

# Air Fields of Washington Township



**By Timothy Swenson**

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## Introduction

As of 2006, there is no place to land an airplane in Washington Township. This has been the situation for the last 20 years. Prior to that, Washington Township had at last one open airfield since the first days of aviation history. Most residents remember the Fremont Airport off Dixon Landing Road, however not many know of the earlier airfields.

## Early Flying in Washington Township

The first airplane reported in Washington Township was on Nov. 17, 1911. After World War I, the number of excess Curtis Jenny's, formerly used for training pilots, allowed almost anyone to purchase a plane. Lawrence and Howard Bunting purchased a Jenny and asked a friend, George Buckleair, to teach them to fly. They used a field near Dry Creek and Mission Blvd. as a training field. When demonstrating the plane to a buyer, the plane crashed on take off. Luckily no one was injured, but the fire caused by the hot engine burned the entire field of wheat, at a cost of \$1,500.

During the 20's and 30's, many surplus airplanes would be converted for crop dusting. Since most farmers had flat fields, it was easy and convenient for the crop duster to fly to a farmer's field, land, take on his dusting chemicals, and then dust the crops. So many almost any flat field could be used for landing airplanes.

## Metzger Field

Metzger Field was a grass field built some time in the 1920's in the "Y" where Warm Spring Blvd joined Landing Road. These are now Fremont Blvd. and Old Warm Springs Rd. Sam Metzger had learned to fly in 1917 at Redwood City, taught by Will Parker, in a patched up airplane with a Bleriot fuselage, Christofferson wings, Hallcot engine, and Farman landing gear. After being an Army pilot in WWI, Sam returned to Washington Township with his own plane. After building the runway, he built a small hanger for his plane. This was probably the first purpose build airfield in Washington Township. Once the Rickenbacker Squadron would land at Metzger Field. There is no known date for when Metzger Field stopped operating.



*(Sam Metzger and Instructor Will Parker - Courtesy of Redwood City Public Library)*



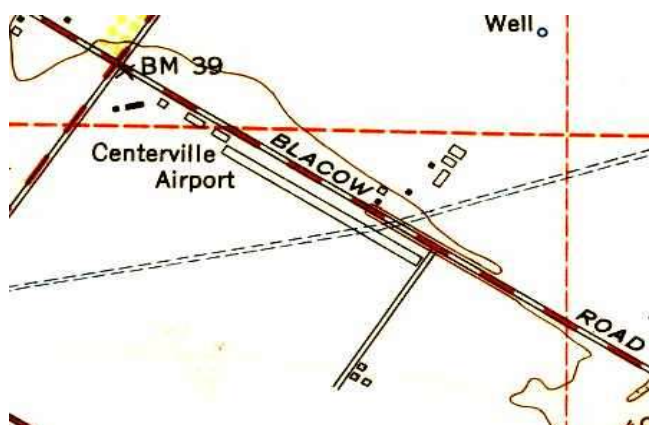
*(Rickenbacher Squadron at Metzger Field – Courtesy of Sisters of the Holy Family Archives Collection)*

## Centerville Airport

The Centerville Airport, called Center Field, was started on March 6, 1946. It was located at the southwest corner of Blacow Rd. and Mowry Ave., with the runway running parallel with Blacow Rd. It was the first privately-owned airfield to be built in Alameda County after WWII. The first plane to land on the field belonged to Don Hubbard, who would be the airport manager. When he landed he was greeted by Loren Marriot, President of the Chamber of Commerce and Louis Cardoza, chairman of the Lions Club airport committee.

The land was owned by Jack Stevenson with the airfield having a 20 year lease. The original lease covered 71 acres of land, but the airfield was eventually expanded to 100 acres. Assisting Don Hubbard in managing the field was Fred Gillman. The board of directors consisted of 10 East Bay businessmen. Bob Stevenson was the resident flying instructor and in charge of the flying school that would take up residence at the airfield.

By 1947, Don Hubbard was filling the position of field superintendent and Charles Osborn was the field manager.



*(1953 USGS Map showing Centerville Airport)*

In 1947, a new flight training school was set up at Center Field for veterans covered by the G.I. Bill of Rights and paid for by the Veterans Administration. The first class consisted of nine veteran students. Wes Sears, of

Newark, had the privilege of being the first student in the air. Sears was a airplane model enthusiast and head of the Modelairs Flying Club. The other students were; Joe A. Lewis, Niles; W. F. Humpert, Irvington; D. D. Dias, Newark; Niels C. Nielsen, Niles; Alex DeKnoop, Newark; J. D. Andrade, Decoto; L. J. Amaral, Irvington; and G. A. Schrader, Hayward.



*(1949 Sectional showing Centerville Airport)*

The school included ground school and flying lessons. The students had to complete the following hours in each area of study; Civil Air Regulations, 12.5 hours; navigation, 17.5 hours; weather, 17.5 hours; aircraft service, 7.5 hours; and radio, 5 hours. The ground school classes were conducted in classrooms built just for this school by Edward Rodrigues and Charles Osborn.

In charge of the school was Edward Rodriguez and James H. Stanhope, both Army Air Corps veterans. Rodriguez started in 1942 with the Army Air Forces Central Training Command. After graduation from pilot training he was assigned as a flight instructor to teach basic and advanced cadet instruction at Independence, Kansas, and Eagle Pass, Texas. He was later to become a B-17 and B-29 pilot. Upon discharge from the Army he was a flight instructor in Dayton, Ohio and at Ried Hillview Airport in San Jose, and also began his flight training in 1942, but with the Western Training Command. After graduating from pilot training he was assigned to a P-38 squadron and flew in the European Theater. His flying earned him the Air Medal with two Oak Leaf clusters. Stanhope was discharged in 1946.



*(Photo of Center Field in 1956)*

While the first class of students were training and the third class was just starting, a number of improvements were made to Center Field. Lights were installed at the field for night operations, costing \$2,000. Two new Luscombe trainers were purchased and added to the existing two planes that the students were using. A hanger was built to house the Keyes and Marston aircraft maintenance company, previously of San Leandro. Keyes and Marston converted military C-47's into DC-3's for commercial use and converted Taylorcraft gliders into powered airplanes.



The third class of veteran students consisted of the following: John W. Musgrove, Niles; Walter J. Rose, Niles; Isaac S. Ussery, Newark; James Caldwell, Irvington; Eugene W. James, Niles; Norman E. Brown, Newark; Harry R. Cesari, Niles; Lewis W. Musick, Niles; Alfred John Perry, Niles; Everett M. Jamison, Newark; Donald D. Dias, Newark; and Francis J. Lowry, Newark.

At the end of October, 1947, the first class of students graduated and received their private pilots license following a barbecue and dance in their honor. The six students that completed the training were; Sears, DeKnoop, Lewis, Ameral, Andrade, and Nielsen. By the time the first class had graduated, the fourth class of students was starting.

A number of the veteran students would go on to found the Center Field Pilots, Inc, a social organization for pilots, headed by T. C. Wilson, of Niles. The organization was comprised of 31 Washington township pilots.

Also in 1947, a Stinson Monoplane, NC97852, owned by Harry Bachstein, President of Aviation Center, Inc. was stolen from Center Field. The thief left behind a 1947 automobile with only 67 miles on it. It was assumed that the car was stolen from a car dealership. After the plane was broken into, it was rolled to a gas pump and filled with 11 gallons of gas. The plane departed sometime around 2 a.m. Don Hubbard lived near the field and reported hearing a plane take off at that time. The airport manager, Charles Osborn, noticed the broken gas pump at 8 am. then noticed that the plane was not in its hanger. The plane was capable of five hours of flight, so notices were sent to Oregon and Nevada to be on the lookout for the plane. Just days later the airplane was found in a hayfield, three miles from Hamilton Field, in Marin County. The plane was sighted from the air, by Harry O. Tollefson, of the Marion County Sheriff's Air Patrol. The plane was parked next to a haystack that shielded it from being seen from the road. The plane had minor damage; a broken door lock and a bent wheel fender. It was later discovered that the car left at Center Field was stolen from a dealership in Oakland.

In late fall, 1948, the group running Center field, Center Field Inc., was dissolved. The partnership consisted of John Stevenson, John Daum, E. M. Stevenson, Harry Bachstein, Harry Schilling, and Don Hubbard. The stockholders were Jack Stevenson, E. M. Stevenson, Harry Stevenson, Don Hubbard and Harry Bachstein. The group was dissolved owing \$21,000, \$12,000 of that being owed to Bank of America and the rest to other creditors, such as Pacific Telephone, PG&E, Shell Oil, and Washington News. It was reported that Don Hubbard left the area and took up a new position in Reno.



*(Corner of Fremont Blvd & Mowry Ave. in 1956)*

On December 6, 1948, it was reported that O. W. "Wally" Ebright has leased Center Field and would be taking over as the manager and operator. At the time, the field had a restaurant, hangers, tie-downs, and a repair service.

In January 1951, Civil Air Patrol units started using Center Field for training. The Fourth Group, commanded by Major Walter I. Imbrulia, was given use of the field by Wally Ebright. The following units were training at the field; Berkeley flight, Oakland squadron, Alameda squadron, Hayward squadron, and Diablo flight. The units worked on simulated disaster, search and rescue, first aid, communications, security, and other normal operating tasks. The first unit to train on the field was the Berkeley flight, under the command of Lt. William M. Dillon, with 85 members turning out for training.

In 1956, Centerville would become part of the city of Fremont. The Centerville airport would change its name to Fremont Airport.

In the late 1950's, Center Field ceased all operations. John Stevenson, then mayor of Fremont and owner of the land on which the Field sits, decided to build homes in the area around the field. FHA financing does not allow homes to be built within 2,000 feet from an airport, so Stevenson decided to close the airport. Airport manager Bill Geary was notified by Stevenson of the end of the lease. Geary left for a new position in Oregon, so Bill Starr, a local pilot, took over management of the field for the last month of its operation.

In the early 1960's the land used by the airport was developed in a shopping center and homes along Blacow Rd.

## Sky Sailing Airport

Prior to WWII, the Army started to expand its pilot training program. The Western Training Command was based at Moffet Airfield (then owned by the Army) and was training pilots in the Consolidated-Vultee BT-13. To get the most planes in the air and to do it safely, auxiliary airfields were established around the area. Air traffic control crews were sent out to each airfield to control the student pilots making touch and go landings. One such airfield was built south of Irvington. This airfield would eventually be known as Baylands Raceway. It is unknown how long the runway was. It is assumed to have had a packed gravel surface.



Wes Hammond, who grew up in Irvington described operations at the field in the book "My Life in Irvington" : "Each morning a small convoy of military trucks arrived to set up operations. I do not remember for certain, but I assume there was a radio communications truck and possibly an ambulance. Soon after the planes arrived, they began a series of practice take off and landings. There was never any security, and they did not say

anything to us as long as we remained a safe distance away. At the end of the day the planes and trucks departed for Moffett Field." He also mentions that the fields in the area were used for simulated touch and go landings. The pilots would start the landing process but abort the landing when they were within a few feet of the ground. Wes reports that sometimes the landing would move from "simulated" to "actual", saying that a few times the planes would crash on these practice landings. One plane crash near what is now Stevenson Blvd and I-880. He describes visiting the site of this accident this way: "I learned of this crash while in class at high school. After getting home from school, a number of friends rode our bicycles to the crash site. After a crash, the Army removed the bodies and all large sections of the aircraft. Then they dug a hole and buried the remaining small pieces. After the military had left, we dug into the hole to search for recognizable parts such as gages, etc. One friend made a surprise discovery when he found the wristwatch of one of the men. It was inscribed on the back 'From the Pine Tree Band.' We all encouraged him to give it to the Army so it could be returned to the family."



*(BT-13's flying at Heath Field – Courtesy Bill Larkins)*

At the start of WWII, the Navy built the Livermore Naval Air Station, where the Lawrence Livermore Lab is now located. Like the Army before, the Navy needed some auxiliary fields, so it created a total of 14 Naval Outlying Landing Fields (NOLF) in the East Bay for this training. NOLF Heath was one such field built on the site of the earlier Army auxiliary field. NOLF Heath was built with a 3,100 ft paved runway.



*(Waco at Heath Field in 1946 – Courtesy Bill Larkins)*



After the war, the land on which NOLF Heath was built would be purchased by the Southern Pacific railroad. The landing strip at NOFL Heath would be leased from Southern Pacific and become the Fremont Drag Strip (later Baylands Raceway).



*(1961 USGS Map showing Sky Sailing Airport)*

Next to the former NOLF Heath, a glider airport, called Skyways Airport, would be established. A 1,800 foot oil-graveled runway would be built just to the east of the former runway, for the gliders and airplanes that would be used to tow them.



*(1962 Section Chart showing Sky Sailing Airport)*

By 1962, the name of the glider strip would be called Sky Sailing Airport.

From the late 1970's until the late 1980's, Sky Sailing Airport would be one of the busiest glider operations in the U.S., with as many as 200 to 250 tows on a Saturday or Sunday, and up to 15,000 launches in a year. Gliders would use the lift generated by the winds uplifting from Mission Peak ridge. During this time, the landing strip was expanded to 2,300 feet.

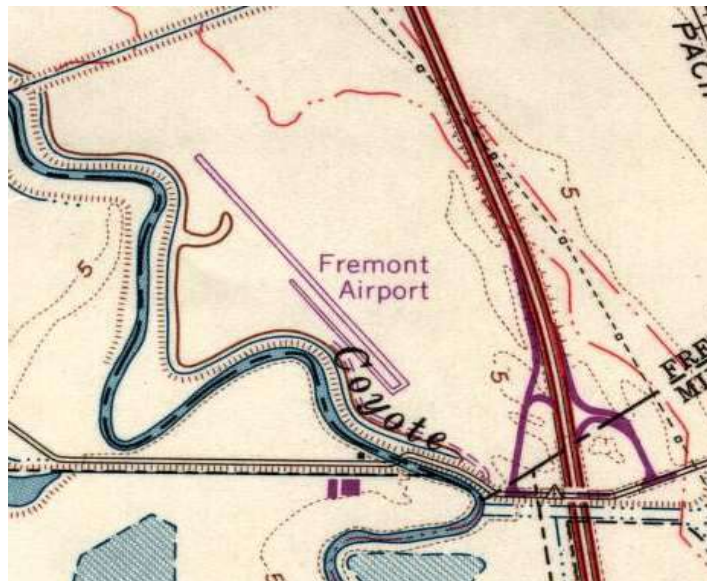
In 1988, developers took an interest in the raceway and glider strip. In late November and early December the last races were run at the raceway. In November the last sprint car races were held on the oval race track. In December the last motocross was held and was the last race event at the raceway.

For the gliders, the end was not far away. The lease, held by airport owner Bret Willat, expired in March 1989. At the time, sites near Sunol, the Fremont hills and Santa Clara were considered for the glider operations, but no sites were found and all sail plane operations in Alameda County came to an end. For Emil Kissel, the closing is the end of an era. Kissel, a glider pilot for 50 years, has been flying at the airport since it opened.

## Fremont Airport

After the Centerville Airport closed, there was much discussion about opening a new airport. For Fremont, the airport would provide businesses in the area with access to corporate chartered flights, and making Fremont more attractive to newer businesses.

In the summer of 1965 a new airport was built in Fremont. This airport was built on some low lying land at the very end of Fremont, right on the border of Santa Clara County. The airport was owned by Al Smith and managed by Bill Visali and Shirley Vergeer, who are also doing business as Montag Flying School. The flight instructor for the school was A. W. Cramer, a Navy Reserve pilot. The flying school had 6 airplanes; a Twin Apache, Cessna 150, Cessna 140, Cessna Cherokee, Aronca, and a Bonanza.



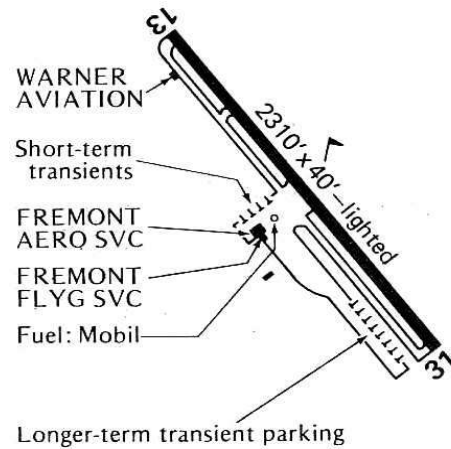
*(1968 USGS Map showing Fremont Airport)*

The runway was 2,700 feet long and the owners had plans to expand it to 3,000 feet in the 1967 time frame. There were also plans to add hangars and a terminal building. Fuel service at the field was done by Mobile Oil Co. The airport covered 44 acres, but had room to expand to 88 acres.

In 1988, the owners of the land on which the Fremont Airport sat, King & Lyons, decided to redevelop the area for commercial use. The operator of the airport, Ron Rice, gave notice that they had to leave by May 1<sup>st</sup>. On April 20, a "last hurrah" was given at the airport. One of the events was a "bombing" contest with flour filled cups being dropped on a target. In symbolic protest, thirteen planes flew over Fremont City Hall. Later a barbecue was held. Tom Dean and Mike Stupey worked the gas pumps to give the planes one last fill up, before closing the pumps for good. Ralph Huy, the former operator of the airports flight school said that the closure is breaking up a large family. The airport supported a community of about 150 plane owners.

Planes from the Fremont Airport were moved to other regional airports, such as Hayward, Livermore, Oakland and Sonoma. Some pilots sold their plane instead of moving it to another airport. When interviewed at the "last

hurrah", Pilot Jeff Green said that he will be moving his plane to Sonoma and considering if he should stay in Fremont or move closer to his airplane. Norm and Nancy West will have to move their airplane repair service to Sonoma airport. Nancy was not happy about the airport closing as they had just started the business and now they have to deal with the costs of moving the business.



*(From 1976 Pilots Guide to CA Airports)*

May 1<sup>st</sup> was the last day that the airport was open. As the day ended, large yellow X's were painted on both ends of the runway letting pilots know that the run was is officially closed. The phrase "farewell friends" was also painted on the runway. With this airport closing, 80 years of aviation in Washington Township would come to a close.