

An airport almost takes off in Palos Verdes

By Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto | Posted: Wednesday, August 30, 2017 4:16 pm

In a previous column, we recounted one of the first flights over the Palos Verdes Peninsula by famed French aviator Louis Paulhan in 1910.

Our next episode takes us into the 1920s and a time when rapid advances occurred in airmail delivery service, the use of private planes expanded, and passenger airline service began to change the world.

Locally, Los Angeles was well on its way to becoming the “air capital of the nation.” The Los Angeles Times reported that Los Angeles County had 50 percent more aviation activity than in any other part of the nation by the late 1920s.

California also reportedly had nearly twice as many licensed aircraft than the state of New York, with 80 percent of the licensed planes in L.A. County.

Infrastructure to support this burgeoning industry became a top priority. Surveys were conducted throughout L.A. County to identify open space and locations to accommodate various types of airfields.

In 1928, the County Regional Planning Commission found 48 possible sites and aviation fields consisting mainly of airports, testing fields, small hangars and emergency fields.

Palos Verdes, then a growing town of some 700 residents with ample open space, would host one of those fields.

The Palos Verdes “airport” opened in June 1928. Local officials welcomed three planes onto the airstrip that marked its official inauguration.

The airfield was located near the current day border of Palos Verdes Estates and Hollywood Riviera at Via Colusa and Calle de Arbolles. The Times reported the area was large enough to add “hangars, gasoline tanks machine shops and housing facilities for machines and planes” in the future if needed.

Residents who owned their own planes could use the landing strip, but local officials hoped it would provide a new air taxi service and stimulate air travel between the Peninsula and Los Angeles, San Diego and even to Santa Barbara.

Don Lawyer, sales manager of the Palos Verdes Project, proclaimed that the field would meet the anticipated local demand for these types of services.

Aero Corporation of California was supposed to operate and provide the planes for the air taxi service. The company was founded in 1926 by aviation pioneers Paul Richter, Walter Hamilton and Jack Frye (who would later become president of TWA).



Palos Verdes airport, 1928

The new Palos Verdes “airport” received national coverage. The New York Times described the air taxi service in Palos Verdes as a place “where wealthy bankers and businessmen live and play and drive sky ships to their offices and home again.”

In July 1928, Major E.H. Wilson, who had assisted Glenn Curtiss in the earliest days of aviation, expanded on the importance and vision of the airport in Palos Verdes, boasting that the city “with its unrivaled marine outlook and inspiring environment” had started to build an “adequate landing field for the common carrier of the near future.”

By 1931, plans for a grand airport and taxi service for the public were all but over. The Olmsted Brothers, who laid out and landscaped the area, reported the U.S. Army and L.A. County had experimented with the field for official purposes though ultimately they never made use of the site.

While other local cities such as Hawthorne, Torrance and Los Angeles did see airports develop and thrive, the one-time airfield in Palos Verdes was permanently grounded, leaving the Peninsula with its awe-inspiring landscape intact.

Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto are Adult Services Librarians at the Palos Verdes Library District.