



Mesa Airlines

Note: This column will review Mesa's independent operations at Albuquerque and all other cities in New Mexico except for Farmington. As Mesa had quite an active life growing up in Farmington, a separate column will cover that operation entitled "Mesa Airlines – Farmington New Mexico". Mesa has also become a feeder affiliate for several major carriers and a third column will address this phase under the "Major and Regional airlines" link.

Mesa Airlines began as **Mesa Aviation** on October 12, 1980 and was founded by JB Aviation, the fixed base operator at the Four Corners Regional Airport in Farmington, New Mexico. The inaugural route was from Farmington to Albuquerque using a five seat Piper Saratoga aircraft which was later upgraded to a nine-seat Piper Navajo. The name was soon changed to **Mesa Air Shuttle** by 1981. In 1982 the company was sold to Larry Risley, an aircraft mechanic at the Farmington airport. Risley and his wife Janie saw that Frontier Airlines, the grandfather carrier of Farmington, was cutting back on their service as they were converting to an all-jet aircraft fleet and the Farmington airport could not economically handle jets. The Risley's grew the airline introducing 14-seat Beechcraft 99 aircraft in 1983 in which many were flown over the next several years. In early 1984 new routes were started from Albuquerque to Roswell, Hobbs, and Lubbock, Texas and over the next couple years the company quickly expanded to many other cities throughout New Mexico and southern Colorado, several of which were subsidized by the federal government in a program known as Essential Air Service, or EAS. The service to Lubbock was switched to Midland/Odessa, Texas in late 1984 but then ended in early 1986. The company name was changed two more times to **Mesa Air** in 1983 and finally to **Mesa Airlines** in 1985.



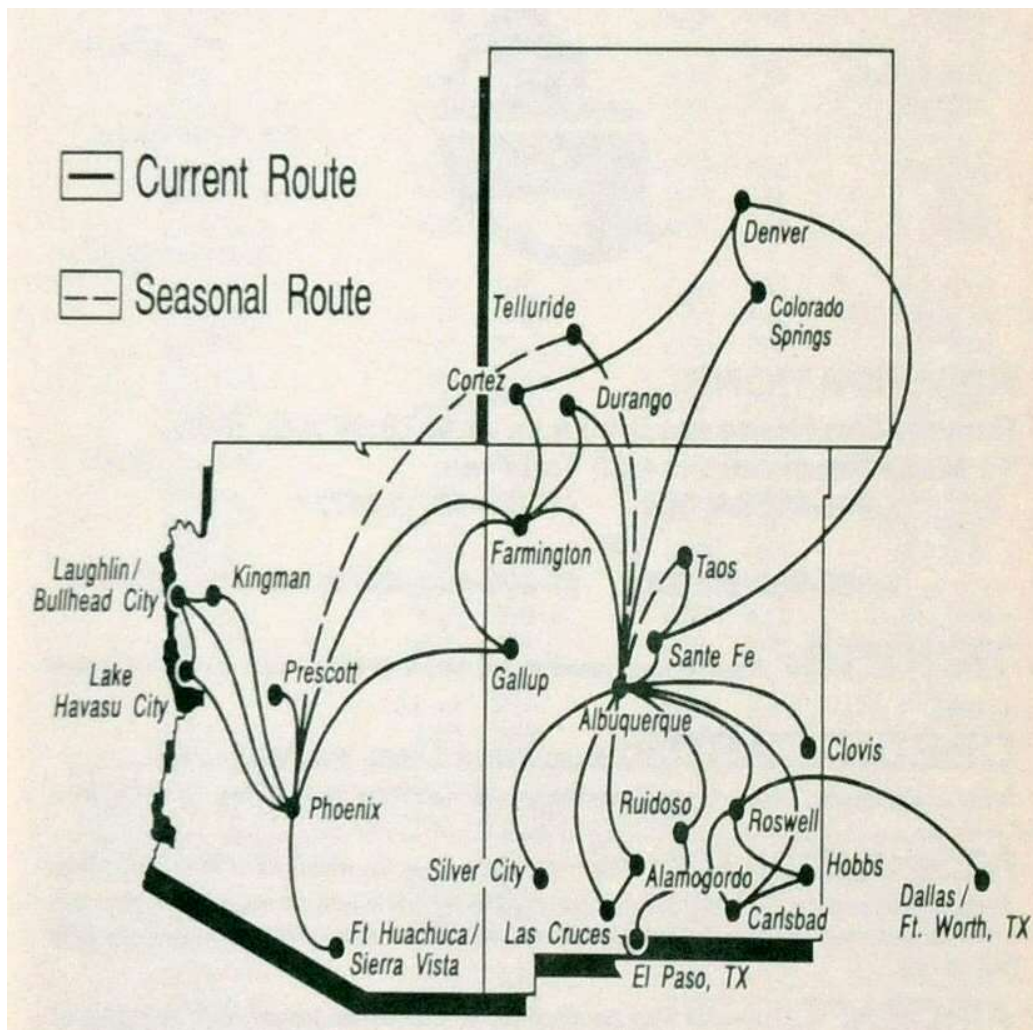
Mesa Air Shuttle Piper Saratoga at the Southwest Air Rangers hanger of the Albuquerque Sunport.



Mesa Airlines Beechcraft 99 at the Albuquerque Sunport.

Mesa struggled during its first few years competing with several other commuter airlines, especially Air Midwest, but by mid-1987 all competitors had left New Mexico and Mesa survived as the only commuter serving Albuquerque from every community in New Mexico that had airline service. Mesa introduced the Beechcraft 1900C, a larger 19-seat aircraft in late 1985 using it for new service from Albuquerque to Telluride and Denver, Colorado. In 1987 Mesa obtained a pair of 13-seat, pressurized,

CAT-Pass 200's for a short time and soon replaced them with very similar Beech 1300's as the company began phasing out the unpressurized Beech 99's. A couple smaller nine-seat Cessna Caravans were obtained from 1987 through 1991 for use on shuttle routes from Albuquerque to Santa Fe and Taos. Mesa had contemplated serving even smaller cities with this aircraft such as Las Vegas, Tatum, and Truth or Consequences, New Mexico but these routes did not materialize. In late 1985 the carrier expanded to Phoenix, Arizona with routes from Gallup and Farmington. Service was briefly operated from Alamogordo to El Paso, Texas and Tucson, Arizona in 1986. Nonstop service from Albuquerque to Colorado Springs was also added in 1986, from Roswell to Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas in 1987 and from Santa Fe to Denver, Colorado in 1989. During the winter ski season of 1987/1988 service was provided from Taos to Colorado Springs and Denver as well as from Ruidoso to Roswell and Dallas/Ft. Worth. Service to Ruidoso was again operated in the latter half of 1990 with flights to Albuquerque and El Paso using the Cessna Caravans. The Caravans also briefly operated cargo flights between Albuquerque and El Paso in 1987.



Mesa route map from July, 1990.



Mesa Beechcraft 1900C's were first acquired in late 1985.



Mesa Beechcraft 1300 replaced the Beech 99's and were flown from 1988 through 1991.



Mesa Cessna 208 Caravan was used between 1987 and 1991



Mesa Embraer 120 Brasilia in a modified paint scheme was briefly flown between Albuquerque and Farmington in 1992.

In 1990 Mesa began an affiliation with United Airlines to operate as United Express with flights from Denver to many smaller cities including Farmington. Denver to Santa Fe flights continued to operate as Mesa Airlines until 1995 when they became United Express. In 1992 another agreement was signed with America West Airlines to fly as America West Express for feeder flights into Phoenix which included the flights from both Gallup and Farmington. 1992 also saw a modified version of the Beech 1900 referred to as the Beech 1900D with a taller “stand-up cabin”. This aircraft would replace the 1900C’s and become the backbone aircraft for Mesa. For a few months in 1992 Mesa introduced the 30-seat Embraer Brasilia on several flights between Albuquerque and Farmington but this aircraft was later assigned to operate on United Express and America West Express routes. Although Mesa did not operate any United Express or America West Express commuter flights from Albuquerque at the time, many aircraft still passed through with the United or America West paint schemes. Mesa continued to grow operating as many as 47 departures per day to 18 cities from the commuter gate at the Albuquerque Sunport. By the late 1990’s however, passenger traffic on commuter airlines nationwide began to decline. Mesa started cutting back on their Albuquerque operation and focusing more on building their major airline feeder operations which they had throughout the country as well as moving their headquarters from Farmington to Phoenix. The United Express contract was terminated in 1998 and all service from Farmington and Santa Fe to Denver was replaced by Great Lakes Airlines. America West Express service from Gallup to Phoenix ended in late 1999 while new service from Santa Fe to Phoenix began in 2000 with Beech 1900D’s but only lasted about one year. The Roswell-Dallas/Ft. Worth flights were suspended from 1995 through 1997 then ended permanently after the 9/11 events of 2001. Service to Alamogordo first ended in 2002 but Mesa was ordered to return there four years later as the cities’ service was mandated under the EAS program and three other carriers that tried flying to Alamogordo all went out of business.



Six Mesa Beech 1900D’s at the Albuquerque Sunport commuter gate in the 1990’s.



Mesa Beech 1900D in the colors of United Express.



Mesa Beech 1900D at the Farmington Airport in the livery of America West Express

During the 1990's Mesa acquired many other carriers and created some new carriers of its own. All would be managed under a holding company called "Mesa Air Group". In 1995 the "Mesa Airlines" subdivision was designated as "Mountain West Airlines" but reverted back to the "Mesa Airlines" name the following year. One of the carriers acquired was Air Midwest, Mesa's former competitor, and by the start of 2001 Mesa transferred all flights operating with Beech 1900D's to fly under the Air Midwest certificate however they were still known as Mesa Airlines in Albuquerque and America West Express in Phoenix. In the years to come, Mesa's (Air Midwest's) independent flights and routes at Albuquerque continued to be dropped until the operation was completely dissolved with the last flight departing to

Farmington on December 31, 2007. The Essential Air Service routes requiring subsidy were transferred to new carriers such as Great Lakes and New Mexico Airlines. The Albuquerque to Farmington route was Mesa's first and was always the strongest with flights operating every hour for many years but by 2008 there was no service by Mesa or any other carrier. The America West Express service between Phoenix and Farmington became US Airways Express in 2007 following a merger between the two mainline carriers but ended the following year when all Beech 1900 flying was discontinued.



Mesa Beech 1900D in a very colorful southwest sunset livery worn from 1998 through 2002.



Mesa Beech 1900D in the final livery worn from 2002 while operating under the Air Midwest certificate.

Mesa Airlines was by far the largest commuter airline to provide intrastate service throughout New Mexico and its neighboring states. The company faced fierce competition by many other commuter airlines as it evolved in the 1980's but prevailed and made a tremendous contribution to commercial air service in New Mexico. A list of the cities operated direct from Albuquerque under the Mesa Airlines independent operation and the dates of service include:

Alamogordo, NM	(EAS)	6/4/85-5/26/02 and 9/24/06-12/31/07
Angel Fire, NM		12/12/86-3/31/87
Carlsbad, NM	(EAS)	11/15/84-6/30/07
Clovis, NM	(EAS)	7/22/85-4/2/05
Colorado Springs, CO		1/1/87-11/11/06
Durango, CO		8/10/83-1/31/05 (several interruptions in service)
Farmington, NM		10/12/80-12/31/07
Gallup, NM	(EAS)	5/1/85-4/1/89 and 11/1/99-11/16/02
Hobbs, NM	(EAS)	1/15/84-6/30/07
Las Cruces, NM		4/1/86-1/20/01
Los Alamos, NM		1/6/97-5/2/1997
Pueblo, CO		7/1/87-12/10/87 and 11/1/04-4/2/05
Roswell, NM		1/15/84-12/31/07
Ruidoso, NM		12/11/87-4/11/88 and 6/6/90-10/27/90
Santa Fe, NM		3/4/85-4/30/85 and 6/13/88-6/18/95
Silver City, NM	(EAS)	3/4/85-4/2/05
Taos, NM		1986/87 and 1987/88 ski seasons then 6/13/88-4/6/91 year round
Telluride, CO		12/19/85-3/28/92 (occasional seasonal service)

Direct service with one or more stops was operated from Albuquerque to Denver, Cortez, Grand Junction, Dallas/Fort Worth, Lubbock, Midland/Odessa, El Paso, Tucson, and Phoenix.