On June 18, 1948, a DC-4 cargo plane touched down in Juneau, Alaska, and offloaded a Bell 47-B helicopter. It was the first of its kind in the territory (Alaska wouldn’t become a state for eleven more years), and must have drawn a few stares. As was typical in the ‘40s, not many people had heard of a helicopter. Probably fewer had seen one. So it’s reasonable to think at least a few of them cut a wager that day on how long it would take for the new contraption and whoever was flying it to fall out of the sky.

If they did, it was the wrong bet. The helicopter and the man who owned it went swiftly to work, flying missions over mountains and tundra that fixed-wings simply couldn’t, eventually carving a niche out of the wilderness that became so vital to the region’s commerce, so critical to the growth of industry there, that his name in Alaska has become synonymous with progress. In fact, if Carl Brady, Sr. did one thing when he shipped that Bell to Juneau, it was to merge Alaska’s destiny with his own. The oil industry, the commuter airline industry, the survey and mapping industries — all players in Alaska’s commercial development — would grow simultaneously with the services he provided. As his friend Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) has said, "We were living in the third dimension. Carl brought us into the fourth dimension."

He noted the many firsts in his father’s career, such as the first use of a commercial helicopter in Alaska, first use of a turbine helicopter in Alaska, and becoming the first Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) approved operator in the state. He credited former Bell CEO Lloyd Schoppa as having provided the aircraft and support services that made those achievements possible. Carol Brady, to whom Carl, Sr.,
has been married for 63 years, told
the crowd that while she loved
helping her husband run his early
businesses in the 1940s, "the best
thing that ever happened was when
Bell came to Yakima, Washington
because we could sell our
restaurant." The helicopter business
brought challenges, she said, citing
the 12 years during which Brady ran
Era in Alaska while she remained
with the children in Washington, but
that it was "a wonderful thing for our
family."

Senator Stevens performed the
dedication. He spoke with
characteristic wit about his long
friendship with Brady, recounting
their years in the Alaska House and
Senate and time spent fishing the
Kenai Peninsula. He credited Brady
with helping open Alaska to industry
and opportunity, and challenged the
crowd to "think about what this
machine did for the state!" As he
spoke, Brady rose and made his way
to the podium, where the two men
stood arm in arm, each with a hand
on the microphone. At the
dedication, the crowd gave him a
thrilling ovation. Brady
immediately seemed more
interested in their curiosity.

"Does anyone have any
questions?" he said.
"What did you do when it rained?"
someone said, pointing to the Bell's
open cockpit.

"You got wet," Brady said. The
crowd chuckled. Stevens then asked
him, "Carl, why'd you do it all?"

"Because you took my place in
the Senate," he said. The crowd
roared, and Stevens beamed, happily
upstaged.

That exchange was a reference to
a well-known political legend in the
state. In December 1968, after the
U.S. Senator for Alaska E.L. Bartlett
died in office, then-Governor Walter
Hickel offered the empty seat to
either Brady or Stevens. Left to
arbitrate the matter themselves, they
agreed that Stevens would go to
Washington, D.C. As a token of
loyalty, Stevens tore a dollar bill in
half and insisted each man sign it. It
was a "chip," he said, that Brady
could cash in whenever he needed.
Stevens later framed the two halves
of the bill, and they remain on
display in the Brady's Anchorage
home.

H elicopter A ssociation
International (HAI) was fortunate to
have the opportunity to speak
privately with Mr. and Mrs. Brady
after the event, about the challenges
and rewards they experienced
building one of the country's finest
aviation companies, and the
gratitude they feel for having had the
chance to do so.

HAI: One of the most interesting
aspects of the ceremony yesterday
was hearing about your early days as
a businessman. We've read about ice
cream shops, a restaurant in Yakima,
and even heard something about a
skating rink you drove around on the
back of a flatbed truck. Where did
your business career start? And how
did helicopters figure in?

Carl Brady: Well, I jerked sodas
most of my life, in high school and
right after high school, and I ended
up in Yakima, Washington doing
that. When Bell Helicopters brought
the first commercial helicopter to
Yakima, I became very interested in
what the future of the helicopter
would be; what it could be. So, I had
myself and two partners start
Economy Pest Control, and we crop
dusted and did everything that could
possibly be done with a helicopter.

From landing on top of buildings,
delivering mail and what not, to
performing an air show, we did it.

HAI: What led you to work in
Alaska?

Carl Brady: In 1948 the U.S.
Geological Survey put out an
experimental bid to map the
northern half of Chichagof Island
near Juneau. They had spent 7 years
mapping the southern half, which is
pretty smooth and level compared to
the northern half, which is mostly
peaks and valleys and that type of
terrain. They offered me a contract
to fly that area and carry the
surveyors around. They did triangle
mapping and had flat tables where
they drew out the different
directions of the landscape, and
through the mountains and valleys
and so forth. That was what they did
in those days. They do it all by satellites these days, but that's how they did it back then.

HAI: Where did you get your first helicopter?

Carl Brady: There were two sons of farmers in Walla Walla, Washington, and their fathers had bought these two helicopters for them, to start their business with. For one reason or another, they failed.

We took over the helicopters from the parents, and told them we'd pay them 40 percent of the gross or something like that — it was a terrible amount — and of course we found out we couldn't do that. So we started on monthly payments, and did that and barely made it for a couple of years. We paid ourselves 300 dollars a month apiece, and that's what we lived on — my wife and I, and our family. Finally, in 1959 I had eleven helicopters in Alaska. My two partners each had one. They were tending to those two ships, and I was bringing in about 80 percent of the revenue from the ships in Alaska.

Then I asked for some money off the revenue from the ships in Alaska. I started Economy Rotor Aids, which became Era.

HAI: Was it difficult to talk Roy Falconer and Joe Seward into that deal?

Carl Brady: No, they were very anxious to do it.

HAI: Were they already drilling for oil in Alaska at that time?

Carl Brady: Well, mapping was the first reason we came. Then oil showed itself to be the developing future for Alaska, so we started working for the oil industry at that time, and we slowly got to where we were working one hundred percent for the industry. And, of course we ended up working full time with them.

HAI: How critical were helicopters to the development of the oil industry?

Carl Brady: In their seismic work and surface geology, it was the only way they could get around the country. I mean, there were no roads up here to speak of. There weren't in those days. We just continued to service the industry by offering ourselves to the oil companies for the seismic programs and their surface geology programs.

HAI: Where did you find your pilots when you first started out?

Carl Brady: We actually depended on the military for the release of pilots, and there were some awfully good ones that came out of there. There were some pretty poor ones, too, but we screened them very closely, and eliminated those that didn't live up to our high standards.

HAI: What about mechanics? Was it hard to find good ones?

Carl Brady: Yes. The first ones we had were from Bell Helicopter, and they came with the product for the first year or so. Then we trained our own, primarily. We got ex-military mechanics who didn't have a license and we taught them how to get a license, and then used them as well.

HAI: Were there many pilots in Alaska when you got here?

Carl Brady: No. Most of the pilots wrote letters and applied for a job that way, sending in applications. We didn't run into too many of those pilots who were that great. We trained them particularly in mountain type flying, which we did a lot of, with sling loads, longline flying and firefighting, that type of thing.

HAI: One of the first things you notice when you look at that early Bell 47 at the airport is that it has wheels. Those wheels didn't have brakes did they? How did you land a helicopter with wheels on uneven terrain?

Carl Brady: Well, you had to find a level spot to land. The front wheels castered, the rear ones did not. And it would turn downhill no matter where you landed if there was any change in elevation.

HAI: Is that where the idea for skids came from?

Carl Brady: That was one of the main reasons they put skids on. As a matter of fact, we kind of invented the skids. In 1948, we had a sawmill operator in Pellican that cut us some 2 by 4s, and we wired them on with clothesline wire. We wired them wheel to wheel, forward to back, and we landed on the tundra, on soft ground. I've got pictures somewhere of us landing on rock piles with the wheels 2 feet off the ground, supported by the 2 by 4 that was sitting on the rock. That became rather routine.

HAI: Did you start making your own skids?

Carl Brady: No, we got by with those until they started making their own.

HAI: What kind of challenges did the weather pose when you came to Alaska?

Carl Brady: The biggest problem was finding what direction the wind was coming from, because the helicopters were so underpowered that they couldn't land above five thousand feet without a possible turnover or accident of some kind. So you had to find where the wind was coming from at all times. We used to fly over rocks with water on them, or over a lake if we were near one, to look for ripples to see where the wind was coming from.

HAI: A nd the cold?

Carl Brady: Oh yeah. It was cold. (laughs.) Especially in Southeast Alaska. It rained a lot. It was foggy a lot.

HAI: Did you have heat in the helicopter?

Carl Brady: We had our own heaters. We put a number 10 can over the exhaust with a flexible tubing coming into the cockpit that gave us some heat, sending in applications. We didn't run into too many of those pilots who were that great. We trained them particularly in mountain type flying, which we did a lot of, with sling loads, longline flying and firefighting, that type of thing.

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HAI: Did you have heat in the helicopter?

Carl Brady: We had our own heaters. We put a number 10 can over the exhaust with a flexible tubing coming into the cockpit that gave us some measure of heat. At least enough to keep the ice off the windshield.

HAI: Could you fly in winter without heat in the aircraft?

Carl Brady: No, you couldn't. When we first started working on the North Slope — when we decided to make operations there — we'd take our oil to bed with us. In other words, we'd drain the oil out of the helicopter and put it near a stove. We took the batteries out and put them where it was warm. It took a couple of hours to get started in the mornings because of the things you had to watch out for. Particularly in the cold.

HAI: I guess there was a moose in one of the airport parking lots
recently. Given your range of operations in Alaska, have you had any run-ins with animals?

Carl Brady: Oh sure. Back in the days when we first started, we chased moose and black bear and brown bear all over the place. There were no rules against it in those days. I'll never forget, we have moving pictures of one moose that we chased that only had one horn. We chased him for over a mile.

And there were many a brown bear. I shot a bear once for a village when they were out of meat and couldn't afford to pay for meat that was coming in. They asked me when I was out looking for survey sites to shoot a bear, so I shot one and brought it in to camp, a quarter at a time. You couldn't carry much in a helicopter at that time.

In Yakima, Washington, I herded elk for several years, from 1950 to 1955. There's an article in an old mechanic's magazine somewhere calling me the helicopter cowboy for that.

HAI: Did you use counterweights in the aircraft in those days?
Carl Brady: Oh yeah, we did that in the Bell by moving the battery around. The back end, the front end, depending on the load. We did that quite a bit.

HAI: What about fuel?
Carl Brady: We carried that with us. We also had caches. The ex-governor of Alaska used to cache fuel for me. That was Jay Hammond, working for Exxon. We had fuel caches scattered around wherever we were working. You hired fixed wing to deliver those, usually. Then you'd carry a couple of 10-gallon cans with you all the time.

HAI: Was that regular gas?
Carl Brady: No, it was aviation fuel, although we used gas when we couldn't find anything else. On cross-country trips, for example. I've wheeled up to many a gas station to get gas for the helicopter, and then rolled it out on the highway and had somebody stop the traffic for me.

HAI: Have you ever run into some serious problems while... continued on page 68