

**THE JET SET**  
*Mesa Airlines Comes  
to Fort Worth*  
**By Walt Shiel**

I've been waiting for years for jet service out of Meacham," a Fort Worth minister said as he boarded Mesa Airlines for his weekly trip to Houston – for the first time leaving from Fort Worth's Meacham International Airport rather than DFW.

On May 5, 1997, scheduled jet service came to Fort Worth, giving travelers on the west side of the Metroplex less reason to envy their east side neighbors' access to



Southwest Airlines and Love Field. If you're thinking this is just another start-up destined to fail like the two previous, and underfunded, turboprop attempts out of Meacham a decade ago, think again. Mesa brings experience, \$60-million in cash reserves, \$500-million in annual revenues from its existing regional airlines, and brand new jet aircraft to Meacham.

Although initially offering service only between Meacham and Houston Hobby (but starting with 11 daily round trips), Mesa plans to add service to San Antonio and other Texas cities as soon as the market will bear, increasing total daily flights to 40 by year's end and 62 by September 1998.

Nobody really expects the Mesa-Meacham combination to knock either Southwest Airlines' Love Field operation or American Eagle's DFW service out of the market. Southwest really doesn't draw heavily from Fort Worth and Tarrant County. As for DFW, many Fort Worth area travelers would rather just drive to Houston than fight the traffic and hassles of driving to DFW to catch a short flight to Houston. As a matter of fact, Fort Worth Mayor Kenneth Barr insists, "Fort Worth continues its unwavering commitment to Dallas-Fort Worth International as the North Texas commercial air center. Adding quality regional service, such as that provided by Mesa Air, enhances our city's and our region's already outstanding transportation system."

If anyone can make a go of it in this market, it's Texas-born Larry Risley, Chairman and CEO of Mesa Air Group. He has the track record and capital, and believes he has the right airplane. "If you look at the Metroplex, Meacham has simply

been ready but it just hasn't had the right airplane to start the service," he says. "Southwest Airlines has something like 34 round trips a day between Love Field and Houston Hobby with 130-seat Boeing 737s. You look at Fort Worth's Meacham, just as convenient if not more convenient, and it's had no service. It's because the 737, or that size airplane, was just too big for the market and now we have an airplane that has great passenger appeal and is a pure jet."

Risley's confidence is based on fifteen years of regional airline experience, during which he turned a one-plane commuter service in Farmington, New Mexico, into the country's largest independently owned regional airline. In 1982, Larry and Janie Risley pledged their home and car as collateral to start Mesa Air Shuttle. They carried 800 passengers in their first month. Five years later, Mesa had seven turboprop aircraft. Today, Mesa Air Group has code-sharing agreements with United, America West, and USAir, operates 183 aircraft, and employs 4,000 people to fly six million passengers annually to 164 cities in 30 states plus the District of Columbia. Now, Larry Risley's ready to take on a new challenge – the regional jet airline market.

Which is why Mesa came to Fort Worth.

Peter Otradovic, President of the Independent Division of Mesa, is responsible for the new Texas operation and is also no aviation newcomer. His resume includes 20 years experience with American, Piedmont, and America West airlines. Last year, Risley hired him as a consultant to find the right jet and the right market, suggesting he first look at Fort Worth. Otradovic's research led him to Canada's Bombardier, Inc., and its 50-seat Canadair Regional Jet (CRJ). He said, "[We] came out here in September and talked to the [Fort Worth] city council, talked to the mayor, then I took a job with Mesa to get it up and running ... This was such a neat, exciting thing that I felt I really needed to do it."

At Mesa's Fort Worth open house, both Risley and Otradovic enthused about the Bombardier CRJ, a twin-jet aircraft able to cruise at 534 miles per hour at 41,000 feet. Mesa has purchased three and has options to buy 13 more. Make no mistake, the Mesa CRJs are really new, flown directly from their Canadian birthplace to Fort Worth in April. Risley proudly pointed out the bright interior and the seats arranged in pairs on either side of a center aisle – no cramped center seats here. Risley claims the CRJ has an inch more leg room than the larger 737. Believe it. A business traveler and his or her laptop could be very happy there.

The Fort Worth market has always been there, Otradovic says. "It's never been as big as the Dallas market, but there's always been a market. The market wouldn't respond to airplanes that were turboprop but will respond to a jet airplane

that's the right size. And that's what this airplane is: it's the right airplane in the right market at the right time."

And what market is that? Risley says, "Tarrant County is the marketplace. Denton and Denton County offer some real opportunities, as well as Weatherford and Parker County ... but certainly the entire Fort Worth [area], parts of Arlington, and the North Richland Hills area."

Risley is determined to provide a first class experience from the moment a customer walks through the terminal door. He invested over a million dollars to refurbish Meacham's terminal building. He bought these stylish new jets. He hired an enthusiastic workforce, hiring locally as much as possible. Only the pilots, for whom the new jets offered an opportunity to move up from turboprops, and a few mechanics were transferred from other Mesa billets. Out of 75 personnel at Meacham and another 19 at Hobby, only about 10 are transferees. The rest are local. Risley smiles, points at several people clad in Mesa Airlines shirts, and says, "You look at these people here today – they're young, they're enthusiastic, they want to see it succeed. If you have that attitude, boy, it goes a long, long ways to getting it done."



Schedule reliability, customer service, passenger acceptance, and price will be the keys to Mesa's successful infiltration of the Texas market. And, of course, marketing – they've got to get the word out. Large display ads have been appearing regularly in the <I>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</I>. The Tarrant, Parker, and Denton county travel agents we talked to were aware of the new service, many had attended the open house, and most had already booked clients on Mesa. Marketing, it seems, is well underway with solid support from the city of Fort Worth. Mayor Barr says, "The City and Mesa are working hard to make this airline a success."

Larry Risley fully understands the need to get his customers to their destinations when his schedule says they'll arrive. Although Mesa needs only two jets to handle the initial Fort Worth-Houston schedule, he insisted on keeping a standby at Meacham. He says, "As we start a brand new service with brand new airplanes in a brand new market, we want to make sure we don't stub our toe. So to do that, I'm setting a \$20-million piece of equipment on the ground just to ensure schedule integrity. We don't anticipate having to use it, but I want to make sure that we have the reliability coming out of the gate."

During their first week of flying out of Fort Worth, Mesa's customer service received high marks. Donna Drake of Fort Worth's Evergreen Travel, who flew on Mesa's initial Fort Worth flight, expressed a typical reaction, rating Mesa "very efficient ... The ride was extremely comfortable and the personnel had a great attitude ... The airplane is quiet inside. All leather seating. Not cramped. Plenty of leg room."

Initial passenger acceptance is good. Several business people, just back from a trip to Houston on Mesa, noted that the service was at least as good as the competition. They praised Mesa's convenience, comfort, quiet cabin, and (here it is again) leg room. Complaints were few, like the somewhat small overhead storage bins or the prospect of walking from the terminal to the aircraft in the rain without covered walkways. A couple of them complained about the \$7-a-day parking fees.

Mesa's prices match the competition with everyday walk-up fares of \$83 one way on weekdays, \$63 weekends and evenings, and an advance purchase price of \$49 each way for a round trip. Risley says, "We certainly don't intend to be the fare leader in the Metroplex; we're going to be the follower. We're going to always be competitive with price, so you'll never be able to find a lower price."

Patsy Hooks of Hooks Travel in Weatherford and Jean Senn of Travel and Tours in Denton had started booking clients on Mesa. Senn didn't think Mesa would lure many of her Denton clients away from Southwest but should be attractive to her clients closer to Fort Worth. Hooks said Mesa was going to be a "big boon to us on the West side of Fort Worth and Weatherford ... Their fares are comparable to anybody else's, so I don't see why anybody would want to drive farther."

Leonard Peters of First Travel in Weatherford thought Mesa's choice of a jet over a turboprop aircraft was right on target, saying it "carries a lot more credibility than commuter planes. Everything out of DFW to Hobby is twin-engine turboprop commuter service."

Otradovic wants area travelers to remember their down-home motto: Y'All Aboard! "What we're selling is convenience and time savings," he says. "When we get that first-time trial, we want it to be a good experience, and we're certain that it will be."

Risley's message is even simpler. With a smile, he says, "Remember 1-800-MESA-AIR."

In case you're wondering, Meacham International Airport is on Fort Worth's North Main Street just south of Loop 820 and just north of the famed Stockyards. Ten minutes from downtown, probably within 25 minutes of anyplace in Fort Worth. Easy

parking (at \$7 a day) with a short walk to the terminal. You won't see other airliners during takeoff or landing at Meacham, but you'll likely spot a single-engine Cessna or maybe an F-14 or F-16 from nearby Naval Air Station Fort Worth.

After flying on Mesa's inaugural Meacham flight and booking several clients on Mesa, Barbara Brown of Travel Hut in Fort Worth says, "For people involved in entertainment, the arts, and business in Fort Worth or Houston, because of the proximity of both airports to downtown, it ought to be a match made in heaven."



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