

## History of Madison's "First Airport" at Eken field

Joan Phelan

The farm of the Eken brothers, Ole and Thomas, was the location of the Madison Airport for several years until the outbreak of WWII when Truax Field was established. The Eken brothers owned farmland north of Commercial Ave and North Street ran through their property which was in Burke Township until July 1927 when it became part of Madison.

Some have questioned whether Eken Field was the location of Madison's "first" airport.

However, newspaper articles shed some light on the subject. The first mention of an airplane at Eken Field was on Aug 12, 1924 when Walter Bullock, a Minneapolis world war aviator arrived for a week's stay with his Standard airplane. He was going to give passenger rides and was negotiating to make a series of aerial photos of Madison. At the time, Ringling and Barnum and Bailey circus was appearing at the Eken tract on North Street. Mr. Bullock's plane was parked near the University but he planned to place his plane on view near the circus grounds and when the circus left he was to use Eken field as a basis of operation.

An article by John Newhouse in the Wisconsin State Journal in 1943 tells of Howard Morey's airplane history. In 1925, Mr. Morey was giving instructional flights at a small field on the outskirts of Chicago. He had purchased an old WWI Jenny and during the Christmas holidays decided to drop off at Madison to see his cousin Mrs. Pim Quinn who lived on Gorham Street. At that time, landing was easy. You just picked a field and landed. The weather was nasty so Morey left the plane over winter. In the spring he picked out a farm on the Sun Prairie Road, later renamed East Washington Ave, as a base for business. Another article says that Morey purchased Penco Field in 1926 and that the following year he operated and managed Royal Airways just south east of Madison. At any rate, neither the Sun Prairie Road location nor the Royal Airport were within the Madison city limits in 1926. The Municipal Airport wasn't in the city limits until after 1941 (map of Madison).

On Sept 27, 1927, the Eken brothers sold 88 acres to Madison Airport Holding Company. The hangars were at 2520 Coolidge St at the end of the North Street Car line. At this time the field was pretty rough and there were high tension wires to contend with. In July 1926 a government airplane carrying army aviators from Chicago to Camp Sparta dug its nose into the bog at the end of North Street when a wheel of the plane caught in a hole and the propeller caught in the ground. The pilot and mechanic were uninjured and the plane continued when a new propeller was obtained. By November 1927 two one plane hangars were erected by Trachte Brothers with a contract for a six plane hangar. A power beacon and flood lights were installed on the field and Governor Fred Zimmerman was one of the first passengers. The chief pilot was Jerry Phillips, a Madison boy with a number of years of experience, who was on leave flying for the movies with Metro Goldwin Mayer. In 1928, flying lessons were being given at the field.

In 1929 several articles appeared in the Capital Times. The Madison airport had three top notch pilots as flying personnel. The flying school being operated at the airport had trained about 100 pilots and 35 had made solo flights. The United States Weather bureau at Madison said that Madison had ideal weather for aviators. The Madison airport location was rated as one of the best as there was safety in landing and convenience for the public. The airport had no obstructions such as tall buildings and chimneys and no high tension wires within the danger line on any side of the field (the accident of 1934 would involve high tension wires). Stunt flying

CP

2

was being done at the field and a local altitude record of 18,500 feet was set on July 21 by Les Smith, chief pilot at the airport, who was accompanied by Cedric Parker of the Capital Times editorial staff. It was felt that without the use of oxygen tanks that this was the ceiling. In 1930, the Madison airport was failing and in Oct of that year Orlando Corbin, a stunt pilot and circus performer, moved from Wichita Kansas to Madison to revive it. In April of 1932, Louis Schoelkopf, a pioneer Ford automobile dealer and inventor, acquired the Madison airport and convinced Orlando Corbin to move his company from Peru Indiana to Madison (aircraft history) where he set up shop and manufactured the Corben Sport airplane at the North Street Airport. In 1934, an Air Aces Air Circus was held with fancy sky riding stunts, aerial acrobatics and a delayed parachute jump. This year also held tragedy when there was a fatal plane accident. A plane flew into high tension wires at the rear of Dahle Street and bursting into flames as it plunged downward into the mud. Harold Anderson, the pilot was burned to death but his passenger Clifton DuBois who was working at the airport for flying lessons escaped. DuBois claimed there was something wrong with the plane which was owned by the airport, but Orlando Corbin who was manager of the airport could find nothing wrong. In June of 1935, "Ace" Corbin gave a free stunting exhibition and offered to "see your city from the air" for \$1.00. This same year, a long and comfortable cabin plane was available for long passenger flights for only 75 cents. Mr. Corbin left the airport in 1935 to pursue other aviation interests and was inducted into the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame in 2008. In July 1938 a Milwaukee man gave a number of exhibition parachute jumps and in September there were acrobatics and air races at the Madison airport. Also in 1938 the new Madison Municipal Airport was built and there were no longer notices of events at the airport on Coolidge St. In Sept 1938, pilots and aviation radio operators met at the Madison airport and organized the Madison Aviation Association to protest the common council's plans for the new airport and demanded commercial rights at the new airport be available to any qualified individual.

During these years, teenagers helped out at the airport in order to get rides and learn to fly. In the 1930's, John Imhoff, a teenager who lived at 2524 Dahle St, related that he took many rides in the airplanes and did some loop-de-loops. Dick Brockman whose family lived on Dunning Street remembers the two-seated propeller planes flying low over the neighborhood and the pilot leaning out of the plane and waving and of course the kids waved back.

The featured speaker at the Feb 19<sup>th</sup> meeting of the East Side History Club was Fred Leidel, age 94 and a retired UW Professor of engineering and associate dean. He was living on Upham Street and spent most of his free time while attending high school and the UW at the Madison Airport. He told many wonderful stories of helping out at the Madison Airport in order to get rides and learn to fly. Walter Blake, who was manager of the airport, was very generous with the "airport kids" and would take them up just for fun or as passengers when he was teaching a student cross-country flying. One time they went up on a moonlit Saturday night without field lights and circled the Capitol Square at low elevation and watched the shoppers around the Square. Another story that Fred told was one about the airports TravelAire three person biplane. They had a siren that could be mounted on a wing strut that was powered by a small propeller. It had a clutch that would release by pulling a cord from the front seat. It was a

3

quiet day and they wanted to drum up some passenger business. They flew to the Square and did tailspins over the Capitol. As they did, Fred pulled the cord and the siren howled. When they got back to the airport there was a policeman waiting for them. He took the siren and told them that if they wanted it back, it would be at the police station.

Airplane ride tickets were \$1 and Fred's commission was five cents. Another story was of small air shows held at the Madison Airport. His part was to unroll a roll of toilet paper and then cut it with his propeller as many times as he could before it fell to the ground. When the circus came to town (the circus was held at Eken Field right next to the airport from 1923 to 1947) the pilots would give rides first to the circus performers and then to the public.

Madison's first airport wasn't used as much after Madison Municipal Airport was built in 1938 although I remember the propeller planes sitting on the field in the early 1940's.