



Manager Vern Ackerman stands in front of the airport office building.

airport, which stayed under Navy authority until March, 1946. "I flew the last Navy plane out of here and the first civilian plane in," he recalled.

The terminal was a rickety old wood building, which stood until the present building was built in 1974.

In the nearly 40 years the airport has been operating, there have been two fatal crashes, both attributable to pilot error. "One was a crop-duster doing aerobatics," Ackerman said.

The physical layout of the airport is a factor in the good safety record, Ackerman said. The runways are long, and there are no mountains to hinder the approach patterns.

"Our safety record isn't all luck, though," Ackerman said. "Somehow I like to think we managed the place properly."

Ackerman admits to running the airport with an iron hand. "I have strict rules," he said. "I don't permit violations of FAA regulations. A lot of pilots don't like me, but maybe that's why we have a good safety record. I don't tolerate monkey business. It's not a loosely run airport."

Ackerman said increasing air traffic shouldn't endanger the safety of the airport, although he thinks a control tower will eventually be needed.

While there are a few pilots who don't always obey the rules, the vast majority of them are concerned about safety, Ackerman said. "Most of them are sensible people."

While flying is serious business, there are moments of levity. In the 50s, before "Watsonville" was stenciled on the ground, a pilot flew in here one foggy morning.

"He walked into the pilot's station and said he was going on to Watsonville when the fog lifted," Ackerman said. "He thought he was in Gilroy."

Not long after that, a Marine pilot landed at Watsonville. "He called me over," Ackerman recalled, "and said, 'I'm a little confused. I know I'm somewhere NORTH of San Francisco.'"

After 33 years on the job, Ackerman said he still enjoys it. But there was a time when he felt differently.

That was in 1964, when he resigned. When asked why he quit, Ackerman pondered the question, then said, "I guess I just got fed up."

But a year later, City Manager Tom Rowan decided to replace the man who had replaced Ackerman. Rowan asked Ackerman to return, and Ackerman accepted the invitation. "I frankly regretted that I had resigned."