

Where Have All the Airports Gone?

By Charles W. Lindenberg

Some years ago a popular song asked, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" Replace "flowers" with "airports" and it becomes relevant to small fields all over the country.

Rummaging through my sectionals, WACs and other charts, I found a 1949 Seattle sectional, complete with the old four-course Adcock range stations and an abundance of small airports.

What happened to all those small fields?

In June of 1955 I took off -- as a student pilot -- from Seattle's Boeing Field in N2744N, a delight-to-fly Cessna 140, the Boeing Employee's Flying Association's first airplane. I had already passed the written exam for private and now all I needed was my flight test. After a short hop over Mercer Island I landed at Lake Airport's 2,100 foot gravel strip, elevation 35 feet, located at N47° 33.8' W122° 11' and picked up the approved flight examiner. After he gave me my flight check -- stalls, steep turns, slow flight, simulated engine-outs and navigation -- we landed, he signed my license and I flew back to Boeing Field as a brand new private pilot. Lake will always be special to me; it was where I finally joined the ranks of licensed airmen.

Today the real estate where Lake Airport was is known as Newport Shores, a housing development with canals for private boats and its own yacht club. Now the home for fancy homes and boats, it will never again see an airplane trying to negotiate a narrow and bumpy gravel strip while fighting a cross wind. Developers filling the need for more housing for an expanding economy and population are the "what happened" to Lake Airport.

In the Seattle-Tacoma area alone were numerous small airports that went the way of Lake.

Perhaps one of the most well known closures wasn't a small, out-of-the-way airport catering to Champs, Cubs, Cessnas and Pipers. On the shores of Lake Washington, at N47°40.6' W122° 15.9', field elevation 37 feet, with a lighted hard-surfaced runway of 5,100 feet and a ground-controlled approach was the Sand Point Naval Air Station. Rather than the need for public housing, this airport was closed when the navy pulled out, releasing the land for other use. The city of Seattle decided to honor a former politician and create a park, naming it after him. There arose loud protests from those who wanted the magnificent runway with safe over-the-water approaches from both north and south, along with its many facilities, turned into a general aviation airport. Unfortunately they lost. The then-mayor of Seattle even threatened to stand in the middle of the runway if any light planes tried to land. (A few local pilots offered their airplanes and services, but he didn't, and they didn't.) I had once looked at, and nearly bought, a Fairchild PT-26 based at Sand Point.

There are still some military installations at Sand Point, but the runway was destroyed many years ago and memories of the numerous navy and coast guard planes taking off and landing there are now just echoes.

Almost directly across Lake Washington, on its west shoreline, or more precisely at N47° 43.4' W122° 13.6' was another 2,200-foot gravel strip, elevation 500 feet. This was near the town of Juanita and was called "North Seattle Airport." The runway ran north/south, parallel to Lake Washington, and was the home of many small airplanes. My memories of North Seattle consisted of landing there once to look at a Stinson 108 for sale. It, too, is history. Again the houses had their way.

In the fifties, Bellevue was a bedroom community for those working in Seattle. Today Bellevue is a city of a very respectable size. In the fifties Bellevue had its own airport, located at N47° 35' W122° 7.4', elevation 1,345 feet, with a hard surface runway 2,300 feet long. Today the Bellevue airport has been torn up and replaced with commercial enterprises. Bellevue was an interesting airport; taking off to the south you had to turn right to avoid the hills directly ahead, and taking off to the north you passed over a dump where thousands of seagulls hung out. They tended to fly up into your flight path and you had to be always on the alert. The runway always seemed in need of resurfacing but it was a nice airport to visit. While training for my private license, I shot night landings at Bellevue, and later made a few daylight trips there.

Near the town of Issaquah was the Seattle Sky Ranch, at N47° 33.1' W122° 4.2'. This was the home of many skydivers and sailplanes as well as numerous general aviation planes. At 50 feet above sea level, it had a lighted turf runway 2,500 feet long. Seattle Sky Ranch fought long and hard to survive against the encroaching houses and commercial buildings, but once again it eventually succumbed. Many of the skydivers had to move north to Harvey Field at Snohomish, and along with the sailplanes, to the Arlington airport.

Moving south to the city of Tacoma, there were once three small airports within five miles of each other. Tacoma, at N47°10.8' W122° 31.6', elevation 369 feet had a dirt strip 2,400 feet long. Tacoma Airpark, N47° 13' W122° 29.6' had a 3,500 gravel strip 250 feet above sea level, and Lakewood, elevation 243 feet with a 2,300 foot strip was located at N47°10.8' W122° 32.8'. (The old chart showed several other fields which I was not familiar with, and they're also gone.)

I remember the Lakewood airport quite well; I'd flown in there to visit friends several times. The runway was flanked with Scotch Broom and was pretty rough. All these three neighborhood airports are now homes, and the nearest general aviation airport is the Tacoma Narrows airport, across the Narrows Bridge.

The last airport that I heard was recently closed will always hold a soft spot in my heart, for it was here that I found my Alco Coupe. A single-seat high-winged taildragger, it had the most welcome icon any pilot could ask for -- a "For Sale" sign in its window. This was the Martha Lake airport, at N47° 51.7' W122° 14.3' with a field elevation of 500 feet. The airport sported lights and a narrow hard-surfaced 1,680-foot runway. The airport was surrounded by trees, which made for interesting turbulence just before flare. In the

little red shack the coffee pot was usually on, the pop machine was a welcome sight after a long flight -- as were the rest rooms -- and the well-worn old couch was a good place to rest and read the latest aviation magazines donated by local pilots. This was also the home of the infamous "Martha Lake Air Force." The mobile homes on the west side of the field kept trying to ooze over, the local developers wanted the land, and eventually the owner sold out. And yes, I bought the Alco Coupe!

These airports are only a drop in the proverbial bucket when it comes to airport closures. If we're to keep our runways open, every aircraft owner and pilot should get involved in local politics and public relations. Help the non-flying public understand the valuable services general aviation offers, and that pilots are not just a bunch of rich kids playing with their expensive toys. Explain how private pilots donate their planes and their time in emergency situations, and sometimes are the only link with disaster areas.

The AOPA (www.aopa.org) has their Airport Support Network (ASN) acting as airport watchdogs, and has been very effective in preserving our general aviation airports.

World War II had a slogan to sell war bonds -- "Keep 'em Flying." We might well adopt that slogan and work to keep our airports alive and well.

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