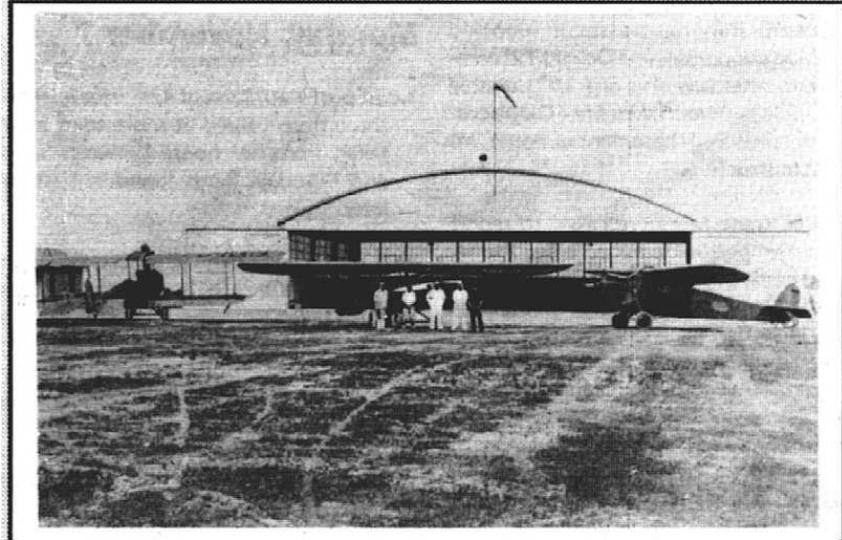


The Scarborough Airport

By Frank Hodgdon



Doors have yet to be hung on the hangar and signs are yet to be painted in the above photo taken in July of 1928.

The Scarborough Airport was technically the Portland Municipal Airport, since it was the brainchild of one Chester A. Jordan, president of the Portland Chamber of Commerce and an avid aviator. He began to dream of such a project in the early twenties when flight was still a novelty and much of the local action was taking place on the sands of Pine Point and Old Orchard Beaches.

Jordan found an enthusiast in the person of Phillips Payson, who had succeeded his father as president of the H. M. Payson Investment Banking firm with offices on Exchange Street in Portland. Payson had learned to fly while in the Army Air Corps during WWI and had continued his interest in aviation after returning to civilian life.

Jordan's dream became a reality when Payson took over the practical aspects of the concept through incorporation and the sale of stock. The two men purchased the site off Manson Libby Road in 1926 from George Eastman and Miss Lida Libby and hired a contractor, The W. E. Arthur Company, to prepare the site and erect several structures. Actual construction commenced in 1927 and was completed the following year. A huge air show and open house was held the weekend of September 27-28, 1928.

Clearing of woods and topsoil was accomplished with two Fordson tractors and several teams of men and horses. The prevailing wage of the day was 50 cents per hour or \$1.50 per hour for one man and a team of horses. Site clearing was impeded by wet conditions during the summer of 1927 and again in 1928 when an unusually open winter left the ground deeply saturated.

Meanwhile, the cooperation of the Town of Scarborough was sought to improve the access road, and the town meeting in 1928 voted to spend \$5,000 to do so. Nevertheless, the final result was a subject of ridicule in the press during the big weekend in September 1928, when several front page photos sarcastically showed "the class A roadway" as a rutted, uneven, gravel track extending a mile and a quarter from Route One to the airport complex.

The famous visit of Charles Lindbergh following his successful solo flight to Orley Field in Paris in May, 1927 took place over the weekend of July 23, 1927 while the Scarborough airfield was still very much under construction. In spite of that, several thousand patient flying enthusiasts turned up to await the arrival of their hero in what turned out to be a pea-soup fog. Lindbergh arrived at the site and circled the field for more than an hour, hoping for a break in the fog. Although he caught occasional glimpses of the tracks of the PS&P railroad, which skirted the eastern end of the runway, he ultimately decided to spend the night at Concord, NH, which was in the clear, and try again the following day, Sunday. Sunday weather proved no better, for the fog persisted. Yet fans by the thousands returned and continued their patient vigil. Again, the Lone Eagle circled the field for nearly an hour, then flew southeast over Old Orchard Beach. A hole developed in the overcast just long enough for the aviator to land the Spirit of St. Louis on the sand shingle. Mindful of the waiting throngs, Lindbergh was whisked by motorcade to the Scarborough Airport where he addressed the throng, shook as many hands as he could, and continued the motorcade to Portland.

With the brand-new Eastland Hotel as his target, the motorcade swept down the length of Congress Street, circled back cove via Tukey's Bridge, and proceeded around Baxter Boulevard to meet a crowd of 30,000 people assembled in Deering Oaks. What a spectacle! Beats the John Glenn geriatric flight all hollow!

The open house and air show at the airfield on September 28, 1928 was a wild success. The weather beamed, the flyers outdid themselves, the daring parachute jumpers all landed safely, and the only casualty was someone in the parking lot who suffered a bruised knee when a motorist backed out of his parking place and bumped gently into her.

Shortly after Ira Milliken snapped the above photo, the blank white 65-foot-wide space over the hangar doors was lettered "PORTLAND AIRPORT." A similar legend adorned the roof so as to be clearly visible to approaching aircraft. The hangar suffered extensive damage during a freak windstorm in December, 1934. Apparently someone opened at least one of the great rolling doors long enough for the building to fill with wind during a gust and the entire rear wall exploded outward, damaging several aircraft. This wooden/glass wall was subsequently replaced with a more substantial masonry/glass/steel curtain.

The Curtiss Wright Company was prominent in the active years of the airport, operating a flying school and contributing expertise to administration. As an adjunct to their presence, the company decided to build a bunkhouse nearby for what they anticipated would be a flood of young men desiring to learn how to fly. Taking on this franchise was Halsey Gulick, whose family achieved fame via the Luther Gulick Camps at Sebago Lake. They built a log building

nearby which today is the home of Post 76, American Legion. Upon completion, the school only managed to enroll two students who completed their courses in 1929. The crash of the stock market that year doomed the project and the building was sold and subsequently became The Plantation Restaurant. Old timers in the neighborhood recounted many colorful tales about this establishment, none of which, unfortunately, was considered appropriate for repeating to teenagers (What were they talking about?).

As we all know, aircraft developed with exponential speed and within ten years of its grand opening, the Scarborough Airport became too limited to accommodate the larger, increasingly powerful birds. Hemmed in by the railroad tracks to the east, Moses Brook to the north, U.S. Route One to the west, and the great marsh to the south, relocation became a priority. Operations moved to Stroudwater in the late thirties. The Scarborough complex became a flying school and the site of numerous air shows in the late forties, ultimately shutting down altogether in the fifties. The hangar became a storage warehouse for several enterprises, Humpty Dumpty notably, which stored empty cans and packaging materials there. Then, in the early sixties, the hangar was destroyed in a spectacular nighttime fire, which left little but a pile of twisted steel and broken bricks among the ashes. The remaining buildings were demolished or moved elsewhere.

Today, the site is the home of the Scarborough Industrial Park. The Public Works complex occupies the grassy spot upon which Ira Milliken stood to snap his historic photo above, and a Butler-type building now rises where The Lone Eagle waved to thousands of excited men, women, and children from his open car in celebration of having flown the wide Atlantic all by himself in that little silver aircraft which hangs from the rafters of the Smithsonian's Air and Space museum.