

Iowa City Municipal Airport

“This is the worst place I ever flew from”, declared Thomas S. Baldwin after a short trial flight over the Johnson County Fair Grounds east of Iowa City on October 11, 1910. “You would have to give me \$20,000 instead of \$2000 to fly over the city”, he continued, “and I hardly think I would want to do it for that.”

Late the following afternoon Baldwin soared over the trees and stables which surrounded the fair grounds but a stiff breeze forced him down a quarter of a mile away. Dissatisfied with such a performance the angry crowd was granted wind checks. The next day Baldwin again took off, this time flying about three miles at a height of a hundred and fifty feet. It was probably the first successful airplane flight in Iowa! The cheers which greeted the “Air King” had barely subsided when he again took off, flew into the top-most branches of a tree, wavered a moment, and then, caught in the “maelstrom jaws” of an air pocket, crashed into some cattle sheds and fell. The plane was a complete wreck, but Baldwin escaped with minor bruises.

It is doubtful if the most air-minded witness of this spectacular flight would have predicted the astonishing development of aviation during the next twenty years. Certainly none would have dreamed

that a decade later Iowa City would become a strategic point on the transcontinental air mail route and boast one of the best airports in the midwest.

The World War taught the practicability of air transport. In 1917 Congress appropriated \$100,000 for the establishment of air mail service and authorized the War Department to furnish such planes as it no longer needed. On May 15, 1918, after a number of spasmodic exhibition mail flights, regular service was inaugurated between Washington and New York. Mail planes commenced flying between New York and Chicago on July 1, 1919.

During the following winter it was decided to extend the air mail service from Chicago to Omaha and on December 29th the Post Office Department telegraphed to Postmaster Max Mayer concerning the "length, breadth, and location of aviation field used by army near your city". The Department was "considering its use temporarily for mail flights to Omaha". After a hasty meeting with the officers of the Chamber of Commerce and a visit to the field Mayer wired: "Aviation field one and one-half miles southwest of post office west of river on Red Ball highway. Seven-tenths mile from street car. City phone in farm house. Transportation available at post office. Property of W. J. Benjamin. Field 440 yards square. Four-way landing, no trees or brush. No building for airplane. Temporary field only. Wire markings desired. Aviators report field first class."

About 1918 commercial flyers had discovered this level tract of pasture land and occasionally rented it to take up passengers. A few landings were also made by transient craft. On January 3, 1920, a special representative of the postal service, Herbert Blakeslee, arrived to inspect the local field. Blakeslee was delighted with the Benjamin tract, declaring it to be the best site for a field then in use by the air mail service and promptly recommended it as the central landing field between Chicago and Omaha.

A trial flight was made over the course by pilots Walter J. Smith and Farr A. Nutter two days later. Nutter followed the North Western railroad out of Chicago but, aided by his maps, he cut diagonally across country and arrived at Iowa City at 11:19 A. M., a few minutes ahead of Smith, who followed the Rock Island. Smith hopped off for Omaha with Nutter in the mail pit at 2:07 and completed the journey without mishap. After this trail-blazing flight, plans were promptly made to transport a regular consignment of mail on the eighth of January. Planes were to leave Chicago and Omaha at about the same time, stopping at Iowa City en route.

Early in the morning on January 8th a group of men gathered in the Benjamin pasture on the outskirts of Iowa City. Bonfires were lighted, and, like the Millerites of the "fabulous forties", they stood gazing steadfastly into the sky, waiting for evidence of a new kind of millenium. Several hours passed. Anxious and apprehensive, the men turned

away from the fire and were about to go home when suddenly, out of the misty haze, a low droning sound was heard. A moment later an airplane came zooming out of the sky, roaring noisily as it circled the field, landed perfectly, and taxied up to the little group of men who had awaited its arrival so anxiously. The first leg of the new Chicago-Omaha air mail had been successfully flown! Iowa City was the only landing in the State on this epochal trip.

The pilot on this pioneer flight, Walter J. Smith, leaped from the cockpit and ran to the fire to thaw out and enjoy a light lunch. Leaving Chicago at 8:29 the intrepid airman reached Iowa City at 10:17, thereby maintaining the "terrific speed" of a hundred and twenty miles an hour. Near DeKalb, Illinois, he had encountered a blinding snowstorm which forced him to descend to within five hundred feet of the earth to guide his plane over the frozen hills and prairies of Illinois and Iowa. Included in the four hundred pounds of mail were urgent dispatches to the mayor of Omaha, to General John J. Pershing, and other government officials. Meat for a banquet to be given in honor of Pershing was also aboard. Exactly half an hour after landing, pilot Smith made a perfect take-off, veered to the north, and then cut directly across country in the direction of Omaha where he arrived a few hours later.

The plane from Omaha failed to reach Iowa City. Although pilot Farr Nutter started at the same time Smith left Chicago, he encountered a stiff wind

all the way and was forced to land thirty miles east of Des Moines.

The first air mail dispatched from Iowa City was picked up by Smith on his return from Omaha. A ten pound pig was forwarded by Robert N. Carson to the manager of the Congress Hotel. Properly decorated for the occasion, the distinguished visitor from the tall corn State attracted much attention from newspaper reporters and camera men. But his popularity was all too short. A few days later Iowa City's first aerial mail played an important rôle at a dinner attended by Eddie Rickenbacker, the ace of American aviators. It was not until May 19th that pilot W. N. De Wald brought the first official consignment of air mail for Iowa City. It was a moving picture film destined for Maquoketa.

While hopes ran high at Iowa City the authorities at Washington suddenly decided that Des Moines should be the permanent intermediate station between Chicago and Omaha. William J. McCandless, superintendent of the Chicago-Omaha division, informed Iowa City business men that the airport would remain at Iowa City for at least ninety days, when the introduction of double-engined planes would permit a change in the location of the field. He admitted that Iowa City was better situated and had the advantage of an established airport.

Unfortunately, the niggardly appropriations meted out by Congress made it impossible for the Post Office Department to purchase or lease fields through-

out the midwest. It was hoped that each community would solve this problem. Iowa City was especially cordial to the various officials sent to inspect the field and manifested a genuine desire to coöperate in every possible way. Chris Yetter was made chairman of a committee of the Chamber of Commerce to secure funds sufficient to lease a landing field. Local business men responded cheerfully, each pledging sums of from two to five dollars a month. Bids were then sought on a number of prospective sites but the Benjamin tract was deemed the best and an agreement was drawn up whereby the Chamber of Commerce leased an eighty-eight acre flying field for \$2200 a year. No difficulty was ever experienced in the payment of an airport pledge. In 1922 the government took over the lease and in 1926 the field was reduced to sixty-eight acres and the rent cut down to \$1500.

The air field was all bustle during the first few months of 1920. M. K. Riddick was appointed manager and Robert R. Vogt of Iowa City was named his assistant. Riddick resigned after serving only one month and Hugh S. Long succeeded him. Regular mail service began between Chicago and Omaha on May 15, 1920. Piloted by W. N. De Wald, the east-bound plane arrived at Iowa City in safety but officials were a bit disturbed when the west-bound plane failed to make an appearance. Two days later a report from Ottumwa told of the landing of pilot C. Ray Benedict near that city. He had been blown off

his course, forced to land in a muddy field, and was unable to take off for several days. Poor marking facilities and landing fields, together with the archaic machines in use, served as deterring factors in the early annals of air mail history.

Despite such handicaps the Iowa City airport was particularly fortunate for there was no serious mishap either to planes or passengers. Only a few minor accidents occurred. Thus, on May 25, 1920, a machine turned turtle on hitting a rough piece of ground. Pilot McLaughlin unbuckled himself from the plane and stepped out with a smile, only slightly shaken. On his return McLaughlin again "cracked up". He continued to Chicago from whence he was sent to Washington to receive "further instructions" in the art of flying.

But a number of notable characters who were prominent in the early history of the Iowa City airport lost their lives in the service. On May 13, 1920, two days before the inauguration of regular air mail, the Iowa City airport lost a warm friend and supporter when Superintendent William J. McCandless was killed while inspecting the route from Omaha to Iowa City. Forced to land, a heavy gust of wind struck the DeHaviland plane in which he was flying, swept it into a tree, and wrecked it.

Genuine regret was felt when news was flashed to Iowa City of the death of Walter J. Smith at Indianapolis on September 8, 1922. Thousands had witnessed the flight and subsequent crash of Iowa

City's pioneer air mail scout on the preceding day at the Indianapolis Fair Grounds. When the Post Office Department asked for an appropriate name for the airport the local Chamber of Commerce voted to honor the name of pilot Walter J. Smith.

The inauguration of night flying between Chicago and Cheyenne on July 1, 1924, ushered in the most novel and thrilling phase of the air mail service. Hundreds saw the arrival of pilots Randolph Paige and D. C. Smith at 8:20 p.m. an hour ahead of schedule. But Smith Field had been the scene of a night flight as early as September, 1920, when residents of Iowa City gazed with "up-craned necks and distended eyes" at pilot Farr A. Nutter's spectacular flight from Williamsburg, Iowa, to the local field. The need of a regular uninterrupted transcontinental flight led to the installation of lighted skyways by the Post Office Department.

Smith Field was equipped with a fifty foot tower on which two powerful beacons revolved. One of these was of eight million candle power, while the other, to be used in foggy, stormy weather, was five hundred million candle power. A half billion candle power floodlight for use in night landing was also installed. In addition to these, a series of lights placed a hundred feet apart outlined the field. With this equipment installed Smith Field became one of the best night flying fields in the midwest.

Meanwhile a canvas tent had served two winters as a repair shop, while neither the Chamber of Com-

merce nor the national government appropriated funds for a hangar. However, when Iowa City became the terminus for the eastern division of the transcontinental air mail service in September, 1922, the Post Office Department advertised for bids for the erection of a hangar sixty-six by one hundred feet in size. The lower portion of the new building was made of cement blocks and a trussed roof allowed the storage of five mail planes.

Telegraph and telephone communication was not entirely practicable and one of the first improvements on the local field was the installation of a radio plant. By this means the air mail stations were able to keep in close communication with the progress of each plane and any mishap or change in schedule could be quickly communicated to the proper authorities. Smith Field was the first airport in Iowa to possess a radio station which made possible the issuance of instructions and the expeditious transaction of official business. Later a waiting room and general office building was erected.

When the Post Office Department adopted the policy of contracting with commercial companies for the transportation of air mail, a new situation arose. The work of the Post Office Department was then transferred to the newly created Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce, which has since supervised the selection and improvement of the landing fields, the extension of lighted skyways, the licensing of pilots and mechanics, and the per-

formance of other details arising from air transportation.

The rapid strides in aviation, the efforts of other cities to obtain their own airports with none of the advantages which Iowa City already possessed, the presentation of the field equipment by the government to the city, the knowledge that the lease would not be renewed, and the realization of the sheer folly of letting slip so valuable a property after maintaining it for almost ten years led to a spirited campaign for municipal ownership of the airport.

On May 27, 1929, by a vote of 1916 to 757, the people of Iowa City approved of a bond issue of \$70,000 for the purchase and development of a municipal airport. The city council promptly appointed an airport committee composed of W. L. Bywater, Jacob Van der Zee, and Lou H. Kaufman. A topographical map of Smith Field was prepared for the State Railroad Commissioners, and under the authority of a new State law a hundred and ninety-two acres including the old air field was purchased for \$56,610.50. Within one brief decade, a pasture from which cattle had to be driven whenever a plane arrived was transformed into a municipal airport.

Only \$12,000 remained in the treasury to make the improvements needed to give Smith Field a first class rating. An expert from the United States Department of Commerce recommended using this sum on the original sixty-eight acres but such a policy seemed short-sighted. W. L. Bywater finally sug-

gested that financial aid be secured from the Boeing company in return for the free use of the field. Negotiations were opened at once and on May 7, 1930, a fifty-year contract was signed.

The city agreed to expend its remaining \$12,000 for "grading, draining, installing lighting equipment, and other improvements" while the company agreed to use a special fund for the same purpose. The company also agreed to "maintain the landing field in a state of reasonable condition and repair for safe landing", and supervise and manage said landing field and airport for and under the direction of the city. The company agreed to collect all fees due the city, keep the office and hangar repaired, operate and maintain both old and new lighting equipment at its own expense, and give a monthly report to the city council on the management and operation of the airport. In return the company was given exclusive use of the hangar and office, and free use of the field after the installation of the two improved runways which are to be a hundred and fifty feet wide by twenty-five hundred feet long.

Runways, a new hangar to be used exclusively for repairs to their own machines and those which alight at the field, together with minor improvements will involve the expenditure of almost \$90,000. When these changes are completed in October, 1930, the Iowa City Municipal Airport will represent a total investment of approximately \$200,000.

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