

BISHOP AIRPORT HISTORY

by Kirt Nance

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In 1928 aviation was a fledging industry, made up of an eclectic collection of planes and pilots that probably had more airplanes than prepared landing fields. Most were using farmer's pastures or simple graded dirt strips. But like the train and automobile, the plane was to make inroads into society and usher in a new era of transportation.

The Owens Valley wasn't any different than the rest of the country, and wanted in on this new means of transportation. There were streams teeming with trout, mountains where game was in abundance, all waiting for the outdoorsman. The problem was the long trip by auto to get here from the urban areas to the south, which could take two days. With established airports in the valley not only could the area be opened to sportsmen, but a regular air service would also allow for the movement of freight and passengers.

Dialog between the City of Los Angeles and Inyo County resulted in a partnership that would see land exchanges, and cooperation that would result in the building of the first County run airports at Lone Pine, Independence, Big Pine, and Bishop. Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, C. W. Naylor, along with supervisors, A.P. Hancock and C.A. Partridge were in charge of handling the airport building operations for the County.

Mr. Partridge handled the construction on the Bishop Airport, and work commenced in March of 1928. It was noted in the March 22, 1928 issue of the Inyo Register that he "expected to be ready in 60 days to receive planes". The airport would be located, "on the Owen Larson property easterly and northeasterly from the Sunland Schoolhouse". True to his word, Mr. Partridge announced in the Inyo Register on April 26, 1928, that "the airport is well advanced and ready with first class condition to receive pilots". This issue of the Register stated that the location of the airport was two miles south of the flag pole. "The flag pole", at that time was located at the corner of Main and Line streets. East of the airport property was a water tower on which was mounted the airport beacon light. This beacon remained after the airport was closed, and because highway 395 makes a curve there, it became known as beacon curve. The tower and beacon have been gone for a long time, and for a time there was a tavern at the location known as "The Beacon Tavern"

A new airline called, Nevada Airlines proposed service to include mail, passenger, and freight, from Reno through Bishop and on to Los Angeles. This was to be the first established airline to service the Owens Valley, and looked pretty promising as its chief pilot was Roscoe Turner. Mr. Turner had made a name for himself as a movie stunt pilot, and as a promoter of Gilmore Oil products. The trademark of the oil company was a lion, so he acquired a real lion and flew from town to town advertising Gilmore aviation oil products. He also held the coast to coast speed record carrying passengers, using the same plane that he would be using for his airline, which was the Lockheed Vega. The trip from Reno to Los Angeles would take four hours in the four passenger plane, and cost \$ 60.00.

The runways at the Sunland location however were not long enough to handle the Lockheed Vega safely. Extensions and upgrades to this airport were not feasible, and a new airport location was required. The new site would be two miles east of the town, on the former property of the Symons ranch and the Harry Shaw ranch. Nevada Airlines request specified length and width of runways, and also that they be oiled to cut dust.

The runways were to be 100 feet wide, by 2500 feet long, and would consist of a main runway and a cross wind runway. The Gilmore Oil Company was the high bidder for the

oil to tame the dust. It would take 1468 barrels at \$3.24 to complete the project. According to the Sept. 5, 1929 Inyo Register, a Capt. Herne who was reported to have experience in airport building was hired along with engineer Paul Rich to head up the job.

The field was completed and ready by Sept. 18, 1929. The quick completion from inception to being able to receive aircraft at these early fields was mainly because; essentially what you had was just the runways. The construction did not include navigational aids, terminals; landing lights etc. Fuel when requested would be brought out from town.

On Sept. 21, 1929 the new Bishop Airport had its official opening. Roscoe Turner arrived in the Lockheed Vega with the inscription on its side, "Fastest in the World", the very plane that he had set the cross continent record of 19 hours. After his arrival Capt. Turner began giving rides down to Mt. Whitney. According to the Inyo Register, "some folks decided to stay at a lower level for their ride, as the altitude caused some to become ill".

Also on hand for the activities was Miss Bobbie Trout, who held at the time more aviation records than any other woman flyer. Of interest, aviatrix Miss Evelyn "Bobbie" Trout died at 97 on Jan. 24, 2003. (For those who would like to read more about her many accomplishments, there is book about her listed in the reference section of this report.)

Also on hand for the dedication, were planes of the U.S. Army Air Force, from March Field in Riverside Calif. The military had enjoyed the Owens Valley and the recreation it offered for some time, a connection which continues today. At the end of the activities, all participants were treated to a dinner at the Kittie Lee Inn by the American Legion. Kittie Lees was located where Whiskey Creek Restaurant is now found in Bishop.

The fanfare and excitement over the first airline venture into the valley was short lived. Nevada Airlines ceased operations early in 1930, citing high operating cost and the small load capacity of the Vega. Although a fast dependable airplane, it just didn't have the freight or passenger capacity to make it as an airliner, like perhaps a plane such as the Ford Trimotor of the time.

This airline venture may have ended, but the age of aviation was here to stay. Aircraft were beginning to be more reliable and great strides were being made. The airports of the valley were seeing more planes arriving in the area. Along with the travelers and sportsmen, came the "barnstormers", and other daredevils of the air anxious to show their skill in this "new fangled contraption". This started something new to the airports, the air show. Some were organized events, others just pilots wanting to show their skill. In 1931, there was an air show at the Bishop Airport that not only had flying demonstrations, but also a parachute jump. According to the Inyo Register, "the jump was to be performed by a Walter Cahill, and he was to jump over town and land at Main and Line streets". "Cahill jumped at 2000 feet and landed in George Romes yard...He missed Main Street by some distance, but that was not material as he also missed wires and buildings".

In 1932 the Bishop Airport was the backdrop for the production of a movie. The Owens Valley had long been used as an area to shoot movies, as it continues to be even today. The movie was not so unique in that the scenes were shot at the airport, but that it launched the career of a famous stunt pilot. The movie was "Air Mail", and starred Ralph

Belamy and Pat O'Brien. One of the scenes required a plane to fly through the open door of a hangar and then out through the opposite side. This was a feat that the members of the Stunt Pilots Assn., did not want to attempt. A young upstart pilot by the name of Paul Mantz that had been trying to get into stunt flying agreed to do the job. He flew a Travel Air biplane through the hangar with only six inches to spare, thus insuring himself a chance to become a member of that elite group. He went on to become famous and flew in many, many films, until being killed in the making of the movie, "Flight of the Phoenix". One of the requirements when making a movie is the taking of photographs as well as motion pictures. The "stills," as they are referred to were shot for this movie as usual, however they were faced with taking the film maybe all the way back to Los Angeles, for processing. Local resident Mrs. Fendon told me that her father had a dark room and allowed the movie folks the use of it. She has kindly shared those great pictures with me.

By 1934 the airport at Bishop, as well as the others in the valley remained pretty basic with spartan facilities. Jim Doherty's, dad who owned Joe's Garage in Bishop, had an old Buick sedan which he had modified by cutting away the rear portion, and installing a wooden deck so that the vehicle could be used like a pick-up. Fastened to the deck were two 55-gallon drums containing aircraft fuel. Out at the Bishop Airport was a small tin shack, and a telephone. When a plane came in requiring fuel, the pilot would call the garage and Jim and his dad would go out and hand pump fuel into the plane.

While Bishop was involved in this new growing field of aviation, its small neighbor to the south was not to be outdone. Big Pine had a very active aviation group called the Sierra Aero Club. On May 31, 1937 they put on an air show and air race; which included a parade, rides, parachute jumps and a dance. The main event was a cross-country race from Los Angeles to Big Pine for 300 hp or smaller airplanes. There was also a five-mile closed circuit race for 50 hp, or less airplanes. This activity took place at the field just south of town, and must have been high drama indeed.

By 1939 the country was beginning to concern itself with the war in Europe, and what those ramifications would mean for the United States. Draft registration numbers were issued, and the government requested an inventory of the nation's usable airfields, for the National Defense Program. The fields listed in this inventory were given class designations as 1, 2, 3, emergency, etc. A class-one field was the highest and meant that the field could be put to direct use by the military without too much updating. Bishop and Lone Pine airports were given class-one ratings. Independence was listed as an emergency field. In those days there was a small field at Owenyo, which was also listed as an emergency field. Its primary use at the time was by the movie industry, as planes could move in and out from there without disturbing filming in near by Alabama Hills. I could not find any designation for the field at Big Pine, and assume it was not considered. Activity at the various airports went on as usual, kind of the "calm before the storm".

Although, I'm sure no one could imagine what was in store in the the next few months and years. At Lone Pine, a flying school was set up utilizing Curtis Robin airplanes, a high-wing, two-seater for instruction. In Bishop the Soaring Club was busy building a sail plane in the Joseph's warehouse, and the Bishop High School started aviation mechanic's course. Coffee sold for .13cents a pound, and a new Chevrolet could be purchased for \$695.00. Yes, it was the calm.

In early 1941, the Government contacted Inyo County and awarded over \$500,000 to update valley airports, so they would fall into National Defense Airway standards. Also in this package were monies and instructions to build an airport at Manzanar. This new airport would have runways 5300 feet in length, and would include runway lights and a beacon. The City of Los Angeles (DWP) would lease the land to the government for fifty years, and it would be for use by the public until such time that it should be needed by the military. According to the United States Department of the Interior, publication, *Manzanar National Historic Site*, 619 acres were leased; however the report claims the lease was never recorded. The USDI report goes on to say, "On May 24, 1956 Inyo County notified DWP that it was abandoning the airport." "The wind sock and tower were removed and the runways were x out." It should be noted that the Manzanar airport had no connection to the Manzanar Internment Camp.

When Pearl Harbor was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941, the Manzanar airport project as well as the updates to other valley airports was just under way. There were labor problems, and construction delays at all job sites. But, according to the Inyo Register, on Dec. 12, 1941, "All the problems that had been delaying work on the airports had been hastily taken care of." The pressure was on not only to finish these fields and others in the U.S., but to start an extensive pilot training program. Up until WW II, the country was only graduating about two hundred pilots a year. A program was started called the "Civilian Pilot Training" program. Students would learn to fly in small aircraft such as Piper Cubs, Porterfields and others. They would get their training from civilian instructors, and receive ground school instruction at local high schools and colleges.

The Owens Valley airports became very important in this effort, as the area was well suited, having good flying weather for many months of the year. Also it became valuable when the government closed all the private fields for up to 150 miles inland from the coast due to the war. Movie stunt pilot, Paul Mantz, mentioned earlier, also was caught up in this forced move. He moved his pilots and planes to Lone Pine, where he shared the field with the CPT program pilots, and according to news paper reports invested \$10,000 in airport improvements. The Bishop Airport at this time had 60 CPT pilots in training.

The Feb. 6, 1942, Inyo Independent noted that daylight savings time would start... "with an hour out of everyday, two legal holidays and only four complete weeks, poor February will go by like an Army interceptor, what's this world coming to?" By mid-May 1942, all airports were very busy with CPT programs. Manzanar Airport was the largest in the valley, and would see planes as large as the B-24 landing there as crews geared up for the big push in the war in Europe.

One of these CPT pilots was Marvin Haggard, who shared the following. "In 1942 I was in Visalia Junior College and they were offering a flying course called the civilian pilot training (CPT). It was after the attack on Pearl Harbor that our government decided to restrict private flying here in the San Joaquin Valley, so the college made the decision to send the students to the Owen Valley to finish their flying course. The flying group (about 20 of us in all) went to Bishop on a bus and stayed at the Kitty [sic] Lee Inn."

"We had three aircraft, Interstate High Wing, 2 place, 65 H.P., and no radio. We learned to take off, climb, fly straight and level. The aircraft had the three basic instruments: altimeter, air speed, turn and bank indicator. We learned to do power on, power off, stall.

Bishop as I remember is about 6000 feet above sea level. At 9000 feet the air gets pretty thin so a 65 h.p. Interstate would not climb very fast. If we took off the runway heading south, we flew right over the cemetery. A good reminder to stay on the ball."

Mr. Haggard and several of his friends returned to the Owens Valley after graduation, and worked for the contractor that was bringing the Bishop Airport up to military specifications. He remembered renting a room in town for \$10.00, and helping to construct the beacon tower and also working out on the runway construction. Of interest, is that during runway reconstruction in the 1990's, a piece of concrete with M. Haggard scratched on it was found. He went on to become a pilot in the Navy during the war, flying PB4Y-1, patrol bombers.

June of 1942, the operation of the Bishop Airport was transferred to the Department of the Army. The CPT program was ordered to move to other locations in the valley; however those pilots with 200 or more hours were told that they would be hired by the Army to train military pilots. Lone Pine and Independence airports already were operating at capacity and could not handle a further influx of trainees. An idea for a new airport in the Big Pine area was put forth by the Big Pine Civic Club, and a Mr. Cook. The new airport was built across the Owens River off the end of Stuart Lane. According to a person who took CPT training there, it was nick-named "Cyclone" field. Possibly the reason was the winds that blow out of Big Pine canyon?, one thing for sure it had to be a tough assignment with the wind, blowing dust, the heat and cold of winter. The field today is partially visible, after you negotiate a rough dirt road that starts just east of highway 395 on highway 168.

There were fields at the other end of the valley in the Olancho area that also were involved in flight training, however not connected to the CPT programs. These were involved in private instruction to local citizens interested in learning to fly. The Olancho field is still visible, but the former Adamson field just to the east on highway 168 is no longer visible. It does indicate, the war aside, the impact that the airplane had in those early days of aviation. The skies above the valley must have been a busy place indeed.

The improvements, and upgrades to the Bishop Airport were complete, and it was now designated Bishop Army Air field. According to information obtained from the Department of the Air Force, Historical Section: "It came under the jurisdiction of the Tonopah Army Air Field on 16th of December 1942. The personnel at that time were sent from the Muroc Army Air Field. It remained on this status for just one short month, when it was replaced under Muroc's jurisdiction. Finally on the 18th of September 1943, Tonopah Army Air Field again took over the command."

"For three months, from January 1943 to March 1943 and again for the same period in 1944, Minter Field, Calif., used the field for basic training. Air corps personnel under the command of Tonopah Army Air Field continued to carry on the housekeeping duties and aircraft servicing."

"On 23 September 1943, the entire personnel from Tonopah moved to Bishop while reconstruction of the Tonopah Army Air Field was being conducted. On 1 November 1943, the personnel returned to Tonopah."

“Since that time only a handful of enlisted men have been kept on D/S at Bishop from Tonopah for housekeeping duties only. Although the field is open for transient aircraft, no servicing is handled.”

One of the persons assigned to Bishop from Tonopah was Howard M Davis. “I was assigned to the team as company clerk, our highest ranking NCO was a S/Sgt who ran the base as COs, assigned to run the field never remained more than a month or two. No cook was provided as we drew per-diem pay to eat in town so we assigned a man that added duty and ran our own mess hall. We had venison for a couple of days as a result of an “attack” at the main gate one night. The guard on duty heard a movement in the bushes off to the side of the shack and challenge the “intruder” to the password, when he received no answer, and when the movement grew louder he fired. Since he followed military procedures, we figured the meat should not be wasted. When conditions in Europe got critical (the Battle of the Bulge) in mid 1944 half our men (including me) were transferred to the East Coast staging area and shipped overseas to England. When I returned home in November of 1945 the base was closed. The buildings were used for homes and the dispensary became the town hospital, (my second child was born there). The golf club used the mess hall as a club house when they had the golf course there and the hangar and tower was leased to an operator who ran the airport for the County.”

Although Bishop was the only designated Army Air Field, it did not take away from the continued pilot training at other valley airports. Lone Pine Airport was a very busy place with both military and civilian pilots training there. According to the Inyo Independent, April 16, 1943, “125 Naval cadets are awarded primary wings at graduation exercises and marched in review on the grounds of LPHS.

In the forties a fighter was designed for the Navy and Marines, designated the F-4U Corsair. It was a large rugged dependable aircraft, destined for use aboard aircraft carriers. Because of the short runways aboard carriers, planes that landed on them had a retractable hook located in the tail that would snag cables that stretched across the deck, bringing them to a stop before they ran off into the sea, a system which is still in use today. The Corsair however, had a design problem that would cause the tail of the aircraft to bounce on these carrier landings, which caused the hook to miss the cable and the plane to abort the landing. The plane was pretty much regulated to Marine units operating off land based fields.

Bishop Army Air Field, in May of 1944, was to play a big part in the handling of this landing problem, when 200 Marine pilots and crews arrived to practice bounce training. The corsair went on to be used both through the rest of WWII, and later in Korea operating from carrier decks.

With the end of the war in 1945, most of the valleys airports returned to civilian flight training, and flights to bring sportsmen and vacationers to the area. Bishop Airport was still under the jurisdiction of the military, even though no activity had been going on there for over a year. Locals complained to Congressman Clair Engle’s office that the public use of the airport was being denied. The Congressman was not aware of the

situation, but was able to get the folks involved to act on it, and in November of 1945, the Department of the Army declared the field surplus, and returned it to the County.

All of the valleys airports, as well as the people of the Owens Valley can be very proud of their contribution to the war effort. A lot of pilots got their primary and basic training here. Some met and married local girls and returned to live here after the war. All of the ones that I have talked with enjoyed their time spent here, giving the main reason the interaction with the residents of the Owens Valley.

It is hoped that this report gives an idea of the early history of aviation in the Owens Valley. It was an era where fantastic strides were made in the aviation industry, the likes of which we shall never see again.