing sweat. Bill Boeing said “To Hell with him”, and told Ross Stern to get busy and build one of their own. Boeing had a friend named Westerfelt and they decided to form a company and build two airplanes. These two “BW” aeroplanes bore a remarkable resemblance to the Martin Aeroplane which, in turn, had been copied from Glenn Curtiss. There seems to be a moral about customer relations and product support mixed up in this episode.

During WW-I, a bunch of sharpies from Wall Street in New York got control of the Wright Company in Dayton, and the Martin Company in Los Angeles. They merged the two companies into the Wright-Martin Company. They sent a young man named Chance Vought out to California as their Chief Engineer. Donald Douglas lost no time in quitting. He went to work for the Signal Corps.

The Wright-Martin Company started building obsolete “Standard” biplanes and Hispano Suiza engines, the latter under a license agreement with the French Government. Martin told them what they could do with them, and took off for Cleveland, taking Larry Bell and Eric Springer with him. Having raised the money from a baseball mogul to build a new factory he was soon joined by Donald Douglas who went to work and came out with the design of the Martin Bomber. It came too late to see service in WW-I, but showed its superiority when General Billy Mitchell made everybody mad at him by sinking the captured German Battlefleet. The death blow to the allegedly unsinkable dreadnaught “Osfriesland” came from the Douglas-designed Martin Bomber.

At Cleveland, a young fellow called “Dutch” Kindelberger joined the Martin Company as an engineer. Also, a veteran Army pilot from WW-I named Carl Squier became Sales Manager. His name was to become one of the most venerable names in Lockheed history.

Back in 1920 Donald Douglas had saved six hundred bucks and struck out on his own. He returned to Los Angeles, found a backer David Davis, rented the rear of the barbershop and some space in the lot of a carpenter’s shop where they built a passenger airplane called “The Cloudster”. This was bought by Claude Ryan a couple years later, who made daily flights between San Diego and Los Angeles with it. This gives Ryan the distinction of being the owner and operator of the first Douglas Commercial Transport, and certainly a claim to be among the original airline passenger operators.
In 1922 Donald Douglas was awarded a contract to build three torpedo planes for the US Navy. Douglas lived in Santa Monica but worked in Los Angeles. Way out in the wilderness at what is now 25th Street and Wilshire in Santa Monica, there was an abandoned barn-like movie studio. One day Douglas stopped his roadster and prowled around to investigate. The studio became the first real home of the Douglas Aircraft Company.

With the $120,000 Navy contract Donald Douglas needed and could afford to hire one or two engineers. He hired my brother Gordon Scott, newly over from serving an apprenticeship to the Martinside and the Faire Aviation Companies in England. Gordon was well schooled in the little-known science of Aviation by 1923.

When I left school in 1919, my Irish father had me apprenticed to a Scotch steamship company. It ran from European ports to Australia by way of South Africa. When I was away on my first voyage, the rest of the family moved to California and settled in Santa Monica. I, of course was contractually stuck to serve out the term of my indentures... namely, 4 years. It was 1924 before I was able to work my way to California.

My first association with some of the early pioneers was when I visited my engineer brother Gordon at the barn a 25th Street. I found him outside on a ladder washing windows. They were dirty and he was the youngest engineer. There were no janitorial services at the Douglas Company in those days.

Gordon introduced me to Art Mankey, his boss and Chief Draftsman, and four of his fellow engineers. There was a tow-haired guy called Jack Northrop, a chap named Jerry Vultee, and a fellow named Dick von Hake who was a reserve Army flyer. Jack Northrop came from Santa Barbara where he had worked during WW-I for the Lockheed Aircraft Manufacturing Co. The fourth member of the Engineering Group was Ed Heinemann. They were all working on the design of the Douglas World Cruisers.

Shortly afterwards, Jack Northrop left the Douglas Company in 1926. Working at home, he designed a wonderfully advanced streamlined airplane. He tied back in with Allan Lockheed who had found a rich man (F. E. Keeler) who was willing to finance a new Lockheed Aircraft Company. They rented a small shop in Hollywood and built the Northrop-designed Lockheed “Vega”. It was sensational with its clean lines and high performance.

In May 1927 Lindberg flew to Paris and triggered off a bedlam where everybody was trying to fly everywhere. Before the first Vega was built, William Randolph Hearst the
publisher of the Hearst chain of newspapers, bought it and entered it in the Dole Race from the mainland to Honolulu which was scheduled for 12 August 1927.

In June 1927, my brother Gordon left the Douglas Company to become Jack Northrop’s assistant at Lockheed. He also managed to get himself hired as the navigator on the “Golden Eagle”, the name chosen by Mr. Hearst for the first Vega, which hopefully would be the first airplane to span the Pacific.

The race was a disaster. Ten lives were lost. The “Golden Eagle” and its crew vanished off the face of the earth. With its only airplane lost under mysterious circumstances a black cloud hung heavily over the little shop in Hollywood. However, Capt. George H Wilkins, later to become Sir Hubert Wilkins, took the number two airplane and made a successful polar flight from Nome Alaska to Spitzbergen in Norway. After that a string of successful flights were to put the name Lockheed very much in the forefront of aviation. The slogan “Look to Lockheed for Leadership” was not empty. The name was soon covered in glory.

At Lockheed, Jack Northrop replaced the lost Gordon Scott with Jerry Vultee. In 1928 Jack quit the Lockheed Company to start a new company in Glendale (Avion). Jerry Vultee then moved up to become Chief at Lockheed. He hired Dick von Hake from the Douglas Company to be his assistant. A young man named Cliff Garrett joined the Lockheed Company as the driver of their pick-up truck.

Incidentally I quit the sea and went to work for Lockheed soon after my brother and the ‘Golden Eagle” were lost. Thus, I became the 26th Lockheed employee. The Vegas were made almost entirely of wood, and I was some kind of a half-assed carpenter, more generally known as a “wood butcher”.

In 1929 Jerry Vultee quit the Lockheed Company to start the Airplane Development Company, which became the Vultee Aircraft Company a Division of E L Chord, the automobile manufacturer. This later merged with Reuben Fleet’s Consolidated Aircraft Company to become Convair. When Vultee left Lockheed, Dick von Hake moved up to become Chief Engineer.

In the meantime, Glenn Martin closed his Cleveland plant and moved to Baltimore. His production man, Larry Bell, moved to Buffalo to found the Bell Aircraft Company. Carl Squier left Martin to tie in with the Detroit Aircraft Company, which had acquired the Lockheed Aircraft Company and seven other companies. They hoped to become the “General Motors” of the aircraft industry. They appointed the feat Carl Squier as General Manager of the Lockheed plant, which had moved to Burbank in 1928.
In the meantime, General Motors had acquired North American Aviation which consisted of several aircraft companies in the east. Ernie Breech, formerly with Bendix but then with General Motors, hired “Dutch” Kindelberger away from Douglas to head up the aircraft manufacturing, units. Dutch took Lee Atwood and Stan Smithson with him. The companies involved were Fokker Aircraft, Pitcairn Aviation (now Eastern Airlines) Sperry Gyroscope and Berliner-Joyce. Kindelberger merged Fokker and Berliner-Joyce into a single company and moved the shooting match to Inglewood, California.

The Lockheed Aircraft Company was founded to build the Northrop-designed all wood Vega. When Jack Northrop left in 1928, it was to start a new company to build an all metal mail plane known as the Northrop “Alpha”. The new company was called the Northrop Aircraft Company. Later it was acquired by United Aircraft which then owned Boeing and Stearman. During the depression United merged the Northrop Division with Stearman in Wichita, Kansas. Jack Northrop persuaded United Aircraft to release him from their contract.

In 1932 he started another Northrop Aircraft Company, this time in El Segundo, California. The Douglas Company owned 49 percent of the stock. In 1937 the Douglas Company exercised their controlling interest and for a year the company was called the Northrop Division of the Douglas Aircraft Company, after which it became the El Segundo Division of the Douglas Company. It became the Douglas Company’s Navy Facility. Its SBD dive-bomber and the A-20 attack planes made a major contribution to winning WW-II.

After Jack left the Douglas Co, he founded the resent Northrop complex from which he is now separated. He is, however, still the nominal head of the independent Northrop Institute of Technology. If some of you are confused about the history of the Northrop Company, it’s because there actually were four different companies bearing the Northrop name.

Thus a handful of young men played roles which unquestionable affected all of our lives and the lives of millions of other Americans.

For instance, they changed Southern California from a wasteland with a few orange groves, apricot and avocado orchards and the celluloid industry of Hollywood, to a highly sophisticated sprawling industrial complex with millions of prosperous inhabitants. The same kind of conversion has come to pass in many communities throughout the United States. The technological explosion which led us to the Space
Age had some very humble and human beginnings. The acorns took root in some strange places—a church, a cannery, a barbershop, and a bawdy house, but from them mighty oaks have indeed grown.

To the immortal names of aviation history like the Wright Brothers and Glenn Curtiss, must be added those of Glenn Martin, Donald Douglas, “Dutch” Kindelberger, Jack Northrop, Allan Lockheed, Larry Bell, Ed Heinemann, Bill Boeing, Jerry Vultee and Claude Ryan. Without them none of us would be here today. I submit that without the combination of their contributions, the Nazis and the Japanese might very well have won WW-II.

They lit the torch! And they passed the torch into other capable hands and it continues to burn brighter and brighter each year.

I feel that I have been privileged to play a wee small part in this explosion of enlightenment, especially as it has brought me into contact with all of you very wonderful people gathered in San Francisco today. I wish you all the very best of everything.