## Watsonville Airport 's enjoying a boom

By LANE WALLACE

When Vern Ackerman became its manager in 1946, Watsonville Airport was home base for 17 planes - a number Ackerman knew would increase in the

coming years.

"I thought we might eventually have 100 planes based here," recalls Ackerman, who is still airport manager. But today, the airport is home to 187 planes and there's a waiting list of 160. "I had no idea when I started here that the aircraft industry would grow so much," Ackerman recalls. "Now I can not only envision the day when we'll have 500 planes based here, I know the day will

.That day is still a few years away, (Ackerman estimates 20), but there are other improvements planned in the first half of the 80s.

"I would envision having a commuter airline based here within five years,' Ackerman said. Commuter airlines have become increasingly popular since the federal government de-regulated the airlines in 1978, a move which allowed the major airlines to have competitive fares and drop unprofitable routes.

When the major airlines eliminating or reducing their flights to such cities as Bakersfield, Santa Barbara, Monterey and Fresno, the commuter airlines moved in.

The commuter airlines increasing service to cities with smaller airports.

While the cost for a major airline to stop in small cities is prohibitive, the commuter planes (with 20 to 30 seats) can afford to do it.

Although he expects the commuter airlines to come here, Ackerman said Watsonville residents can rest assured that there will be no large commercial jets landing here. "Our runways couldn't handle them," Ackerman said.

The planes being used by commuter airlines are not big noise-makers, Ackerman said. "You'll never notice the difference between them and the planes flying in here now," he said.

If a commuter airline comes here, it

won't be the first. Southwest Airways (no relation to PSA) operated a DC-3 out of Watsonville from 1946-56.

"They were making money, Ackerman said. But as faster planes were made, the DC-3 became obsolete and Southwest Airways left Watsonville.

United Flight Service, a private company which rents planes, provides air taxi service and offers flight training, now operates out of the airport.

The airport is an essential asset to the commerce of Watsonville and the surrounding area, Ackerman feels.

He estimated the airport's presence provides a \$2 million annual boost to the local economy. The figure includes the direct revenues such as hangar rental, property taxes paid by plane owners, and indirect revenue such as the money spent by people who fly in to Watsonville, Ackerman noted.

The people who fly in to Watsonville don't always spend their money in the Pajaro Valley, Ackerman noted. "Some of them go to Santa Cruz," he said.

Ackerman's \$2 million estimate does

## success story

Back in 1965, Don Santi, then president 1,200 planes. of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, decided an antique plane show might be a nice activity for the community.

So with the help of a few others, Santi organized that first event, attracted 62 planes.

From that modest beginning has evolved the West Coast Antique Fly-In, which last year attracted more than 20,000 paying customers and more than

The event, held each Memorial Day weekend, is the second largest event of its kind in the country. Only the Oshkosh, Wisconsin, event is larger.

"The event, sponsored by the Chamber and the Northern California Chapter of the Antique Airplane Association, can't get any bigger than it is, according to Vern Ackerman, airport manager.

"We've got planes parked in places you wouldn't believe," he said.

not include the annual antique fly-in, which attracts about 1,200 to 1,500 planes and about 40,000 people in three days

"So many people think that most pilots use the airport for pleasure flying," Ackerman said, but it's not the case. We have about 70 per cent business flying and 30 percent pleasure flying and flight

"There's some corporate flying, and there's a lot of real estate people, contractors, attorneys, and people in agriculture," Ackerman said. "There's a dentist who flies in and out once a week."

Ackerman said that in the winter about 25 planes land here each weekday, a figure that goes up to 60 to 65 in the summer. On the weekends, the figures are 50 in winter and 100 in summer.

In addition to his duties as airport manager, manager, Ackerman is Granite Construction's chief pilot.

Sherell Watson, manager of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, agrees with Ackerman's assessment of the airport's value.

"An airport is extremely important to the commerce of any city of this size," Watson said. "The airport here is particularly good. It's lighted and it has good access." good access.

The airport operated in the red until about five years ago, but has been selfsufficient since then, according to city Finance Director John Radin.

The city was able to put the airport in the black because of the increased demand for hangars, Radin said. The city must borrow money to build the hangars, but the rental revenue more than covers the city's loan repayments.

In the 1978-79 fiscal year the airport's gross receipts were \$186,000, of which \$15,000 was "profit."

Any "profit" that's left over after the

bills are paid is plowed back into capital improvements, Radin noted.

When the capital improvements are revenue-producing (such as hangars to be rented) the city must pay the full cost although low-cost government loans are available.

But when the improvements deal with safety, the airport is eligible for 90 percent federal funding.

Funding has been approved for an

instrument approach system which will aid pilots who need to land when visibility is less than optimum.

Fourteen hangars will be built as soon as state money for a loan comes through, Radin said. With the long waiting list for hangars, the city will have no problem

Other improvements planned within the next four years include expansion of the paved tie-down area (now waiting for FAA approval) and resurfacing of taxiways and the secondary runway. The main runway was resurfaced about four years ago, Ackerman said.

The city has also purchased land on the west side of freeway (in line with the main runway) to preserve it as clear

That move didn't generate any controversy, but the city's current effort to buy "clear space" has created a stir.

The city wants to buy the "clear space" above about 70 homes in the Freedom area and has offered the homeowners \$1,000 each. City officials maintain that the purchase of clear space would only be to prevent the possibility of tall trees or antennas blocking the sight lines for pilots.

But residents of the area have refused to sell the clear space, voicing fears that such a move will de-value their land and give the city the right to control the height of their buildings.

One meeting between city officials and the residents has been held, but the problem hasn't been resolved.

Watsonville got an airport because Santa Cruz residents weren't willing to pay for the land needed for one.

In 1939, the Civil Aeronautics Administration (now the Federal Aviation Administration) offered to build an airport for the City of Santa Cruz if the people there would support a bond issue to buy the necessary land.

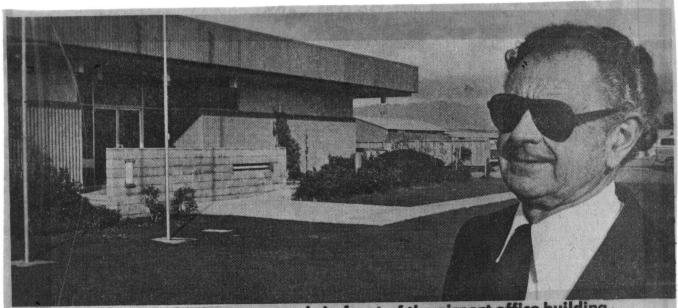
Santa Cruz voters rejected the measure, so the CAA turned to Watsonville. Voters here approved the purchase of 295 acres for \$125,000, and the CAA started building the airport

By the time the airport was ready for use, the United States was at war. The Navy leased the airport from the city and used it as an air station and training site

When the war ended in the summer of 1945, Ackerman, a Navy pilot, was named operations manager for the

WATSONVILLE

REGISTER-PAJARONIAN February 23. 1980



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."