

# REMEMBERING ANDRAU

By John S. Halbert

"Let's go out to the airport!"

With this welcome suggestion from my dad, our family, plus anyone else who wanted to go along with us, piled into our 1939 Dodge and headed out to the edge of town to the old airport to watch the airplanes take off and land. Sometimes, we even took the dog. From the late-1940's until the mid-1950's, going out to the airport was a Sunday afternoon ritual.

But that was long ago in another state hundreds of miles from Houston.

When I moved to West Houston I was pleased to find an airport nearby that reminded me of the old airfield back in my Alabama hometown. It was called Andrau Airpark, named after the family that had established the landing field around the time of World War II.

Even though it had only a short, narrow runway, it was long enough to handle some good-sized aircraft. One time, I saw a "DC-3", an earlier-vintage airliner, parked at the terminal. A World War II-era "Lockheed Lodestar", outfitted as a luxury passenger aircraft, made its home there. Sleek private jets nestled inside other hangars.

Over the next several years, every so often, I took my pre-school son, Franky, to Andrau and, with permission of the airport manager, the two of us walked about the airport, observing the planes in their corrugated hangars. Larger hangars fronting the runway housed the private jets. The terminal building had a restaurant and flight offices, and was a nice-looking place. The people working there were cordial to us and my little boy always had a good time.

When Andrau celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a big air show, it attracted thousands of air-enthusiasts. A number of World War II-era planes flew in for the occasion and there were aerobatic demonstrations that thrilled the crowd.

But not long afterwards, rumors began circulating that the airport's days were numbered. The old airfield, comprising hundreds of acres, was the largest tract of undeveloped land in West Houston, and, sure enough, a large international developing company bought the property. Just before Christmas, 1998, Andrau closed for the last time.

A few days later, I drove to the airfield for a final visit. As I turned into the entrance road, a small plane flew off the field. A group of people and a camera crew were gathered on the runway. I had just witnessed the very last take-off from Andrau Airpark, and the occasion had been recorded on video and film.

An elderly gentleman drove up behind me and got out. He and I had the same idea: to pay one last visit to the airport. We reminisced about happier days when the airfield was a lively place. A car pulled up where we were standing and a pleasant lady emerged. She identified herself as the wife of the former airport manager. Could I visit the airport and take pictures? She smiled and motioned me past the barrier.

And so, for one last time, I walked alone around the airport with my camera and shot a long roll of film (this was before digital cameras became popular). Instead of the bustling parade of planes that had enlivened the airport for decades, the place was quiet and deserted. The old hangars all stood empty and forlorn. Trash barrels overflowed with the last refuse of the place. Here and there, rusty corrugated hangar doors creaked dismally in the breeze. A scrap of paper blew across the taxiway. Oil stains that smudged the concrete and tie-down ropes tossed aside on

the ramps offered mute evidence of wonderful airplanes that would never return.

A melancholy feeling came over me as I realized that it was all over for Andrau Airpark. Soon, bulldozers would arrive and rip up the runway that had seen so many countless take-offs and landings over the years. Cranes and trucks would complete their demolition of a piece of West Houston history.

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Now, some years later, a splendid neighborhood of expensive manicured homes line winding, rolling streets. A famous-name golf course occupies part of the big open space that once housed the airport. Many of the residents are newcomers to Houston who have no idea of the history of the land upon which their homes sit. Andrau Airpark is not only gone, but, for many, it is also forgotten.