



Mike McCallum

Vern Ackerman grew up here, and is part of the story of the growth of aviation in Watsonville.

When Watsonville took flight

Airport is 50, but city's aviation story is much older

By VERN ACKERMAN
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WATSONVILLE Municipal Airport celebrates its golden anniversary today, but the area's aviation story begins much earlier than that.

I served as manager of Watsonville's airport for three-fourths of its life, and can remember back 60 years, when I would ride my bicycle up Werners Hill to the airport to clean up the hangar and earn a free airplane ride.

In the 1920s, when aircraft speeds were considerably slower, there were takeoffs and landings in open fields, like Mines Field (now Los Angeles International), Mills Field (San Francisco International) and Buchanan Field (now Concord).

A celebration of aviation

Watsonville Municipal Airport's 50th anniversary celebration is a festival for aviation buffs.

Festivities begins with the VFW flag-raising and a gun salute at 10 a.m. An aerobatics show, vintage airplane display, and plane rides will be offered and the mayor and current and

former airport managers will be on hand to rededicate the field.

Rides on some aircraft will be available at a cost of 5 cents per pound (of the passenger). Tours of on-ground aircraft will also be given.

Planes on display include
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Landing fields in this area were known as Rio Del Mar, San Andreas, Palm Beach, and there was one near Watsonville on Beach Road. Another one, called Storms Field, was located on what is now Freedom Boulevard, about where Country Cousins and Mariposa Avenue

sit.

The first Watsonville Airport was actually located in Monterey County, near the junction of Salinas Road and Highway 1. Started by a small group of investors, a corporation was formed on March 21, 1930, and Watsonville Airport Inc. was

born.

The Monterey site was selected for a very practical reason — it was the only land available at the time for a reasonable price. With money from the sale of 5,000 shares of stock, 85 acres of land were bought and the airport built.

A little more than a year later, a Stinson Monoplane piloted by W.W. Bendell and carrying then Gov. James "Sunny Jim" Rolph made a low pass over the runway, cutting a ribbon to officially open Watsonville's first airport.

That inaugural flight started something that continues today — the growth of aviation in Watsonville.

Claude Wilson, a World War I Naval Air Service pilot, holds the honor of serving as the first

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airport manager; Harlow Ford was president of the first board of directors.

Dedication ceremonies included a big air show attended by prominent aviators of the day, and featuring \$250,000 in aircraft coming in from all parts of the state. An Aviators Ball was held at the civic auditorium, attracting all the political and aviation luminaries of the time.

Among those active in establishing that airport were Ford, Floyd McFarlane, Basil and Ken Clark, Bendell, William Waters, Bill * Russell, Perry Andrews, Pete Calaghan, Charles Tharp and Dr. Henry Watters.

Many of these men flew their own planes. Watters had his Curtis Robin; McFarlane and Russell had their Eagle Rocks; the Clark brothers flew a Stinson and later a Ford Tri-Motor.

Other fliers and their craft were Lou and Harold Foote, Monocoupe; Roy Martelli, Eagle Rock; Roy Waugaman, Ryan; Bert Scott, Bird; Russell Kempter, Lincoln Paige; Bill Neibling, Travelair; and Jack Irwin, a later airport manager, an Irwin Special. Manager Wilson owned and flew a Bird.

Jack Irwin's wife, Stacey, was the country's first woman to be licensed as an airplane mechanic.

During the next 10 years, through the Depression and recovery, recession and prosperity, the airport was a focal point in the communities' social and economic life.

With the '40s came another war, and civilian flying gave way to the military. In 1941, the airport was designated as an auxiliary base out of which would fly the big, 250-foot silver blimps used for submarine patrols.

Among the locals who were based there were Don Wilson, George Davis, Vern Dietz and Ron Hill.

The base was shut down in 1945 when the blimps were no longer needed.

The airport, too, closed on May 3, 1947, when the corporation sold it to Ed Petersen. No aviator, Petersen replaced the facility with a cattle feed lot.

Cattle chutes, weeds and rusting farm machinery had taken over where the proud Birds and the fat blimps once flew. But underneath was Watsonville's first airport, and a good chunk of her history.

In 1939, the Civil Aeronautics Authority, forerunner of the Federal Aviation Administration, decided that a civil airport was needed in Santa Cruz County.

CAA representatives went first to the city of Santa Cruz and said, "If you purchase the land, we will build you an airport."

Unbelievably, the offer was voted down.

They next offered the city of Watsonville the same deal. A bond issue was approved almost unanimously for \$125,000 and the purchase of 330 acres.

Construction soon began on a parcel of land near Freedom, the airport's current site. The runways were just nearing completion when Pearl Harbor was attacked Dec. 7, 1941. The military needed new bases throughout the state, and fast.

Watsonville was chosen as a

er squadrons, and spent 90 to 120 days in Watsonville to train before being assigned to carriers on duty in the Pacific.

The airport was built by the CAA at an original cost of \$715,000. In 1944, another \$2.39 million would be spent on additional improvements.

As the war ground to a halt, so did operations at NAAS Watsonville. On Nov. 1, 1945, it was closed and placed on caretaker status.

The last official Navy flight took off in Nov. 1945, piloted by a former operations officer at the base, a combat veteran decorated for sinking an enemy ship.

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the China Doll, a Curtiss-Wright designed C-46 Commando World War II transport. Its large load capacity and excellent high-altitude performance earned it distinction carrying supplies over the "Hump" — the Himalayas, in the Indo-Burma theater of war.

The China Doll, the only C-46 operating on the west coast, is being flown in from Camarillo by the Southern California Wing of the Confederate Air Force, an organization dedicated to the preservation and operation

of historic WWII aircraft.

A \$1 donation to tour the plane will be asked. The Confederate Air Force will be also selling souvenirs and memorabilia.

Other exhibits will be a DC-3, a twin-engine aircraft, one of the early successful commercial passenger airliners; a Lockheed/Howard 250; an F8 Bear Cat Navy fighter, the last piston-engine carrier fighter manufactured by Grumman; and a P51 Mustang fighter.

Food and refreshments will be available.

For more information, call Sharon Reeder, airport operations supervisor, at 728-6075.

That pilot was Ack Ackerman, a Watsonville native, who served as airport manager until 1987. He knows most about the airport, because he saw it built, was stationed there briefly during the war, and managed it most of its years. Ackerman not only flew the last Navy aircraft from the base, he flew in the first civilian airplane to use the airfield after it was taken over by the city of Watsonville. — Editor

Ackerman and his partner, R.F. Ditlevsen, operated a small air facility, called Foothill Airport, during the time NAAS Watsonville was on caretaker status, from November 1945 to March 1946. Foothill Airport is now the site of the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds.

The city acquired the 32 acres bought by the Navy. The change of ownership was completed in 1947, with the government turning it over minus the cost of the old station.

The city sold those 32 acres to the Freedom Elementary School District, which moved its school into the old Navy buildings and operated there until 1963. When the school closed and the district later absorbed by the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, part of the land was sold

back to the city for use as a future parking lot, the rest sold to a San Jose investment group.

On Dec. 2, 1946, a Southwest Airways DC-3 landed here to pick up its first passenger, Forrest M. Knight, and 16 pouches of mail, thus providing the first airline service to the community. This service continued until 1956. Southwest Airways became Pacific Airlines, then Air West, Hughes Air West, Republic and finally was taken over by Northwest Orient.

The first airport manager was Robert Hudson, who held the post for a few months until he returned to the Air Force. Ackerman and Ditlevsen, his business partner, a former Marine pilot with whom he founded Watsonville Flying Service, became co-managers of the airport in 1946. Ackerman bought out Ditlevsen a year later, and on July 1, 1948, was appointed airport manager by then Mayor C.H. Baker.

Ackerman held the post until resigning in 1964. The resignation lasted just a year. Ackerman was reappointed manager by then City Manager Tom Rowan.

Today, Ack juggles his duties as an airport manager and chief pilot for Granite Construction Co., for whom he has worked 33 years.

The airport is a busy place, trafficked by four times the number of planes as during the war years. The facility has earned pilots' praise for the way it has developed. During the past 41 years, many improvements have been made, including five miles of perimeter fencing, ramp lighting, over 100 hangars and 300 black-top tie-down spots.

Land acquisition on the south end of Runway 19 and across the highway provided permanent protection from development on the critical end of the main runway. A new terminal building with a restaurant was added, as well as runway and taxiway lighting, underground street lighting on Aviation Way, runway resurfacing, a new Runway 25 taxiway and an instrument approach system.

When Santa Cruz closed its airport on Dec. 31, 1983, Watsonville absorbed 82 more aircraft without a problem.

Four Master Plans have been developed, the latest projecting construction of a control tower, instrument approach, more hangars and tie-down ramps with a new access road.

The Airport Capital Improvement Program calls for expansion of the terminal building, reconstruction and widening of Aviation Way and additional auto parking lots.

Forecasts also include a maximum of 625 based aircraft.