NINA MOINI: MSP may be the go to airport for many Minnesotans and a hub for Delta Airlines. But decades ago, the Downtown St. Paul Airport was the epicenter of aviation for Minnesota. It was there that the first private airmail route for the Midwest originated and where Northwest Airlines, remember, built up its operations before eventually merging with Delta.

As the Downtown St. Paul Airport gears up to mark 100 years of service tomorrow, we'll take some time now to learn more about its rich history. Joining me now to talk a little history is Bruce Kitt. He's the archive manager at the Northwest Airlines History Center. Thanks for being with us, Bruce.

BRUCE KITT: Well, thank you for the invitation, Nina.

NINA MOINI: 100 years-- that's a really significant milestone, Bruce. And you worked for Northwest Airlines back in the day, many years before taking on this role with the museum. What are you reflecting on with this 100-year mark?

BRUCE KITT: Well, it's just interesting that all the airlines that we know of today, they all began in 1926 and that some of them-- many of them are gone. Some of them are still here, the legacy carriers. And it's just how aviation has become such a common, sometimes exciting mode of transportation.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and that it's still in use, given its historical significance. Is that rare?

BRUCE KITT: No, I don't think so. I think that a lot of forms of transportation over time, if they survive, they only get better. Railroads have improved. Cruise ship lines, shipping has improved. Aviation is no different.

NINA MOINI: Let's go back to the very beginnings of the Downtown St. Paul Airport. How do you think the need for transport mail led to the founding of the airport? Can you describe what happened back then?

BRUCE KITT: Well, I think-- well, first off, the government got out of actually flying mail when they passed the Airmail Act of 1925. The government got out, turned it over to private contractors so they had contract air mail routes. I think business saw this as a way of speeding up communications, speeding up business. So mail would be delivered quicker. It was faster to fly it from Minneapolis to Chicago than it was to put it on the fastest train. And I think business perceived any bit of time saving was a benefit to their business, be it banking again or commercial business.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

BRUCE KITT: So it just-- the technology improved. The speed improved. Business was happy. And things just kept growing from there.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Why was St. Paul the air base and not Minneapolis, even though there was an airport in Minneapolis as well? And that's not to say anything negative on St. Paul versus Minneapolis. I don't want to get the emails. [LAUGHS] Just wondering.

BRUCE KITT: Nor do I.

NINA MOINI: But why do you think that decision was made?

BRUCE KITT: Actually, you know, it's funny. We call ourselves the Twin Cities. And I think any siblings, especially twins, there was rivalry over who was more important, who did mom love better.

NINA MOINI: And still.

BRUCE KITT: The airmail route was set out. It was Chicago to the Twin Cities, and Minneapolis and St. Paul tried but never agreed on a mutually acceptable location for the airport. Both of them became stops along the airmail route. So the route as originally set up was Chicago to the Twin Cities via La Crosse. But when it got to the Twin Cities, it stopped at St. Paul, and then it hopped over to Minneapolis.

So again, they couldn't agree. So both of the cities were airmail stops. It's just that eventually St. Paul became the home base for Northwest Airways, as it was called back then. And it kind of-- well, it never-- neither one of them won in the sense that one defeated the other. They were both just copartners in the airmail route.

NINA MOINI: And then if we fast forward a little to when World War II began, how did the functions of the airport change as a result of that?

BRUCE KITT: Drastically. Once war was declared in December of '41, in February, the government shut down St. Paul Airport for all commercial and private flying.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

BRUCE KITT: And the airport actually became a bomber modification center for the war effort. And during the war, virtually all the airlines had contracts with the government to support the war effort. The airlines, all the major airlines, took on specific modification programs so that the manufacturer of bombers, fighters, wouldn't have to stop a production line to make six planes for Asia, 10 planes for Europe, and then back again.

So they would just kind of cookie cutter turn out the airplanes and send them to these modification centers. Northwest had the contract to modify B-24s. Those two hangars with the rounded roofs that you see still at St. Paul Airport, those were the principal hangars where the B-24s were modified during the war.

After the war ended, eventually, the hangars were repurposed by Northwest and became their maintenance facilities up until the advent of the jets. So from '42 to '45, it was basically a military base and then reverted back to civilian use.

NINA MOINI: It's just so fascinating and important to know this history. I appreciate it so much. Again, between MSP and Delta with the big hub, the Delta hub, Minnesota seems to have a big presence in the aviation industry. But how would you describe the significance of the St. Paul Downtown Airport in the greater landscape?

BRUCE KITT: Well, with the advent of jets, home and field couldn't handle them. The jets needed longer runways, and there was just no land available to extend any of the runways. All of Northwest's operations then in 1962 moved up to Wold-Chamberlain Field. But St. Paul then found its niche as a corporate and business airport. The hangars, those World War II mod hangars, were taken over for a number of years by 3M and housed their corporate jets there. There are a number of flight schools. Signature is there to support business jets. So St. Paul really found its niche other than commercial airlines in this category.

NINA MOINI: Just lastly, Bruce, what is your wish for the history of this-- or for the future of this historically significant airport?

BRUCE KITT: Oh, I think, looking at it now, the niche that it's found, I think it augurs well for long-term usage. I'll put a plug in for the old Work Progress Administration terminal building because it now hosts Holman's Table. That's become a popular destination for airplane watchers. They've got great food. It's given the airport kind of a new lease on being in the public's eye.

NINA MOINI: Cool.

BRUCE KITT: And I think, barring any unforeseen circumstances, I think the field, the airport, will continue in its successful path.

NINA MOINI: Another 100 years. Bruce Kitt, thank you so much. This was really fascinating to learn about and very important. Thank you for your time.

BRUCE KITT: Thank you, again, for the invitation, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Bruce Kitt is the archive manager at the Northwest Airlines History Center. And tomorrow, again, at the airport, there'll be a public celebration of the centennial with a concert, opportunities to see the aircrafts, and flyovers. That starts at 5:00 PM.