

Monroeville's Airports

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Monroeville's Historical Airports By Marilyn Wempa With 2003 dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers's first successful flight, it is significant that Monroeville residents can claim past and present sites relating to early aviation. By the 1930s, Monroeville (then called Patton Township) was on the cutting edge of the nation's aviation experiences with an airport located in Monroeville and two more were operational by the 1940s. While two of the airports are presently closed, their history lives on in the memories of those who used them and in photos and text found in Marilyn Chandler's book, "Hamlet to Highways." East Pittsburgh Airfield (also called Johnston), was located off Johnson Road in Mellon Plan, where Chambers Landfill is presently. Before it closed in the early 1970s, it was noted for its air shows that attracted hundreds of spectators and for handling the air mail for the Wilmerding Post Office. The only evidence of Pitt-Wilkins Airport, as it was called on a 1949 map, is a sign along Tilbrook Road reading Bohinski Fields, denoting where Monroeville Parks Department once had ball fields on Bohinski's property. According to Emil Bohinski, 72, operation of this airport began in the early 1940s on his father's property. "Pitt-Wilkins was noted for airmail deliveries for Pitcairn Post Office that were picked up with a hook extended from the bottom of an airplane to snatch the letter bag hung between two poles," Bohinski revealed. He also recalls seeing the Piper Cub, Aeronca, and Stearman light aircraft landing there. "The pilots were daredevils," he said. "With no restrictions at that time, they would fly upside down and buzz homes. At the beginning of World War 2, their planes were bought by the government and taken to centers for pilot training. Many of the pilots I saw at the field became military pilots, and they would come back to say 'hello' by flying over field!" The Pitt-Wilkins Airport closed in 1948 when Bohinski's sister and her husband opened Pittsburgh Monroeville Airport on the other side of Monroeville. Raymond J. Weible asserts saving and restoring the last existing airport in Monroeville, located at the end of a bumpy lane off Logans Ferry Road, has given purpose to his life. "Pittsburgh Monroeville Airport has inspired countless men to become pilots and currently houses sixteen privately-owned planes in several hangers," he said, affectionately speaking about the airport built and run by Monroeville residents, Harold and Helen Bohinski Brown. Its manger for the past eighteen years, Weible decided to erect a sign along Logans Ferry Road designating the field as Harold W. Brown Memorial Field. "Mrs. Brown is proud she and her late husband, a pilot himself, worked hard to make it a first-class facility in 1948 for small planes to land, flight instruction, and a place to hanger residents' planes." [(Photo: Mrs. Brown greeting a pilot. "She regularly pumped gas at the airport.")] Although the fifty-five-year-old field near Garden City no longer offers aviation fuel for sale, 2,000 planes land and take off at the airport every year, according to Weible. Pilots pay \$3 on the honor system to defray the expenses of mowing the grass and maintaining the runway for an overnight stay. Having sixteen planes in the hangers is in sharp contrast to the numbers there between 1952 and 1958 when 112 were housed or tied down there, or even in 1970 when seventy-four airplane owners made this airport their base, he says. Fond memories haven't faded, however, and continue to inspire former users and their families to gather for Weible's annual summer hanger party to talk over old times. "People are really happy to see the place still exists where they learned to fly," Weible explains. "For instance, one active pilot, who is probably one of the oldest in Pittsburgh, is a 90-year-old Monroeville resident. Chuck Honaker is still a good pilot and comes to the parties!" Weible is proud he also hosts a gathering every other year for the Aero Club of Pittsburgh. The airport buildings also serve as the meeting place for Cadet Squad 604 of the Civil Air Patrol. This club encourages boys' and girls' interest in aviation, and they practice skills needed to secure crash sites until FAA authorities arrive. A retired electrical contractor, Weible, 66, earned his pilot's license in 1973. He holds licenses to fly commercial planes and helicopters, is qualified to teach multi-engine and instrument training, and gives lessons at the airport. He is the proud owner of a Russian MIG-15 fighter he spent three years restoring. "It is capable of speeds of Mach .92 and 687 miles an hour. Because the MIG is foreign made, I must notify the Federal Aviation Association when I fly it out of Arnold Palmer Airport in Latrobe for the five air shows I participate in yearly." He explained Monroeville's 2,300-foot runway isn't long enough for the MIG. Another pilot with fond memories of Brown's airport is Ralph Beatty, 49, who grew up on farm property adjacent to the airport. "Part of the airport property was purchased from my grandfather by Harold Brown, who built the airport and I believe was an Army Air Corps instructor. As a youngster, I got an airplane ride from one of my dad's friends and my passion for aviation began. My first actual job was washing planes at the airport when I was 14." Due to the generosity of the late Clark "Woody" Woodard, who ran the flight school at that time, Beatty was soon trading wages for his private pilot's license lessons. Beatty soloed on his sixteenth birthday (the minimum age requirement), and got his license at 17 (also minimum age). "Monroeville airport was typical of other small airports where most professional pilots got their start. Many of the instructors I had are now heads of flight departments with major corporations or are airline pilots." Beatty believes small airports like Monroeville are seldom appreciated by local residents or the municipalities they are in; but if managed properly, they can be a major asset to a community. "More and more businesses are now flying their own corporate airplanes rather than dealing with the hassles of airline travel. Businesses prefer to have a local airport close to their business and often locate near airports for this purpose." The new airport being built along with a corporate business park in Tarentum is an example. "For my part, my exposure to aviation from Monroeville airport led to my career in aviation. I am now a contract pilot for a Pittsburgh corporation, as well as a scheduled pilot for the Federal Reserve Bank. As a youth, my good fortune to grow up next to Monroeville Airport shaped my future for the rest of my life. I am forever indebted to Harold and Helen Brown for creating a welcoming environment for me at their airport. I am also deeply indebted to Mr. Woodard for giving me the opportunity to learn to fly." He believes throughout the history of this airport, there are countless dozens of professional pilots who

either got their start at Monroeville airport or honed their skills as flight instructors or charter pilots on their career paths. "I am blessed to call myself one of them," he said, adding he taught his two sons to fly and one is a student at the Air Force Academy. _____ Note: This piece originally appeared as an article in Monroeville Matters, #6, 2003.