

Airports evolve from progress

The first flight of a plane in St. Cloud occurred on Oct. 8, 1912, when Dr. F.M. Bell flew his plane up almost out of sight after lifting off from the baseball fields near Lake George.

After making a broad turn to return, Dr. Bell was forced to land in a cornfield.

Northside Airport

For barnstormers who flew into St. Cloud during those early days of flight seeking a nickel or more for rides, the landing field of choice was the field "three blocks northwest of the Great Northern roundhouse." This was a 106-acre field with its eastern half roughly centered at 22nd Avenue and Ninth Street North.

The story of the "port" in St. Cloud begins here, at what came to be known as the Northside Airport. It continues at sites out of town, back into town, and then out of town again. Chad Smith flew into this field near the roundhouse frequently and in 1927 he gave a ride to Sven Peterson, who lived nearby. This inspired Sven to purchase his own plane in 1928. He then leased the field strictly for flying and kept his plane there. (Sven Peterson later would be appointed to the Minnesota Board of Aviation for his efforts to develop flight in Central Minnesota.) The only drawback to the Northside Airport was a power line that ran along 22nd Avenue.

This made night flights somewhat difficult. But, according to Jack Kipp, a frequent barnstormer there, "We needed the money, so the power line didn't stop us so long as we had the lights of two cars."

An important asset of Northside Airport was its "personnel," Edmond "Ding" and Edward "Tuffy" Binsfield, twins who lived with their family near the field and were friends of Sven Peterson. The brothers kept an eye on planes on the field and assisted pilots as needed. The nearby Great Northern Hotel and its bar became a fa-



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vorite hangout for the pilots. "Dutch" Heeck, the proprietor, reportedly frequented the field for rides.

In late May 1922, the Journal Press advertised an "Air Circus" at Northside Airport, promising many stunts. In early April of 1928, J.W. Chandler put on a show at the Northside Airport. Chandler held the record for most continuous complete loops in a row, 543 in four hours. But in July 1928, the Journal Press reported that the "Stranolind," one of the largest planes in America, would be stopping in St. Cloud to promote "air mindedness."

The power line along 22nd Avenue, limited the runway at Northside Airport to 1,600 feet, well under the 2,400 needed by the Stranolind. It wasn't long before calls began for a larger, more official airport.

Whitney airport

In March 1929, Alice Whitney, widow of prominent St. Cloud businessman and civic leader A.G. Whitney, donated 143 acres near Cable, southeast of St. Cloud for a "Whitney Memorial Airport." The new "port" was rushed to completion. A grand opening was held May 23-25, 1929. Sven Peterson's plane was among those on display.

Famous pilots performed aerial acrobatics. Speeches were made. One of the pilots highlighted the safety of flying, saying that, "In the event of motor trouble, there is plenty of time to think. Planes are a great distance from the earth. It is easy to detect a smooth landing field."

In the grand finale, Nona Milloy, who had already done some wing walking, parachuted down from high above the thousands in attendance. Milloy landed in a tree 2 miles east of the airport. "The specs or The Whitney Ca-



Photos courtesy Stearns History Museum

Crowds would gather to watch the planes at the St. Cloud Northside Airport.

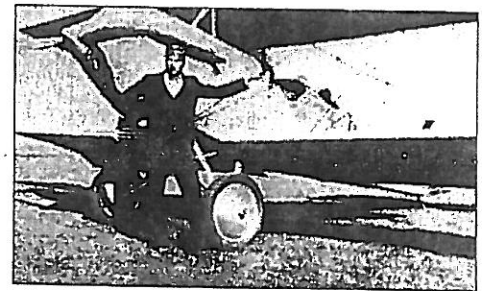
ble Airport were unimpressive: "Lighting — none; Hangar — none; personnel — none."

Despite the new official airport, many local pilots continued to use the Northside Airport because of its more central location. When Ray Russel and Chet Heinzel completed their glider in 1931 they became part of mini airshows that were still held at the Northside airport. Their glider was launched by several men who would stretch and then release a large "band" made of inner tubes. It was reported, though, that they obtained better flights when towed by a car or motorcycle.

In late 1932, it was said that Northside Airport was the most exciting place to be in town on a Sunday afternoon. When the Department of Commerce was providing money for airport improvements in 1933, the Whitney Cable Airport was deemed insufficient for upgrade funding. Also, the money could only be had if applied to a new airport closer to St. Cloud.

'New' airport

Whitney once again stepped forward. By late December 1933, a land swap of sorts was made in which the city returned the Cable property to her in exchange for an almost equal amount of land between



Sven Peterson stands beside his plane in 1930.

17th Street North, and the Sauk Rapids bridge.

The grand opening for the new Whitney Airport took place June 30, 1935. This was a more subdued affair than the grand opening near Cable. The grand finale did include another parachuting display, though, this time by young Betty Goltz. In what was taken to be a good omen, Goltz landed right on the target. Action over at Northside Airport began to slow, despite the efforts of Sven Peterson and other local pilots. But it was only after Pearl Harbor that St. Cloud's first common landing field was ordered to close. The few planes remaining there were either sold or mobilized.

The convenience of the new Whitney Airport's location was praised by many. The city encroached upon this airport's borders through the years until July 24, 1970, when it was closed and a newer, more

modern airport opened on a 400-acre site five miles southeast of St. Cloud.

St. Cloud airport

The opening of the new municipal airport consisted of a "fly-in" (actually a transfer of some planes from the Whitney Airport to the new airport) and an informal ceremony between airport and city officials.

The large planes that take off or land at St. Cloud's Municipal Airport today roar to the progress of St. Cloud, and watching these modern aircraft take to the air is always amazing. Yet, they may never match the thrill of an afternoon air show at St. Cloud's Northside Airport, back when a plane flight began with nickel and a pilot shouting "Contact!"

This column is the opinion of Mike Moran, a local history author. You can write to him in care of the St. Cloud Times, P.O. Box 768, St. Cloud, MN 56302.