

First in Flight



By Christopher Patton

For 10 years, West Knoxville was home to the county's only official airport. In the late 1920s, Knoxville wasn't much bigger than present day Farragut. The city's western boundaries stretched just past the dirt road of Sutherland Avenue. Along that route, neighbors witnessed a decade of aviation wonder at Sutherland Avenue Airfield, which was later renamed McGhee Tyson Airport.

On a 60-acre tract about where the current day West High School and National Guard Armory are located, Walter Self, in 1927, developed the first "full service" city airport. Complete with a hangar, gas station and 2,000-foot runway, Self helped update the airfield that was in previous use by flyers, but lacked all the amenities.

According to Jim Fulbright, author of "Aviation in Tennessee," Self was similar to other budding pilots and businessmen

who understood there was money to be made in flying.

"That was the golden era of aviation and basically a thumbnail sketch of what happened is after World War II, you had a lot of people involved in aviation during the war and they wanted to continue," he said. "That gave rise to the barnstormer era, but then on top of that there were those who thought about the more practical uses of aviation."

There were many changes in aviation during those 10 years at Sutherland Avenue Airfield. What began as a hobby for Self and Frank Andre, the two sole stockowners in the Knox Aero Corporation, started to pay dividends. The Knox Aero Corporation was organized in the early 1920s, and stock was sold to buy an airplane and manage an

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The hangar, gas station and 2,000-foot runway are photographed at the Aug. 1, 1930 dedication of McGhee Tyson Airport on Sutherland Avenue.

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aircraft sales agency.

When Self developed the Sutherland airport, he located a sales office there selling Curtiss and Waco aircraft. However, there was more money in the new aviation market than just aircraft sales. Cargo was first, Fulbright said, and then pilots discovered they could fit a couple paying passengers aboard too.

"Most of these guys wanted to continue to fly after the War because it was such an adventure and just something they wanted to do. But, the practical side came along and the whole American enterprise system got involved and it just went from there," said Fulbright who works for the Tennessee government piloting dignitaries and employees around the state on official business.

With all this money being made and more airplanes in the skies, governmental control was inevitable. About the same time Self developed Sutherland

Avenue Airfield, the U.S. government got involved with certifying aircraft and issuing rules. Before then, certification for flying an airplane or operating an airfield wasn't needed.

Sutherland's airport reached its height in popularity and functionality in the early 1930s. Retaining Self as the airport's manager, the City of Knoxville purchased the airport in 1929 for \$40,000, and renamed it during an Aug. 1, 1930 dedication ceremony. The new name of the airport was McGhee Tyson Airport in honor of naval aviator Lt. Charles McGhee Tyson.

McGhee Tyson was the son of Gen. Lawrence Tyson, who commanded the 59th Infantry Brigade in World War I. McGhee Tyson died on Oct. 11, 1918, while flying over the North Sea placing mines in the path of German submarines.

Less than a year after the city took over, the Sutherland airport was the first in the county to transport U.S. mail by

airplane. In 1933, the National Air Races were also held there. The city improved the hangar and added crushed stone to the dirt runway, but the sun was setting quickly on the Sutherland Avenue airport.

"As planes got bigger the needs got bigger. That's exactly how it got started," Fulbright said.

In 1930, Tom Kesterson opened Island Airport, which had a runway twice as long as Sutherland's. Larger planes were being developed for commercial services including passenger aircraft, and Sutherland's runway was just too short to accommodate the larger planes.

The city abandoned the airport in 1937, moving operations to the current site of McGhee Tyson Airport in Blount County. Fliers followed, and the Sutherland airport was never used again.

One of those pilots that left Sutherland for better accommodations was Ferris Thomas. Thomas, who died two years



In the background of this 1930 photograph at Sutherland airport is the first plane to carry airmail from Knoxville to Chattanooga.

ago, was the last known pilot to have flown into Sutherland Avenue Airfield. From Blount County, he operated an airline service with a Curtiss trimotor, high wing airplane that was fabric covered.

His son Andy Thomas Jr., remembers his dad pointing out spots of East Tennessee aviation history including the Sutherland Avenue airport.

"He flew down to Atlanta and back over the mountains," Thomas said. "One time here in Blount County coming back, he wasn't quite back to the airport and ran out of fuel and had to land in a field out here. Every now and then I go by that field, but I remember that field being pointed out to me as a kid, as well as others."

The history of the Sutherland Avenue Airfield is disappearing quickly, said David Williams.



Some of the best fliers in Knoxville posed for a photograph at the city dedication of McGhee Tyson Airport. From left to right are Decker Coykendal, Walter Self, George McNutt and son, Louis Hilbert and Charlie Kilgore.

Williams, president of the Pond Gap Area Neighborhood Association, rallied support from the Sutherland Avenue

neighborhood association and raised \$1,300 for a historic marker. With support from both the city council and county commission, the Tennessee Historical Commission approved the proposed marker in March 2003.

"Just not our neighborhood, but every where people need to know where they are historically," Williams said.

Seventy years after the dedication of the Sutherland airport as McGhee Tyson Airport, the neighborhood is planning a dedication ceremony of their own. Some time during the summer, Williams said the historical marker will be planted and numerous activities will be planned for the celebration. A few of the events already planned include announcing essay contest winners, a mural of the airfield painted by students and faculty at nearby West High School and a fly by over the old airport. ■



David Campbell

"Elder" David Campbell was born in Augusta County, Va. about 1763. He served under Colonel John Sevier at the Battle of King's Mountain during the Revolutionary War. In 1787, Campbell moved to Grassy Valley in what is now Knox County, Tenn. He is credited with co-founding Campbell's Station along with his cousin, another David Campbell.

"Elder" David Campbell, so called because of his long stretch as an elder at Grassy Valley Presbyterian Church, died in 1813 and is buried in Pleasant Forest Cemetery on Concord Road. A memorial stands on the grounds of the Avery Russell home on Kingston Pike in Farragut.

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