

# Remembering When Capitola Had an Airport

Airports

Today, homes, parks and New Brighton Middle School fill the acres of flat land above Capitola Village, but for several decades in the first half of the 20th century, runways marked the open field that housed the Santa Cruz-Capitola Airport.

The land widely known as "Hihn's eastern field" fit the simple needs for an early airport, said Capitola Historical Museum Director Carolyn Swift.

"In the early days of aviation, any big field was used as an airfield," she said.

These were the days when planes weren't that more expensive than fine automobiles, rules were scarce and the well-heeled wanted to avoid slow-moving trains or dirt roads to reach their destinations. However, Capitola's airport was different.

While Capitola had been attracting visitors for a half century by the 1920s, the airport appears to have been built not to transport or entertain tourists but to comple-

ment the neighboring California National Guard training site.

The 250th Coast Artillery Regiment was established in Capitola in 1926, later renamed Camp McQuaide after it moved south off San Andreas Road.

The National Guard used the camp for maneuvers for two weeks each summer.



Esther and Russell Rice

Initially planes pulled silk banners that served as targets for the National Guardsmen to practice shooting, Swift said. She recalled hearing

tales from an early resident who remembered chasing down the remains of the silk parachute material for his mother to turn into a scarf.

Other pilots also used the field and it soon became home to the Santa Cruz Glider Club, which some reports say was founded by county aviation pioneer Russell Rice in 1926. Swift said she has heard that Henry Washburn, who owned the neighboring former school property, also towed gliders from the field.

## Waikiki of the West

Russell Rice's wife, Esther, was also involved in the management and promotion of the airfield. She wrote a column "Barrel Rolls from Santa Cruz" for an early aviation publication called "In-Flight," said Swift, who interviewed Rice several times.

She would often present visiting pilots with a box of begonias picked from the nearby fields. The begonias were considered quite rare and exotic then. Rice received and kept many letters of thanks from the pilots, Swift



A view of the airport from 1950. Photos courtesy of the Capitola Historical Museum and Covello and Covello Photography.

said, and they sometimes even held parties in their Central Valley homes to show off the unusual blooms when they flew home.

At other times, begonias were used to make leis that were presented to pilots by young women in grass hula skirts.

Esther Rice dubbed Capitola "The Waikiki of the West" in her column.

Rice once told Swift that she really didn't plan to learn to fly herself, but she would at times be on the field telling pilots to pull up or pull down as they came and went. When they challenged her right to tell them what to do, she decided she should learn to fly herself.

Another local female pilot, Edith Fikes, owned what became the Soquel Inn across from Soquel Elementary School, and it became a popular spot for pilots to stay overnight, Swift said.

Another favorite pilot hang-out was the Cozy Coffee

Shop in Capitola Village.

After nearly a decade of use, the airport got a boost from city of Santa Cruz in 1934 when it applied for emergency relief administration funds to pay for work on the airport. That year it was officially designated as the Santa Cruz-Capitola Airport and made the city's civic airfield. It was operated under a lease from the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce for many years.

It continued in use until World War II, when it was closed along with many small municipal fields. Russell Rice got permission to reopen it in 1945 to train pilots at the end of the war, Swift said.

## The Director of "The Birds" Files In

The airport continued its use by those who wanted to fly into the northern half of the county.

One of those was famed

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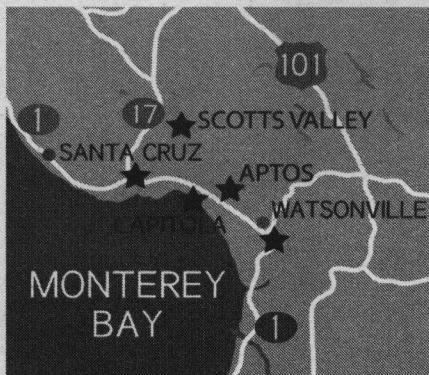


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## airport from p. 8

movie director Alfred Hitchcock, who owned a home in Scotts Valley.

Swift shared a story from Brad MacDonald, a founder of the Shadowbrook restaurant, who would pick up Hitchcock in an amphibious "duck" vehicle.

This was before the restaurant had its cable car. MacDonald used the duck to cross Soquel Creek and bring diners to the restaurant at creek-side if they did not wish to go down the steep hill.

MacDonald would collect Hitchcock at the airport, take him to dinner at the Shadowbrook, and then he would

head on to his home in Scotts Valley, Swift said.

By the late 1940s, the construction of Highway 1 shortened one of the runways, and aviation maps from the early 1950s list a 2,400-foot unpaved runway.

Capitola incorporated as a city in 1949, and Santa Cruz continued to consider other

locations for an airport, spending several years and thousands of dollars buying land in the Swanton area before switching its focus to Sky Park in Scotts Valley.

In 1954, the Russells abandoned the Capitola airport to move their aviation interests to Sky Park.

With their departure, the

airport closed. The land was briefly planted with strawberry crops and considered as a site for Cabrillo College.

By the 1960s, a neighborhood had grown up around Capitola Elementary School, which is now part of the New Brighton Middle School Campus, leaving no trace of the former airport. ■