

THE AIRPORT

By John S. Halbert

"Let's go to the airport!"

With those inviting words on countless Sunday afternoons in the late-1940's, and on into the 'fifties, my parents, my sister and I, plus anyone else who wanted to go along, piled into our big, black 1939 Dodge four-door sedan we called "Bessie Bee," and headed out to the airfield to watch the planes take off and land. It was a favorite pastime with us for many years. Sometimes, we even took the dog with us.

As we rode along toward the airport, which was about five or six miles east of town out Second Street Road, we could see, far up ahead in the distance, a vacant, two-story yellow brick building that stood all by itself and was visible for miles back down the straight, flat thoroughfare. It never seemed to get any closer or larger, until, all at once---when we were within a couple of blocks' distance from it--- it zoomed up to its actual size. We talked about this intriguing optical illusion just about every time we went out there. The number of trips we made to the airport must have totalled into the many dozens over the years.

On those drives, we usually had to stop at the traffic light where the solitary structure faced us on the opposite left corner, which gave me many opportunities to look it over. After a while, I began to admire it, even in its deserted state. The narrow, two-story building was a half-block long with square, upright lines. Although it was outdated in appearance, it was still solid and good-looking with cut stonework that went along well with its yellow brick exterior. It even had a name: "Detroit Park Building", carved in stone in Roman letters over the front entrance. The cornerstone bore the year "1925", and the name of a development company I didn't recognize. The main entrance faced the corner diagonally with stone steps leading up to it. A big picture window looked out onto the front sidewalk that ran alongside Wilson Dam Highway, and another pair stared toward the intersecting Second Street Road.

As we drove past the building on our way to and from the airport on those many Sunday afternoons, I would catch quick glimpses through the plate-glass windows into the empty interior, always wondering why such a handsome building was vacant. Many times in my pre-adolescent youth I toyed with the fanciful idea of owning it myself, and later even as an adult made a serious search to try to learn to whom it belonged, but was never able to find out who were the owners. At some point, I discovered to my amazement that it apparently had *never* been occupied from the time it had originally been built in the mid-1920's! Obviously, it had been intended for some purpose, but what had happened to cause the building to never be used?

According to the fascinating and true story that I learned much later, it had been constructed a few years after the end of the First World War as a land office for a big industrial and real estate project that never panned-out. In the mid-nineteen-twenties Henry Ford had proposed to move his entire automobile empire down from the Detroit, Michigan area to North Alabama, intending to build a seventy-five-mile-long city to be known as "Detroit Park." Miles of streets and subdivisions with Detroit, Michigan-related-names such as "Woodward Avenue", "Highland Park", and "Dearborn Avenue" were optimistically laid-out with sidewalks, street lights, fire hydrants, water lines and sewers. Ford had intended to tap nearby Wilson Dam on the Tennessee

River for electricity to run a former U.S. Government munitions plant he had earmarked to convert to a fertilizer factory.

The Ford Motor Company planned to build huge automobile plants at "Detroit Park." Henry Ford and his friend Thomas Edison actually visited the area twice in the 1920's to look over his proposed acquisitions.

But at the last minute, Washington politicians decided not to turn over the dam and the munitions plant to Ford, and that spelled the end of "Detroit Park." Thereafter, the only occupants of those vast, desolate would-have-been neighborhoods were wildlife and weeds.

We used to drive for miles past the empty streets of what was to have been a great city---except there were no buildings or people around. On our way out Second Street Road, we always drove by all those forlorn reminders of dashed hopes from decades past. As we rode along in the Dodge, mile after mile of orphaned streets and empty sidewalks silently slid by us. Out in the fields, hundreds of perfectly-preserved telephone poles stood expectantly at attention, awaiting messages that would never come; sentinel fire hydrants by the score stood on guard in the weeds, ready as always to protect homes and businesses that never came to pass. During hunting season, in the old "Detroit Park" districts it was actually possible to legally shoot wild game from a sidewalk---next to a fire hydrant---facing a paved street!

And always, as we made our passage to the airport, far up ahead, the ubiquitous yellow building always awaited us.

A mile or so beyond where the solitary building presided over its lonely country crossroads, we made a right turn and in a minute the two massive hangars of the flying-field loomed up ahead. Then, daddy swung the Dodge through another right turn and we bumped a short way up a rutted gravel road that ran past the end of the runway where a four-foot-high wire fence stood alongside the lane that marked the edge of the airport. We always stopped as close as possible to the fence, where a dozen or more other cars and a goodly number of citizens were usually on hand---a testimonial to the airport's entertainment value.

If the weather cooperated, as it usually did, we stood outside the car where we had a panoramic view of the airfield. In those days, along with the big airliners, there were always private planes taking off and landing. It was all very exciting---and gave us a good excuse to go out there often.

From the late 'forties and on into the 'fifties, 'Eastern Airlines' had a dozen or so flights each day into and out of the airport. It was not unusual for several airliners to be parked at the terminal at the same time, loading and unloading passengers. Eastern flew mostly "DC-3's", a large and popular passenger plane for those days. Just behind the cockpit windows, a bird insignia with upraised wings designated the airplane as the 'SILVER FALCON'; other bold letters proudly proclaimed the ship as being a part of 'THE GREAT SILVER FLEET'.

For all of the activity at the airport, the terminal itself was a modest aluminum-sided building nestled between the two main hangars that combined the airline ticket counter, a flight school and a tiny restaurant. Out in front was a paved ramp where the airliners loaded and unloaded passengers. Sometimes, for variety, we switched from our usual vantage point at the end of the runway to the terminal gate and watched the big airplanes turn off the runway and taxi straight toward us. At this point, the pilot usually shut down his left engine and the airliner rumbled toward us with one of its two propellers stopped---a touch of drama.

Eastern later graduated from the pre-World War II tail-dragging DC-3's to larger, more modern aircraft with tricycle landing gear that lowered the nose of the plane to where we could look at it straight-on as it taxied toward us using only one propeller---a thrilling sight, indeed

Most of the time the bigger airplanes took off coming toward us. It was exciting to watch as the big airliners, about a mile down the runway, began their takeoff roll. They started their run in silence---it always took a few seconds for the sound to reach us---then we would be rocked by the thunderous oration of the engines. A half-minute later or so, racing at takeoff speed with the monstrous twin-radial engines turning the propellers at full power, the onrushing aircraft would lift its wheels from the concrete and with a strident roar pound right over us and the cars!

On one unforgettable occasion, however, the tires of a streaking airliner coming straight at us did *not* rise at the usual spot, seemingly *unable* to take off. As we observers stared transfixed, at the last split-second, only a few dozen feet from where we were standing, the airplane finally lifted, its landing gear---only four or five feet above the ground---zoomed past only about a car-length's distance from us, the right wing barely clearing the top of our Dodge! The tricycle landing gear hurdled the top of the fence by mere inches, having just begun to retract as the plane swept by us---otherwise, the wheels in the lowered position would have plowed through the brush just beyond where we were standing, which would have surely been the end. Fortunately, no one was directly in front of the staggering airplane---had there been, they would have been gruesomely pulverized by the propellers.

Stupefied, we spun around and gaped as the huge airliner, desperately clawing for altitude, struggled away from us out over the cotton field toward the highway, both engines howling under the strain, its screaming propeller tips within scant inches of scraping the ground! It must have been overloaded, or something. Just as a crash seemed certain, with shouts of relief we saw the airplane start to pull up, brush a hedgerow, barely clear a subdivision of white frame houses a half-mile away, skim over Second Street Road, and---at long last---painfully and with great effort begin to haul itself into the air! What the passengers (and the pilots) *inside* the airliner were thinking in those moments must have been beyond description. The whole incredible episode, from the time the aircraft started its takeoff roll until it lunged over the main road, probably lasted less than sixty seconds.

Daddy suggested that maybe we were cutting the safety margin a bit too close---no doubt, we had been extremely fortunate. After that, we moved back down the gravel road a little farther and watched the planes take off from a more prudent distance.

As the Muscle Shoals Airport always had a good safety record, what we saw that day could very well have been the closest to a big crash there ever was at that airfield.

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During those rides to the airport we talked a lot about my father's flying lessons in his youth at that same airport. Although he never became a licensed pilot (the "Depression of the 1930s" took care of *that*), he flew with an instructor and always claimed that he become pretty good at handling an airplane.

He said he took his lessons in a frail-looking two-seater trainer he described with a laugh as being a thin bedsheet stretched over an imaginary wooden frame. The contraption, he said, was powered by a little engine that (hopefully) spun a varnished wooden propeller fast enough to do the job. According to daddy, the planes in those days were so underpowered that the pilots had to run alongside to help push them off the ground! I never believed that, of course

But after listening all those years to his flying and barnstorming stories, I knew I wanted to someday try my own hand at getting a pilot's license. And in a few years, I would get that chance.