

## Gene Banning Collection Donated to PAHF — Volunteers Help Retrieve, Catalogue and Preserve Historic Materials

By Doug Miller

This story goes back decades to a time when a new Pan Am pilot named Gene Banning became fascinated with the growing empire of Pan American World Airways. His interest soon grew into a studied pursuit and then a life-long passion.

Fast forward decades, to the 1990's. Now retired, Captain Banning had amassed a trove of historic Pan Am materials, not only his own but those of colleagues such as George Price, Bill Seeman and others. The material in his collection was instrumental in helping Banning to author what has become one of the very best books ever written about "the world's most experienced airline": *The Airlines of Pan American Since 1927* (Paladwr Press; Maclean, VA; 2000).

Gene Banning will long be associated with promulgating Pan Am's legacy thanks to his superlative book. His commitment to academic research also led to the creation of the annual Dave Abrams-Eugene Banning Fellowship, supported by your Foundation and awarded by the University of Miami's Special Collections.

When Captain Banning passed away in 2005, his wife, Jackie, survived as caretaker of the many boxes of materials Gene had amassed in their former home in South Florida. She eventually decided to donate his collection to the Foundation.

Things might have stalled there, but for the generous intervention of the late Captain Harvey Benefield, who undertook the actual retrieval of the boxes



Capt. Banning, courtesy Univ. of Miami  
Special Collections

from Mrs. Banning's residence. The collection was temporarily stored in a space at the AWARE store in Miami.

When it was time to downsize AWARE's storage space, it was critical to find a new home for almost thirty boxes of the Banning collection. One choice was to send them directly to the University of Miami's Special Collections. But it might be an unknown hiatus before Special Collections Director, Cristina Favrett, could allocate the required time and resources to catalog the documents, films, artifacts and photographs. And not all of this material belonged in the archive.

Recognizing the significance of this collection, Nicola Hellmann-McFarland, who serves as the main reference assistant at the Richter Library on the Pan Am Collection, came to the rescue. Along with her colleague, rare book cataloger Linde Brocato, they volunteered to work on their own time to do what

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might be termed an “emergency catalog operation.” They reviewed all the material stored at the AWARE space working under strict CDC guidelines for Covid.

And that brings us to the next player in this drama, Dr. Eric Hobson, Ph.D., Professor of English at Belmont University in Nashville. Eric, who is a PAHF member, volunteered to assist by picking up the material at the AWARE store. Eric has maintained a close relationship with the Foundation and was intensely interested in the material. He has done extensive research and his articles have appeared in this newsletter and on our website.

When he learned that Gene Banning’s collection was in need of immediate intervention, Eric quickly responded with an offer that proved to be exactly what was needed. At his own expense, he offered to fly down and retrieve the collection, bring it back to his home in Nashville, and continue the examination and cataloging of the material. It was an offer we couldn’t refuse. Not only was the collection now assured of physical safety, it was going to be available as an historical asset possibly years sooner than what was likely to be the case otherwise. The Foundation maintains ownership of the material, pending further

disposition, but for this interim period, Dr. Hobson is arranging for appropriate, environmentally-correct storage at Belmont University, acting as temporary caretaker on PAHF’s behalf.

And what a treasure this collection is turning out to be! Eric has been carefully reviewing, and in some cases, reorganizing what he’s uncovering. For example, Gene Banning was an inveterate correspondent with his former Pan Am colleagues, and the collection includes hundreds of letters he saved. These are filled with details that will prove a gold mine for historical research. The collection contains scores of photographs, which he is carefully pulling out and protecting to prevent any further deterioration.

## Manufacturer’s plate from Sikorsky S-42



Retrieved from the wreck of the “West Indies Clipper,” NC823M. In an earlier role, this airplane, under the command of Edwin Musick, had flown the initial transpacific survey flights as the “Pan American Clipper.”

Dr. Hobson, while careful to maintain a professional approach to his work with the collection, is not averse to undertaking the task with a sense of fun. When he picked up the black mini-van he used to transport the boxes, in a homage to the days of yore, he dubbed it the “Ebony Clipper.” Although this vehicle never left the ground, it carried a sense of mission as it rolled north that reflected the very best traditions of caring for Pan Am’s historical heritage that motivated Gene Banning and continues for so many others, such as members of the Pan Am Historical Foundation.

There is a lot more to come from this endeavor, and we’ll keep you posted. ➔