

# 1975 - 1978

## FAA - Miles City

**- See Appendix II for stories and anecdotes from Miles City FSS -**

I went to Miles City on Sunday June, 29<sup>th</sup>, checked into a crummy motel and the next morning presented myself at the Flight Service. That Friday was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July so my first week was only 4 days long and I went back to Havre for the long weekend. During that first week I learned what a Flight Service was and decided I was really going to like the work.

The origins of Flight Service Stations dated back to the period between about 1925 and 1940 when facilities were established to provide weather observations and to relay communications between controllers and aircraft. Beginning in the early 1960's remote communication outlets were being established allowing controllers to talk directly to aircraft so the communications relay aspect of the job decreased significantly. About the same time the National Weather Service determined that their personnel could no longer provide personal weather briefing services to pilots and asked the FAA to assume this responsibility.

In 1975 there were about 325 Flight Service Stations across the country. The primary responsibilities for the specialists these facilities involved providing route weather briefings to pilots, filing their flight plans and taking weather observations. We still provided communication relay in areas where the Air Traffic Centers did not have communications - and in eastern Montana that meant at most airports. Additionally we provided assistance to lost or disoriented pilots using direction finding equipment and assisted in search and rescue for overdue aircraft. Facilities were "ranked" as Level 1, 2 or 3 based on the number of services they provided. Staffing and pay grades were determined by the facility level. Miles City was a Level 1 facility, but based on the workload it qualified as Level 2 and unfortunately there was a freeze on upgrades so we were stuck at Level 1.

One of the specialists, Nelson Rendon, invited me to stay with him the second week I was in Miles City because his wife was away. During the week I found a place to rent and went back to Havre again on Friday.



Home 1975-1977: 2511 Palmer, Miles City, MT

We borrowed one of the vans from the coke plant, loaded everything up on Saturday and took it to Miles City on Sunday.

Things changed a lot over the years but in 1975 the procedure for new hires (we were called Developmentals) was as follows.

First off we were on probation for the first year and could be terminated at any time for any reason. This roughly equated the maximum amount of time allowed for training.

When a Developmental reported to his assigned facility a school date was established at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City. In my case the date they got was in September so I spent all of July and August watching and learning and helping out when I could. Late in July another new specialist, Rick Waller, arrived and in August Mick Farrell reported. We learned the mechanics of taking weather observations such as reading temperatures, calculating dew point and sea level pressure. After a time we would complete the entire observation and then give it to the specialist on duty to complete the sky condition and initial the observation. Depending on who was on duty we were also allowed to do some radio work, with the one rigid prohibition that we were not to do anything that approached giving weather briefings. We also became very adept at entering flight plans on teletype. We had no idea of why the messages were coded the way they were, but as long as we stuck to the precise correct format it was easy. By the end of August I was doing some shift work because I'd learned enough to actually be a help to the specialist on duty.

In theory the FAA had the option to assign us to a different facility after we finished school, but I never heard of an instance where the developmental didn't return to their original facility after training.

Life at home was sometimes a struggle. I'd taken a big pay cut and was now making about \$9,000 a year (I figured I'd have made about \$13,000 driving truck that year) and we had to watch our money. We'd moved from a pretty nice apartment to a barely adequate little house in a new town where we knew almost no one. Pat was not happy. She didn't like having to live on a budget, she'd left all her friends in Havre - including her sister - and of course there was the upcoming separation when I went to Oklahoma City. Since my school was set to start in September, and Sal was starting 1<sup>st</sup> grade we decided it wouldn't be a good idea for Pat to try and come to Oklahoma City with me.

When I got to Oklahoma City I found that Rick was in my same class. He'd only been notified a few days before the class started and had to throw things together to get his wife and kids to Oklahoma City.

The school wasn't too difficult thanks in part to the two months experience I'd gotten in Miles City. The biggest problem was that sometimes procedures we'd learned in the facility didn't exactly jive with what was being taught. We had to learn to keep our mouths shut. Half of each day was spent on learning to understand weather systems, weather phenomena and forecasting. The rest of each day was weather observations and the other operational aspects of the job. At the end of the 10 weeks we had both written and practical tests we had to pass.

One day while in Oklahoma City I called home and got no answer. I called Havre and no one there had any idea what had become of Pat and Sal. It turned out they had gone to Connecticut. We were paid every two weeks sometimes this resulted in 3 checks in one month and our budget was set up with this knowledge. I guess that because she didn't like the budget and didn't understand it when a third pay check arrived in October she assumed that this was "extra" money so she bought airline tickets and flew to Connecticut. This put us behind by one pay check and it was early 1976 before we got back on track. I finished school and was home the week before Thanksgiving. Things were tense because of the financial situation and, looking back, I think spiraled downhill from then on.

After a Developmental passed the course in Oklahoma City the only requirement to reach certification and be area rated (able to work at a given facility without direct supervision) was that we had to take weather observations under supervision for two weeks. So both Rick and I were area rated two weeks after we returned from the academy and we started working shifts.

We worked a rotating schedule where we started our "week" on a 4:00 PM-midnight shift. Subsequent days were then 2:00 PM-10:00 PM, 8:00 AM-4:00 PM, 6:00 AM-2:00 PM and ended on a midnight-8:00 AM shift. Whatever you did on Saturday you did again on Sunday so the work week was 6 days long and every week you had different days off.



Miles City Flight Service Station

When your days off fell on Saturday and Sunday you got a 3 day weekend. This schedule sounds horrible but it actually wasn't too bad in that there is never a given day of the week that is permanently tied up with work, about every five weeks we got two 3-day weekends and I always thought it was nice having days off during the week. The trick was to project the schedule into the future so you could see what days or nights were (or weren't) available when making plans.

Needless to say Pat didn't like this at all. She could not understand the rotation and to her it seemed totally random. The fact that the schedule rotation took no consideration of holidays (although we were paid for them whether we worked or were off) it really bothered her. The fact that it wasn't always possible to take leave because of staffing and I refused to call in sick to get time off made her particularly unhappy.

I should say here that in 26 years I never took vacation for Christmas and there was never a year when I wasn't able to be home on either Christmas Eve or on Christmas day and sometimes I was home for both.

Towards spring I thought maybe things were beginning to improve. Pat had stopped complaining so much about the shifts and of course the weather was improving. She suggested that maybe she was pregnant and was planning to see a doctor if nothing changed in a few weeks.

A final straw, possibly, was that in May I was scheduled for an evening shift (2-10) on our wedding anniversary, and it didn't look like it would be possible to get off. After I got to work that day it appeared that things were going to be quiet so I arranged to take off at 6:00PM. I called home to let her know I'd be home early and we should go out for the evening. The big surprise was that she became angry about that. When I got home she refused to talk to me, other than to bitch about a job where you couldn't make plans.

After a couple days of silence I asked her how long this was going to last and she informed me that it would be 16 days (or some specific number like that) because as soon as school was out she was leaving with Sal. She then disappeared for a couple of days, and I have since come to believe that she went to Rapid City "took care" of her pregnancy.

After school was out she moved to Havre and lived with her sister for a while. I made a few trips up there, but she would never see me and then she, Sal and her sister all went back to Connecticut.

By the end of the summer I realized that there was no chance that things would change so I filed for divorce.

That fall I bought my first brand new car, a 1976 Plymouth Volare. It was a good car except there was a design problem and by the mid 1980's I began to have a problem with rusting rocker panels.



1976 Plymouth Volare

With Pat gone I had time on my hands and decided to start taking some classes at the Community College. Rick Waller decided he'd do the same thing. We'd look through the catalogue, find a course that seemed interesting, and then see if the instructor was willing to let us into the class. Some instructors had a problem with the idea that we worked shifts and couldn't make every class. As I mentioned we could project our schedule out through the quarter and tell them exactly how many classes we'd miss. I don't recall what all we took, I know we weren't always in the same classes, but I took such diverse courses as Anatomy & Physiology, several Psychology courses and Montana History. In the Montana History course that I wrote a paper on the Great Northern Railroad's impact on northern.

I later showed that paper to a friend of my dad, who worked for the railroad in Havre. He made some copies for me and asked if it would be OK to show it to his boss, who was division superintendent. I learned later that the superintendent used my paper when he gave speeches up and down the Hi-Line. Then, in September 1979, I got a call from the Havre Daily News and they

asked if they could publish my paper for a Burlington Northern Days supplement to their paper. Not bad for a paper that was only worth a "B".

Sometime around the end of 1976 or early 1977 I met Rosella Little Light at the bowling alley. She was an attractive Indian from Browning who was attending the Community College. We dated into the summer of 1977 and then broke up when I refused to give her \$1,000 to bail her brother out of jail in North Dakota. He'd been arrested for driving a car with license plates that were so far out of date that they weren't even the current style, and I'd warned him that it was going to happen.

As I mentioned I'd had a chance to start at Great Falls Center in 1974 but turned it down based on the advice of a controller I knew. One day while at Miles City I had an occasion to call Salt Lake Center and amazingly the supervisor who I reached was the same guy who had given me the advice in Great Falls. He told me that if I was interested in coming to Salt Lake they were looking for people and he'd be able to get me a job. I reflected on this - it would have meant considerably higher pay - and decided I really liked what I was doing and passed on the opportunity.

During the spring of 1977 Clair Wilson, the facility chief, was selected for the manager's position at the Jamestown, ND Flight Service. None of us thought he was very happy about the move, but in those days the unofficial rule was that you needed to move around to move up and he was just doing what he needed to do. When he left I was appointed as acting chief for about 45 days and had my first taste of management. It was a little overwhelming since I had less than 2 years in the FAA and only about 15 months as a full performance specialist. I had some real challenges during the 6 weeks in the position.

**- See the section on Miles City in Appendix II for stories about this time -**

As fall of 1977 approached I had some vacation time coming and thought it'd be a blast if I could ride along with my brother Bob, who was driving for the coke plant in Havre. I wrote to him to make arrangements and the response I got was from Phil Cassel saying that if I wanted to come back for a week they would like me to take the town route so they could give that driver a vacation.

So in September of 1977 I went to Havre and drove my old route for a week. I was concerned that I'd be way out of shape and was surprised that I had no major problems. I took it easy and when in doubt delivered less than I could have thinking that the regular driver could make it up the following week and that he'd appreciate the commission. On Friday of that week, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, after I cashed my pay check, Bob, Daryl and I went out to dinner. I was feeling pretty flush because what I made that week was the same as what I made in a week with the FAA (and I was on paid vacation) so afterward I tried to talk them into going out for a few drinks. They both declined so I went out to the Hi-Line Club (part of the bowling alley), where there was live music. I was standing near the bar visiting with a guy named Bruce Hoover, who was a route driver for Vita-Rich Dairy. While we were talking a young girl tried to squeeze by on her way to the restroom. Bruce always thought he was quite the ladies' man and he stepped in front of the girl giving her a bad time. It was apparent that she just wanted to go to the ladies room and wasn't at

all interested in his line, so when I saw her coming back thought I'd save her the harassment and stepped in front of Bruce and asked her to dance. She accepted and then asked me to sit at her table, because, she said, there were a bunch of obnoxious Canadian guys sitting with them.

I learned that her name was Sue, it was her birthday and that she was out with some of her nursing school classmates. At one point I offered to buy a round of drinks and everyone but Sue ordered. I found out later that because I was still wearing the clothes I'd been wearing for work the past couple of days I looked pretty rough and she didn't think I would have money to pay for the drinks.

As closing time came I asked her and her friend if they'd like to have breakfast. They agreed and as we walked from the bar Sue asked if I needed a ride. It turned out that she was parked right next to me, but I had almost new 1976 Plymouth and she was driving an early '60's model Buick. So again she was fooled by my attire.

At breakfast she didn't say much and ate very little, but as we prepared to leave I asked her if I could see her again. She has since told me that it really surprised her because she thought my interest was in her friend. What really impressed me was that she was very up-front about the fact that she had two kids and whatever she did she had to consider them. Until that time I'd never met any single mothers who were that honest about their status or seemed to put a priority on their children.

We went out to dinner on Saturday evening and on Sunday I took pizza to her place and watched TV with her and her kids. On Monday I had to get back to Miles City, but we continued to write and I went up to Havre every chance I got.

At work I had decided that it was time to move to a larger facility. Miles City FSS was pretty busy and, although we continued to have the work load of a Level 2 facility, there was no hint that the facility might get upgraded. In addition to that I wasn't crazy about the changes I saw happening since our new chief had arrived. I had submitted a bid for an opening in Jamestown just before the trip to Havre, but hadn't heard anything.



Jim & Sue October 1977

Around November an opportunity arose for me to ask some people from the regional office about the status of my bid. Their response, after checking, was to ask me if I would stay in Miles City if it was upgraded. I said yes I would but asked when the upgrade might occur. They said they expected that it could be as long as a year before the freeze on upgrades was lifted so I said I

would rather move to Jamestown. They advised me that I was the unofficial selectee and I should be hearing something in a few weeks.

When I got official word that I would be moving to Jamestown in January, I decided it was time to ask Sue to marry me. So the next trip to Havre I gave her a ring and she accepted.

We set the date for the following summer when she graduated from nursing school.

One of the first things I did was to help Sue get a new car. I think she'd been driving a beat-to-death Buick LeSabre with poor (or no) brakes. She got a 1970 Ford Galaxie that lasted into the early 80's.

