



Faith Raider

Julie Leonard and her daughter, Trisha, 10, exit plane after an air tour during Watsonville Airport's open house Saturday.

Flying the friendly skies over Watsonville

By FAITH RAIDER

STAFF WRITER

It was a glorious day to fly. And hundreds of people took advantage of an opportunity to do just that at the Watsonville Municipal Airport Saturday.

An all-day open house to celebrate the airport's 53rd birthday drew in about 200 people for a 7 a.m. pancake breakfast. Some 150 had flown the friendly skies before noon.

Twenty-one pilots were offering 15-minute air tours in small planes ranging from two-seat Cessnas to six-seat Bonanzas to

participants for five cents for every pound they weighed.

"The bay looks a lot smaller from up here," said Watsonville resident Mick Luerano, one of three passengers flying in a four-seater Mooney plane.

Sponsored by the Monterey Bay Ninety-nines flying club, proceeds from the flights will go to the airport to fund a "flying friendly" video about noise abatement.

The open house is an annual event that began three years ago when the airport celebrated its

See AIRPORT, back of section

AIRPORT

From page 1

50-year anniversary, said airport manager Don French.

"It's the community's airport and we'd like to invite the community to it," he said. The airport's other major annual event, the Antique Air Show and Fly-in, is held in May.

The variety of planes that flew passengers over the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, Cabrillo College football field and Sky-View Drive in theater in Santa Cruz did not include experimental planes — planes not certificated by the Federal Aviation Administration.

A 71-year-old pilot flying an experimental plane made headlines this week when he crashed on a maiden voyage not far from the airport.

Although FAA inspectors had looked at the experimental plane during its construction phase and before it was flown, the engine appeared to have malfunctioned, French said. Nonexperimental planes are certifiable because they are the same as other planes of an identical design, which has been extensively tested.

French had predicted that the unfortunate crash would not cast a pall over the open house. "These kinds of things tend to bring pilot folks in like a family," he said.

The airport was built in 1943 by the War Department, which took over the construction begun by the Civil Aeronautics Agency because of World War II. It was used during the war as a rendezvous point for naval airplanes designated to land together on air carriers. In 1946, the War Department transferred ownership to the City of Watsonville.

Although the airport is not used commercially, members of the business community fly in and out regularly, French said.

Some 500 jobs are directly related to the airport's location in Watsonville, French said. Some \$17 million a year is generated for the community by local taxes paid by aircraft owners; the use of fuel, maintenance and other airport services; and motels, food and ground transportation used by visitors who come through the airport, he said.