**A Lincoln Museum of Aviation (LiMA)**

A discussion on the benefits of such a museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

**Introduction**

The City of Lincoln has grown from a small settlement near Salt Creek to become the center of Nebraskan government, education and many aspects of culture and commerce. The city’s attractive qualities are growing quite rapidly as of late with consideration of the new arena under construction as well as the Antelope Valley efforts. Entering the 21st century with a strong motivation of the university as well as business, Lincoln defines the ultimate small town feel with the availabilities of a larger city.

There are cultural interests in the city of course, the Sheldon Art Gallery and Nebraska History Museum tending to be well recognized but other museums such as the Roller-skating Museum, the Telephone Museum, and the Larsen Tractor Museum to consider a few. Yet in the background of Lincoln’s own history there has been a regularly-occurring roar overhead. There has been one for over 80 years now, and the source of that sound comes from Lincoln’s rich aviation history.

As a Cold War researcher with a strong interest in Lincoln’s overall aviation history, learning of Lincoln’s contribution to flight came only after deeper research into the understandings on how a man named Charles Lindbergh came to the city to learn how to fly, how Lincoln Army Airfield was one of the most important American aviation mechanics schools to contribute to the war, how enough firepower once stood on Lincoln Airport’s Airpark tarmac to devastate continents and finally how private aviation came to dominate the skies above the capitol.

Lincoln’s aviation history is a deep and rich topic that could be readily opened to the eyes of not only Lincoln’s own citizens but could prove to be a tourism spot of interest to all demographics.

There is a great need to provide this proud history of how Lincoln came to be an influential place of aviation.

**A Brief History**

Soon after the Wright Brother's first flight in 1903, aviation came to Lincoln and soon proved to be a great influence in the progression of the state's history. From the early days of World War I into the barnstorming days of the 1920's and 30's, the city’s aviation presence flourished. Aircraft manufacturing plants soon set up shop in Lincoln and a few noteworthy aviation pioneers were known amongst Nebraska citizens including Charles Lindbergh

With the dawn of World War II, Lincoln was quickly opened as an Army Airfield to support the awesome need of training mechanics to service the aircraft so desperately needed overseas. The scrap drives in the city as well as small contractor services building parts for the war effort including aviation came to be a focal point of Lincoln’s contribution to winning the largest war in history.

After the war, the skies over the plains still heard the roar of aircraft engines with the 173rd/155th groups of the Nebraska Air National Guard standing up at Lincoln Airport as the second such ANG unit to stand up in the United States. Soon Naval Air Station Lincoln flew naval aircraft in a reserve role and finally Lincoln AFB (1954-1966) was constructed as a deterrent against Soviet aggression. This became a nationally important intercontinental bomber and missile base serving during the darkest days of the Cold War

Through less threatening skies developed Lincoln's general aviation throughout the 1950's through the present day. The development of Duncan Aviation proved to be an aviation powerhouse throughout the private aerospace world. The buzzing of Cessnas are well known to Lincolnites as are the mediflight helicopters always on standby to assist with medical emergencies. In the last quarter of the 20th century Lincoln became a home to many types of helicopters including the historically important UH-1 Huey, the Hueycobra gunship and the UH-60 Blackhawk of the Nebraska Army National Guard.

Even with its vast history, Lincoln aviation continues to be an influential force militarily and privately throughout the nation and even the world. With such a history, a great deal of informative, educational and inspiring stories could be presented to the public successfully.

**Why?**

Elements of Lincoln's aviation past can be seen across the city. From the notable aviation history of Lincoln's 24th and "O" Streets to the lone beacon standing above the former Union Airport in Northeast Lincoln, much is academically known but little is accessible directly to the public. The Nebraska State Historical Society keeps records in the subject but this is aimed primarily at researchers, scholars and students whereas the Strategic Air and Space Museum offers an immense history of Strategic Air Command as well as science education, but it offers a more nationwide interest rather than that of Lincoln’s.

A physical museum is needed whose mission would be concerned with keeping archival records and providing documentation (both physically and on-line). The fact that this would be open for public viewing displaying elements of the past in an interactive manner would mean a great aspect of the state’s culture could now be better enjoyed by both residents and could also influence tourism.

**Where?**

1. Lincoln Air Park

**Lincoln Air Park**

Though many parts of Lincoln could offer great aviation significance ranging from the flight school at 24th and “O” Streets to Arrow Airport’s former location near Boosalis Park, Lincoln Air Park represents a wider history of aviation stretching back into the 1920's when Lincoln Airport was first established. Its role in history included becoming an Army Airfield in World War II, becoming home to Nebraska's Air National Guard force shortly thereafter, the establishment of a major Strategic Air Command bomber and missile base during the 1950s and 60s and finally its noteworthiness as a hub of general aviation. Also factored in is the field's proximity to I-80, the lack of considerable cultural development in Northwest Lincoln and the availability of structures and/or area to meet the need of museum establishment and sustainability.

Several properties at Air Park are currently available that after consideration could become a home to such a museum and it would be a belief that such a cultural interest could help bring tourism and commerce into the rapidly expanding Air Park area. Increased traffic could help support the construction of more business and therefore more jobs to the area. There are multiple plans for area improvement and expansion, some of which are already complete via the City of Lincoln, the Lincoln Airport Authority and a number of private businesses.

Lastly, a museum here would be easily accessible to interstate travelers on I-80. Highway 34 improvements merely complement accessibility to the area. Beyond this, infrastructure including recently improved storm sewers in the Air Park area will prove beneficial as new lines and systems would not have to be built.

**Precedent**

A similar museum, the Combat Air Museum in Topeka, Kansas, utilized space at a former Air Force Base there. Although their main mission is slightly different, the museum has remained a promoter of aviation history for over 25 years.

A Kansas Aviation Museum exists in Wichita promoting much the same idea as a Lincoln museum could, as does an Iowa Aviation Museum.

Arnold Heights Neighborhood Plans have mentioned of possibility of an aviation museum in the past as well.

**Mission**

The idea of a Nebraska Aviation Museum would be to promote the state's influence in aviation history but also what these events have meant to the state itself. A suggestion for three main areas would include

 - **Archives and records** - To collect exhibits and preserve records for future generations in both physical and computer form. Such records would compliment, but not compete with archival records of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

 - **Public Display and Education** - To present information gathered in a form understandable by the public in that it displays a look into the past. This presentation should be educational but also entertaining for such a museum to succeed. Fresh displays and exhibits should be presented often to ensure repeat visitors. Most of all, the mission should be to provide a sense of pride and inspiration in Nebraska's aviation past.

 - **Internet Presence** - Due to the rapidly changing technology and also the way the public now gathers information over Internet sources, a great deal of attention should be paid to establishing a full web presence that would allow visitors to gain access to aviation records and histories.

- **Other** – Considering a location at Air Park, perhaps a small aviation-themed coffee shop/deli to provide limited food/beverage operations could be built within the museum. The point here would be to attract visitors considering the currently limited availability of either in both spots. Such an operation could enhance museum revenue but also create a “meeting place” focal point that would enhance museum visibility.

A formal/informal conference facility which could better handle meeting needs could aid in offering more meeting space for

As shown, preservation and archival records of such an institution should be a primary goal as without them an effective public presentation simply can't exist.

**Funding**

Financial matters would have to be further discussed. It is believed an institution of this type would be open to receive federal and state grants. Of course, donations would come into play as well.

**Other Possibilities**

Such a museum could work in concert with the Nebraska Air National Guard allowing the guard to present a history on more accessible grounds as many of its displays are presently within the National Guard base, off-limits to the public. Some Air National Guard as well as Army National Guard historical artifacts and information currently reside in a brick two-story building at Nebraska's State Fair Park that was only open during the Nebraska State Fair. As the existing museum building is decaying and small, perhaps a joint use of a museum in Air Park is possible with these two units.

**In Closing**

In all, such a museum would create great benefit for the Lincoln Air Park or central Lincoln as well as the Lincoln, Nebraska area itself. Northwest Lincoln lacks a significant cultural draw for visitors with the exception of infrequent air shows and increased traffic could help commerce in the area. In addition, it could aid state tourism as a whole as outside visitors could gain knowledge and perhaps an interest in Nebraska. In the greater sense however, Lincoln lacks a museum dedicated to all of its significant aviation history. To present a story to future generations that carries the stories and lives of these important Nebraskans would be of great benefit for the state's culture as a whole.

**Lincoln Aviation Museum Development Plan**

Mission: “To preserve, educate and inspire visitors in the history of Lincoln’s aviation heritage”

Exhibits: Early Days 1903 – 1940 “The Blue Frontier”

 - Lindbergh

 - Lincoln Standard Aircraft

 - Arrow Aircraft

 - Lincoln Flying Institute

 - Air Mail

 - United Airlines

 World War II 1941 – 1946 “Training For War”

 - Mechanics School

 - Union Airport

 - Arrow Airport

 - Arrow Sport

 The Cold War 1947 – 1967 “Force For Freedom”

 - Lincoln Air Force Base

 - B-47 Stratojet

 - KC-97 Stratotanker

 - Atlas-F ICBM

 - U.S. Army 6th Missile Battalion/43rd Artillery

 - Nike-Hercules

 Post-Air Force 1968 – Present “Emergence of Private Aviation”

 - LAA Acquisitions

 - Private Aircraft Development

 - Goodyear Global Distribution Center

 - Commercial Aviation in Lincoln

 - Air Park Development

 Air National Guard Exhibit Area

Temporary Exhibit Area

Education Center/Classroom

Conference Room/Meeting Space

Potential Interest Groups/Stakeholders: City of Lincoln

Lincoln Airport Authority

Nebraska Army/Air National Guard

Lincoln Convention and Visitors Bureau

Lincoln Chamber of Commerce

Lincoln Parks and Recreation

Arnold Heights Neighborhood Association

 Duncan Aviation

 Silverhawk Aviation

 Lincoln Composites

 Veterans Groups

 University of Nebraska – Lincoln

 Experimental Aircraft Association

Potential Grant Sources: Nebraska Humanities Council

 National Endowment for the Humanities

 Nebraska Department for Economic Development

 Federal Aid