

When flying machines were all the rage

A half-century and more ago, Delaware County was dotted with airfields, and planes might swoop along a street.

Feb. 9, 1992

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Special To The Philadelphia Inquirer

Delaware County has had a long-standing romance with flying machines.

Even before Charles Lindbergh soloed the Atlantic in 1927, and long before Silvio "Babe" Dignazio buzzed the Media courthouse during World War II - in a B-24 bomber, no less - planes and airfields were part of the local scene.

The county seat, for example, had a licensed landing field as far back as 1924. It is said to have been the setting for one of the nation's earliest air shows and numerous visits by barnstorming pilots.

Other fields included Buckman Airport in Chester's West End and Benedict Airport in rural Booths Corner, Bethel Township, which boasted 20 hangars in a building near Foulk and Kirk Roads.

All three were out of business by the 1950s, sold for residential development or, in the case of Benedict, an oil tank farm. Smaller back-yard runways that dotted the countryside from the Linville farm in Middletown to Bishop Road in Springfield have also disappeared.

The oldest landing "field" in the county isn't on land, and is still in business. It's the Philadelphia Seaplane Base in Essington, started in 1915 by Col. Robert Glendinning, a wealthy Philadelphian who owned a Curtiss Flying Boat.

Today, the base is owned and operated by Bob Mills, 72, whose father, Frank, was Glendinning's chief pilot, instructor and mechanic before he purchased the facility, which includes 10 acres of land, in 1936. Frank Mills died in 1940.

The Media Flying Field was just outside the borough limits in Nether Providence Township. Leased and operated by the Media Business Men's Association, it was on 50 acres on the south side of Baltimore Pike between Beatty and Turner Roads.

Media lawyer Hugh Bonner, 86, recalled recently that the field consisted of no more than a 2,500-foot dirt landing strip, a small building and a windsock on a pole. But it was "home" to a number of flying enthusiasts, instructors and a glider club that he helped to organize.

The inspiration for the field, according to records in the Media Historic Archives, is credited to C. Frank Williamson, president of the businessmen's group in 1924, and T. Elwood Allison, a member who operated a local drugstore chain.

Williamson apparently saw the promotional value of having airplanes, which then attracted great public interest, take off and land in the vicinity of the retail district. Allison owned the field and lived in a castle-like mansion that stood nearby on Plush Mill Road.

Dick Wolff, 74, of Lima, who piloted bombers during World War II, remembers the day in 1947 that he flew Santa Claus to the Media field in his two-passenger Aeronca. Children who had gathered to greet Santa became so excited, he recalled, that they almost swamped the plane.

Even greater excitement gripped Media residents one summer afternoon in 1944 when, as local businessman I. Frank Lees recounted it, "the most god-awful roar I ever heard chased workers out of their stores and offices."

"Babe" Dignazio, owner of the Towne House Restaurant in Media and an Air Force captain during the war, flew a huge four-engine B-24 Liberator down State Street en route to an airfield in Washington.

Dignazio, now 73, said the escapade brought him before a court-martial, which ultimately cleared him. He said he was transporting the bomber from England to the United States when he "flew a little off course."

Buckman Airport was laid out in the early 1930s on the west side of Highland Avenue in Chester, overlapping what is now Interstate 95. It was built and operated by Norman Smith and was designated as an airport because, unlike Media, it had a bona fide hangar and a maintenance facility.

Alfred Graeber of Springfield, whose father owned a Piper Cub J-3, recalled visits to Buckman, where the county's earliest airmail pickups took place. Graeber said children would gather just to witness the novel system.

"Post office people strung the mail bag on a special line between two poles, and the airmail plane would swoop down, hook the line and zoom away with the bag bouncing in the air," he said.

Graeber said his father, Alfred Sr., maintained a private landing strip behind the family residence at 228 S. Bishop Rd., Springfield, until 1941, when the outbreak of war forced its closing.

"The government required all licensed airstrips to have 24-hour security, and my father couldn't afford the cost, so he closed down and moved his plane to Buckman," Graeber explained.

Paul Nelson, 75, a retired pilot from West Chester, said he helped build Buckman's hangar using materials reclaimed from a trolley barn at Fifth and Penn Streets in Chester.

"I was pretty young then, and I did it for flying time rather than money," he said. He recalled that the airmail service was operated by All-American Aviation, a company founded by Wilmington flyer Richard Dupont.

Wolff, who operates Red Maple Nurseries in Lima, flew 28 bomber missions over Germany during World War II. He was the first president of the Delaware County Aviation Association in 1946, and for a time leased Benedict Airport with a partner.

"We made money on airplane rides, flying instruction, plane rentals, gas and maintenance, and did a booming business on weekends," he recalled. "The war created a tremendous interest in flying, and lots of veterans used their GI Bill to take lessons."

Wolff said rides cost \$6 per person and lessons were \$12 per hour. In those days, it took a minimum of 35 hours to obtain a flying license, he noted.

Nelson remembered that the Army captured a German helicopter during the war and shipped it to Benedict because the field was so remote. "It was a big attraction, watching them test it, because it was supposed to be secret," he said.