



 **UNITED EXPRESS**

## Great Lakes Airlines

Great Lakes Aviation was a commuter airline founded in 1977 in Spencer, Iowa that began operations in 1981 with a single route between Spencer and Des Moines, Iowa. The carrier grew with operations centered in the great lakes region and developed hubs at Chicago's O'hare International Airport as well as Minneapolis and Detroit. Great Lakes became a United Express feeder carrier on behalf of United Airlines in 1992 operating 19-seat Beech 1900's and 30-seat Embraer Brasilia aircraft. The carrier then migrated west and established other hubs at Denver, Phoenix, and Tucson however the Tucson flights were operated under the "Great Lakes" designation, not as "United Express". By the late 1990's, Great Lakes was in an ideal position to begin acquiring small regional jets as most other commuter carriers of its size were doing however Great Lakes never operated an aircraft larger than the 30-seat Brasilia.

As Great Lakes had operations focused at Albuquerque, Farmington, and Santa Fe New Mexico, this narrative will cover each operation separately. Great Lakes also served Clovis, Gallup, and Silver City, New Mexico which are all included in the separate narratives.

## Albuquerque, New Mexico:

Great Lakes served Albuquerque on two occasions, the first through an acquisition of Arizona Airways on January 15, 1996 in which service to Tucson was operated with Beechcraft 1900C aircraft. This service was flown until May 23, 1997. In 1999 Great Lakes moved their headquarters to Cheyenne, Wyoming and their designation as United Express ended in early 2002 switching all flights to operate under the Great Lakes brand. From 2000 through 2002 the carrier operated a mail and freight flight between Albuquerque and Denver then returned to Albuquerque on April 3, 2005 with passenger flights to Clovis and Silver City, New Mexico. These flights began after Great Lakes had obtained the Essential Air Service contracts for both cities formerly held by Mesa Airlines and all flights were operated with stand-up cabin Beech-1900D aircraft. Initially a flight from Albuquerque to Santa Fe which continued to the Denver hub was also flown but was discontinued three months later. After that, an Albuquerque to Clovis flight was extended to Amarillo, Texas then continuing onto Denver to maintain a link to the rest of the Great Lakes system. This flight was discontinued in mid-2007 when Southwest Airlines began service between Amarillo and Denver. An Albuquerque-Santa Fe-Denver flight was then reinstated until Great Lakes discontinued all service at Santa Fe in early 2008. From there the Albuquerque operation was isolated with no other links to anywhere within the Great Lakes system which was rather unusual for the carrier. Instead, an aircraft would periodically be ferried, usually between Clovis and Liberal, Kansas, to cycle the aircraft with the rest of the system. (Great Lakes had scheduled service between Liberal and Denver at the time). As Great Lakes was also flying from Farmington to Denver and since no other carrier was flying between Farmington and Albuquerque by 2008, it would have been beneficial for the carrier to begin service between Albuquerque and Farmington for a link to their Denver hub. Great Lakes also operated a maintenance facility in Farmington and there was plenty of spare time each day for the isolated aircraft at Albuquerque to perform one or two round trips to Farmington. Unfortunately, this route never came to be. Four years later in the spring of 2012, a flight from Albuquerque to Alamosa, Colorado that continued to Denver had begun but ended after only three months. In October 2012, an Albuquerque to Silver City flight was extended to Phoenix but then all flights from Albuquerque ended on December 1, 2012. At that time, all service at Silver City was shifted to Phoenix and new service from Clovis to Denver was established with a stop in Santa Fe. The Santa Fe stop was deleted in mid-2013 and the Clovis to Denver flights then began stopping at Liberal, Kansas, or Pueblo, Colorado before all Clovis service ended on January 31, 2014. Service from Silver City to Phoenix continued until the end of the year 2014. Essential Air Service to both Clovis and Silver City was then awarded to Boutique Air. Great Lakes also had a code-share relationship with Frontier Airlines and during the time the carrier served Clovis and Silver City to Albuquerque, passengers could connect with Frontier flights to Denver. Unfortunately, Frontier and Great Lakes did not synchronize their schedules at Albuquerque and the code-share appeared to have little benefit.

## Farmington, New Mexico:

Great Lakes service to Farmington, New Mexico began on June 1, 1998 when the carrier replaced Mesa Airlines as the United Express feeder service to Denver using Beech-1900D aircraft. After the United Express affiliation ended in 2002, Great Lakes continued the Farmington-Denver service under their own identity. Normally from four to six flights per day were operated to Denver and occasionally a flight would stop at Alamosa, Cortez, or Telluride, Colorado enroute. In late 2003, a new flight was added from Farmington to Phoenix operating nonstop at first but later a stop in Page, Arizona was added. New service to Gallup, New Mexico was added on July 1, 2007 with flights on a Denver-Farmington-Gallup-Phoenix route which increased westbound service from Farmington to three per day. The Gallup service was short lived however, ending on March 30, 2008, and flights from Farmington to Phoenix then began stopping at Show Low as well as Page, Arizona. In early 2009, new flights were added from Farmington to Ontario, California with stops in either Prescott or Kingman, Arizona. This service was switched from Ontario to the Los Angeles International Airport two years later. New service was also added from Farmington to Las Vegas, Nevada in early 2010 with nonstop flights at times, otherwise a stop at Page or Kingman was made. Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles had all become small hubs for Great Lakes and Farmington was used as a stop to link these new hubs with their main hub in Denver.

In early 2014, new restrictions were implemented for airline pilots which caused a severe hardship on Great Lakes as well as many other commuter airlines. The carrier's traffic then began declining and all westbound flights from Farmington ended by year end 2015. Seating capacity on the Beech 1900D's was reduced from 19 to 9 seats so they could be flown with only one pilot instead of the normal two. The Farmington aircraft maintenance facility was also closed down and by early 2016, Great Lakes service at Farmington was reduced to just one flight per day to Denver, Monday through Friday only. Due to the carrier's lack of pilots, this single flight often cancelled and during the month of July, 2016, the flight only operated on three days. By October however, Great Lakes had discontinued service to a number of other cities and was able to staff a schedule of three flights each day between Farmington and Denver as well as a weekend flight to Phoenix via Page, Arizona. In December, 2016, the carrier introduced the 30-seat Embraer Brasilia aircraft at Farmington on two flights per week to Denver and began two per week to Prescott, Arizona continuing onto Los Angeles. This new recommitment to Farmington did not prove successful however and by October, 2017 the schedule was dropped to only the four weekly flights operated with Brasilia's. All flights then ended on October 30, 2017 leaving Farmington with no commercial air service after having such service for 70 years.

## Santa Fe, New Mexico:

Santa Fe service also began on June 1, 1998 as United Express with flights to Denver, the same as it did at Farmington. Mesa Airlines formerly operated only four flights per day between Santa Fe and Denver as United Express however Great Lakes increased the service to as many as 12 flights per day all using the same Beech 1900D type aircraft. After Great Lakes lost its status as United Express in 2002, the Santa Fe service was cut back to only two flights per day. The Santa Fe and Farmington service continued to operate an indirect code-share relationship with United Airlines as well as with Frontier Airlines when connecting at Denver with flights on United or Frontier. A single flight from Santa Fe to Albuquerque was briefly operated in 2005 and again in 2007 however all Santa Fe service was discontinued on January 7, 2008 after the announcement that American Eagle and Delta Connection carriers would serve Santa Fe from other hub cities using regional jets. Delta's service never came to be however and American's service from Santa Fe was to Dallas and Los Angeles. Great Lakes then returned to Santa Fe on December 1, 2012 with two daily roundtrips on a Denver-Santa Fe-Clovis routing. Five months later a new United Express carrier operating 50-seat regional jets began service between Santa Fe and Denver prompting Great Lakes to change its schedule to a single flight to Denver as well as adding a new nonstop to Phoenix. All service to Santa Fe ended again on November 3, 2013.



Great Lakes Beechcraft 1900D in the livery of United Express used until 2002.



Great Lakes Beechcraft 1900D at Farmington in the carriers' house livery used from 2002.



Great Lakes Embraer 120 Brasilia at Farmington.

Great Lakes had served a total of six cities in New Mexico but downsized considerably between 2014 and 2017, discontinuing all service to New Mexico. The carrier then shut down on March 26, 2018.

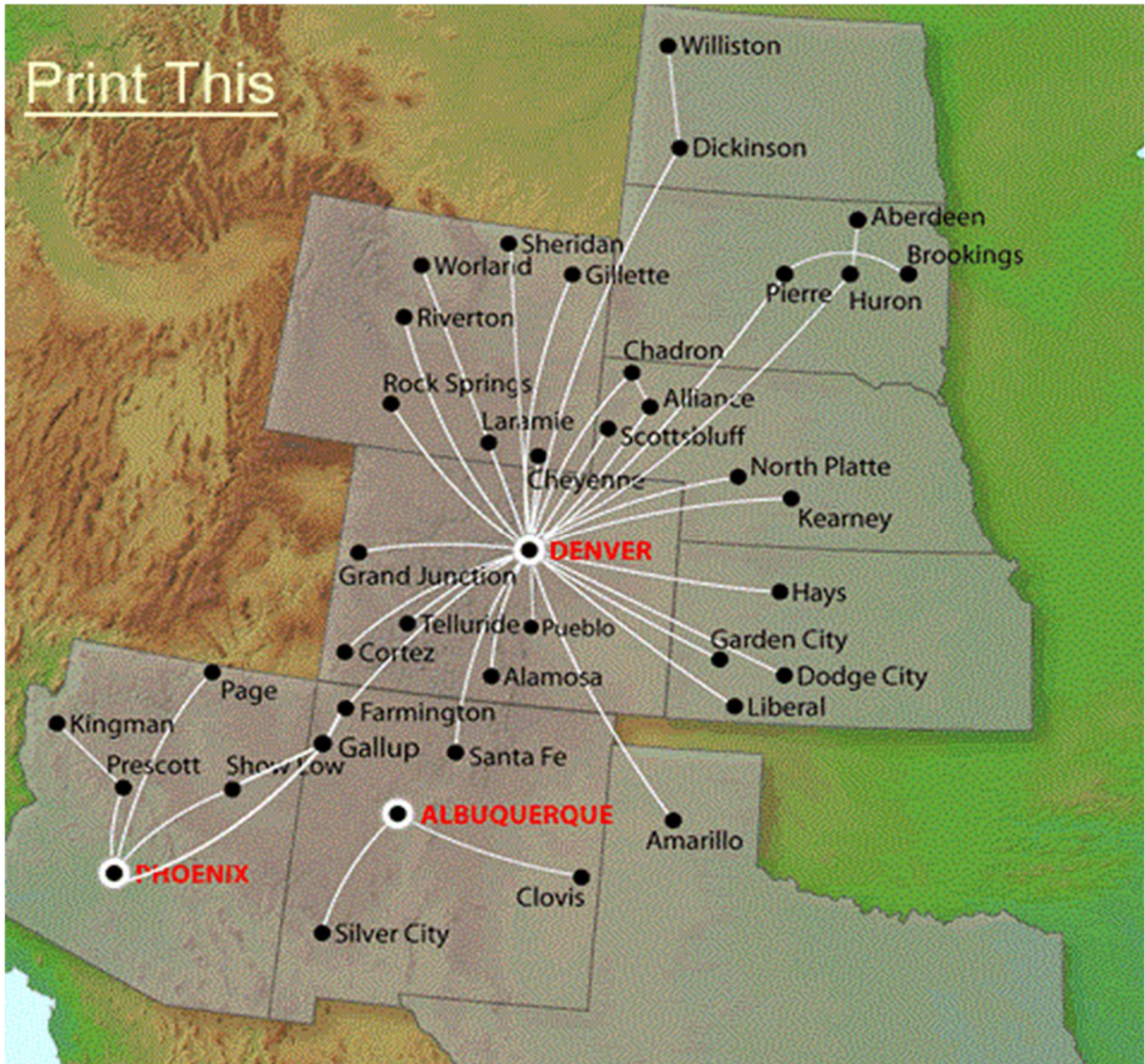
Great Lakes also had a theme similar to that of Frontier Airlines in which the tails of many of their Beech 1900D aircraft were painted to advertise cities that the carrier flies to as well as some of the other regions in the West. Unfortunately, none of the cities or area in New Mexico were ever represented although the Shiprock monolith would have been a perfect example to represent the city of Farmington. Ironically, Farmington was one of the strongest cities that Great Lakes had served in their entire system.



Great Lakes Beechcraft 1900D promoting Dodge City, Kansas.



Great Lakes Beechcraft 1900D promoting the White Mountains of Arizona.



Great Lakes route map from 2007.