

# A Look Back at Capitola's Airport

by Carolyn Swift

**A**t first glance the photo looks to be nothing extraordinary, but up close one can see that it's captured a romantic vitality that Capitola knew only briefly in the years after World War II.

A cheerful group, leis around their necks, paper plates in hand, mill outside a small clubhouse, smoking and talking. The men wear flight jackets with fur collars and caps with the bills pushed back. Their eyes are shaded by dark glasses with wire rims. The women are dressed in Katherine Hepburn-style trousers.

It's early spring. Eucalyptus trees give a hint of the location, and the visible mid-section of an airplane tells the rest. These are all pilots, on a visit to the "Waikiki of the West" also known as Capitola-by-the-Sea.

Another Ed Webber photograph shows a half dozen people resting in Adirondacks and lounge chairs in front of a clubhouse. Planes are grouped in the distance along Runway 20. This is the Santa Cruz-Capitola Airport, managed by Esther Rice and her late husband, Russell, from 1945 until 1954.

Images in the Rice scrapbooks illustrate this region's aviation history and also give meaning to a time that's quite special in Capitola's past. These were years prior to the city's incorporation. It was just before the founding of the Begonia Festival, in the days when Capitola joined Soquel without the barrier of a highway in between. The spark for all these events was on the horizon, though, and could be seen coming if one chose to look in the right places. The airport was one of them.

Capitola's begonias, for example, were made famous by soaring through air long



Begonias and the airport made Capitola famous after World War II. ◊

before anyone ever thought of floating them down Soquel Creek. They were the symbols of Capitola's congeniality, small envoys of good will that were given to visiting pilots and sent out by the dozens during begonia season.

The begonia hostess was Esther Rice. Formerly Esther Fields, she was a native of Santa Cruz and well-acquaint-

decade with the daily paper and became its longtime correspondent on aviation news.

During World War II, Rice put an application at the military training center at Camp McQuaide, and soon had a new job in charge of social functions for the soldiers.

"I remember going over to the Brown Ranch in a military truck to pick begonias for an

begonia season to the Brown Ranch on Forty-First Avenue, armed with big flat cartons that would fill easily."

Back at the airport, she'd pack them a dozen each in shirt boxes saved for her by Abram's Store in Santa Cruz.

"About twelve begonias would fit in a box with a good lid," she added. "Every plane that came in would leave with

before, and sent messages of admiration and gratitude.

One letter, sent by a San Franciscan in 1946, suggested Capitola be called "Begonia Haven." Another said the writer found the unusual blooms were a novelty about town when she sent them to school with her children.

"If all the folks you have given your flower to have enjoyed them as much as we did, you are certainly responsible for spreading a lot of pleasure," wrote the note's author.

## Resort Town Turns Boot Camp

The Rices had a connection to the Browns Bulb Ranch and Dairy through their friendship with Allen Brown and his wife, Marion. Allen had a veterinary degree and was an innovator in the family's dairy business. He and Russell had

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ed with Capitola. She'd graduated from U C Berkeley in 1929, and returning home that year, won a job in the business office at a local newspaper. She married Russell Rice in 1933, continued another

officer's club dance," she recalled. "That was how I got the idea. Then when we got the airport I thought of using them as a gesture of good will and public relations. I went every Sunday morning in

a box."

Turning the pages filled with letters in the old scrapbook, Rice said most of the pilots were men who took them home to their wives. Many had never seen begonias

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**View of Santa Cruz-Capitola Airport and the "Waikiki of the West," in 1948.**

been tennis buddies in school. Marion Brooks Brown and Esther Rice became close friends in college.

Both couples knew the local resort as Camp Capitola and were familiar with Camp McQuaide when it was first established just east of Depot Hill. From the beginning it had intriguing possibilities as an air field.

The camp was settled on Hihn's field in 1922. Twenty-seven acres were used for six-week training camps, initially for the 63rd Regiment and then by the 250th Coast Artillery. On appointed days, the soldiers would come to each home in the village and open the windows around town to prevent damage from sound of cannon blast.

A few years later, in 1926, a glider club was formed at Capitola. Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau Advisor Henry Washburn, who lived nearby, was often seen towing a glider along the cliffs with his big old Cadillac.

Pilots and interested entrepreneurs had dreams of a permanent airfield at Capitola even before locals began to bellyache about Camp McQuaide.

Another Rice collection

photo, dated April 23, 1931, portrays a distinguished gathering of townsfolk that included Washburn, the famed Santa Cruz Mayor and Boardwalk enterpriser Fred Swanton, County Surveyor Arnold Baldwin and Capitola's future first mayor Harlan P. Kessler. A Camp McQuaide hangar and a row of eucalyptus trees in the background mark the site covered today by Capitola Knolls and the subdivisions of Monterey Avenue.

there with another small airfield three years later.

Meanwhile, Hihn's field was leased to the City of Santa Cruz. The \$1 lease arrangement of 1933 allowed money to be obtained through a Work Progress Administration (WPA) project for the grading of the field, completion of the runway, and official establishment of a municipal airport.

**Airfield Dedicated in 1934**  
Almost sixty years ago, on

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Before long, ranchers were grieving louder and louder at the loss of chickens killed by the noise of the artillery blasts.

Even stronger criticism from influential Lewis Hanchett of the private El Salto estate convinced military officials it was time to move on. The annual training camp finally moved to government land near Sunset Beach in 1938. The Army reopened it

November 11 1934, the little airport started up its engines with a big air show dedication.

Festivities were sponsored by the American Legion, the builder of the airport clubhouse.

The airfield was closed during the war. Russell Rice had gone to Texas with the Civil Air Patrol, and flew border



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patrol over the Rio Grande, at times only at 50 feet off the ground.

He was glad to get back to Capitola, where he won permission to make instructional flights back and forth to San Jose, even before the war was over.

The Santa Cruz- Capitola Airport was the only local airport ready to go on V- J Day in 1945. Business immediately picked up with a flight school, a charter service and hangar rentals.

The fly- ins were initiated the following summer, and with them came begonias and Capitola's new fame as the "Waikiki of the West."

"One the fly- ins we called The Airavan," she recalled, "The first year we started from Watsonville with the Airman's Association. We went to Monterey, and greeted their pilots and gave them a gift. Then we went on to King City. By the time we got to Palo Alto and then to our place, we had 60 planes [along for the tour]."

The Rices greeted the pilots with the Hawaiian motif, complete with a stage on the back of a truck belonging to one of the pilots, and a hula dancer from a local dance school.

Along with the fly- ins and regular business, the airport at Capitola would greet breakfast flights from other airports. A group like the Vallejo Sky Harbor Dawn Patrol would fly in and would be taken right

into the village to the Kozy Cafe (now the Craft Gallery), or over to the Soquel Inn. The inn was a popular stop because it was co- owned by Edith Fykes, a well known pilot who once performed with Poncho Barnes flying circus.

Women pilots who flew with the American Air Women were among those who made frequent breakfast visits to Capitola. Esther Rice herself learned to fly in 1948, putting in about 100 hours in a little Aeronca.

"The only reason I really

learned to fly was because when I was standing watching a pilot come in for a landing, I would say, 'Oh, you're too high, slow up, slow up!' and they would ask, 'Do you know how to fly?' I would have to say 'Noooo' ... So I had to learn," she confided, "to justify my criticisms."

Even so, Rice was surprised to find a number of people were willing to ride with her when they wouldn't fly with anybody else.

She still recalls the Sunday mornings when the speaker would blare Hawaiian music and she'd call out "Let's go flying!" There might be 12 people lined up to go up for a ride that cost \$3 per couple.

When the Cabrillo Highway cut between Capitola and Soquel in 1948, it sliced off 200 feet of the airport runway. But the planes continued to come, sometimes with celebrated visitors. One gathering that returned for 3- 4 years was the Falconiers, a group of Walt Disney artists and studio staff. They toured the begonia gardens, Big Trees and the Mystery Spot, courtesy of the pilots.

**New Era for Capitola**

The Rices were well-acquainted with Brad Macdonald and the Improvement Club activities that led to Capitola's Incorporation. They all worked on the Gay Nineties celebration of 1949 and its

schedule of events that made it the forefather of the Begonia Festival. Macdonald, as owner of the Shadowbrook, also offered some innovative transportation of his own for guests willing to take a ride from the airport to his restaurant.

Traveling by amphibious jeep known as the River Taxi, Macdonald would splash down the creek from the Shadowbrook and on up the hill to the airport. After dinner, his guests would be driven back to their planes for the trip home.

Although airport life was busy, Rice never lost her love of writing. Issues of *In Flight Magazine*, published at the Watsonville Press under editorship of Walter Bohrer, always included "Snap Rolls From Santa Cruz," authored by Rice, listing airport comings and goings.

The Rices always knew, however, the lease at the Santa Cruz- Capitola Airport might not last forever.

"We never had any running water," she explained. "We operated there nine years and never had water, because we didn't have a longterm lease on it. The Hihns gave us a reasonable rent at \$100 a month, but we never knew if they might find a better deal."

Finally, in 1954, the decision was made to lease the airport property to strawberry growers who wanted the land for five years. The Rices, who ran two airports since taking the lease on Sky Park in Scotts Valley in 1951, shifted their operation there. They continued to run Sky Park until they subleased it in 1965 for two years.

People driving or walking the neighborhoods between Monterey and Park avenues, near the freeway, may now begin to look at these places differently. Rather than a collection of fairly new homes, one might catch a flash impression of an old Stinson coming in for a landing and a box- lid full of begonias. □

Photos by Ed Webber  
Photography



The airport lost 200 feet of runway when Highway One was built in 1948.