

History of the Hurricane Airport

I have been a regular user of the Hurricane Municipal Airport since 1966. In 1962, when I first became aware of the airport here, it was only being used by the Stratton Brothers Construction Co. They were flying their Cessna 336 from here, keeping it in the single hangar on the field.

The airport had very humble beginnings. It started out as a small dirt strip. In 1942, Junior Eager, later known for his inventive mind, bought a "Taylor Cub." He managed to talk Winferd Spendlove into allowing him to blade a small landing strip on this dry, undeveloped parcel of land, and begin flying in and out of it. Sherry Gubler Naegle still remembers the day when Jr took her for a ride in his plane.

He was the only user until May 28, 1945. A B-24 Bomber (a very large WW11 4 engine bomber) was dispatched on a practice bombing run from Tonopah, Nevada, to the practice bombing range south of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Somewhere near Hurricane, one of the engines caught fire. The pilot ordered the bombardier to drop the practice bombs on the sand dunes south of town, and he prepared the crew to abandon ship.

Then the pilot noticed Junior's small strip. Since their maps did not show an airport in Hurricane, the pilot became somewhat confused, thinking that they must be in Fredonia, Arizona. Still, the pilot decided to attempt a landing rather than allow the plane to crash.

He lined up on the runway heading north, and he came in so low that he took out the fence at the south end. As soon as he touched down he was on the brakes, causing the wheels to skid in the soft dirt. The plane skidded all the way down the runway, continuing right though the north fence, crossing the road, jumping the irrigation ditch and finally coming to a stop in the field north of the current runway. The landing raised so much dust that it looked like the plane had crashed and was on fire.

Than (Nathaniel) Naegle was working for Ross Savage in his field in Leeds that day, and remembers seeing the huge plane circling the sand dunes for about what seemed like a half an hour before landing. Clark Campbell and Ira Bradshaw were hoeing weeds in a field south of Three Falls Elementary School, and they also

watched the drama unfolding. They couldn't believe that such a huge bomber could land on that small strip. When they saw the cloud of dust they were sure that the plane had crashed. They jumped on their bikes, and they pedaled out here as fast as they could.

When they arrived, they were surprised to find that the plane and crew were fine. Others came in cars, and one gave the pilot a ride into town so he could call his base for assistance. The crew was soon on its way back to base, but things were not so simple for the plane. Even with a new engine, the strip was way too short to attempt a takeoff.

A C47 cargo plane was dispatched with a new engine, but when the pilot saw how short the runway was he refused to land, and he diverted to Nellis Air base in Las Vegas, Nevada. The engine had to be trucked in from there. The Army got permission from Winferd Spendlove to lengthen the runway for the bomber to take off. They filled the irrigation ditch with railroad ties so they could tow the plane back down to the runway. They then located a test pilot who was eager to be discharged from the service, and they offered him enough extra points to earn his discharge if he would agree to fly the plane out and back to base. He agreed, and he came down to access the situation.

The first thing he did was to remove all of the guns and armor. Then he removed the bombsight, and all other unnecessary equipment, in order to lighten the plane as much as possible. He then measured his lift-off point and marked it with a stake. He made several practice attempts to make sure the plane could accelerate to flying speed in that short distance.

He used the advantage of early morning cool air for the actual takeoff. Clark Campbell was there to witness the takeoff, and said that he barely cleared the south fence, but made it. An interesting side note to this is in March, 2015, I attended a funeral in Redlands, California for my wife's uncle. After the service, as we were talking outside, I noticed a small old man who was sporting a B24 tiepin. I struck up a conversation with him and asked him if he had flown the B24 during the war. He affirmed that he had. I then told him that I flew, and was based at an airport that was developed because of a B24 that had made an emergency landing there. He asked where that was, and I told him that it was the Hurricane Municipal Airport. He told me that he was the pilot that flew the plane out. His name was George Huettig, and he was 96 years old at the time I spoke to him. I thought it

very interesting that I would be able to meet the actual man who flew that bomber out years ago.

Having that bomber land in Hurricane raised quite a commotion in our small town. It was talked about at the barber shop, Graff's Mercantile, and the old white church. Since many were involved in peddling fruit, they began thinking about the advantage of flying their perishable commodities to the markets. Soon opposing groups formed, for and against developing a municipal airport. I reviewed the Washington County News and found that the arguments raged for months. In the end, the Hurricane Lions took on the project. Owen Sanders led the effort. They raised the money to purchase the land from Winferd, and they organized the purchase of the materials to make the runway and build a hangar. With volunteer labor they created a gravel runway with a dirt crosswind runway, and they built the hangar. They also built some archery targets so there would be other recreational uses for the land. The airport was dedicated on November 13, 1947, and it was donated to the city. It enjoyed initial use. I found a picture of three airplanes parked out there from those days. A flying club was formed, and several local people got their pilot's licenses before the hard economic times took their toll. I know Kent Wilson was one of those. I have spoken to him about it. I remember what Loren Squire said about life in Southern Utah was like -- "Depression, what depression? We never knew when it started, or when it ended."

After a few years the airport suffered from abandonment and neglect. When I came here in 1962, the Stratton Brothers were the only ones using it. They kept their Cessna 336 in the hangar. I started flying there in 1966. At that time there was only one track through the weeds, but the crosswind runway was still useable. Stanley Aviation got the contract to develop ejection systems up on the mesa, and they used our airport to base their Aero Commander and North American T6. I guess the runway on the mesa was not long enough for them.

Someone burned down the hanger while I was away in the army in the winter of 1970. In 1975 we suffered a terrible tragedy out there. Bart Spendlove had flown in from California to visit his folks, and he crashed on takeoff while leaving. He, his wife, and 4 children were burned beyond recognition. It was terrible, and those on the fire department who had to remove the bodies will never forget it.

By 1976, tumbleweeds really became a problem out there, and I went to the city council to ask for some help clearing them off the runway. All I was asking for was a couple of hours with the town grader. There were some pretty hard feelings

about the airport at that time, and they were pretty abrupt with me. They told me, "We're not going to build you a personal airport." I felt rebuffed, but considering the fact that I was the only one using the airport at the time, I could see their point.

Becoming suddenly aware of the airport and its condition, the City Council decided to close it. They informed the FAA, and a NOTAM was filed to inform pilots that it was not useable. This move absolved the city of any liability should an accident occur. I and others continued to use the airport, and no action was taken by the city to prevent its use.

By 1977 I had obtained my Flight Instructor license, and I started teaching others to fly. Soon, there were about 20 of us using the airport. We formed a flying club, and we bought 2 airplanes. One of my students (Russell Limb), was on the city council. He made the case for the airport to the council, and in 1979 we were able to secure \$200,000.00 from the Utah State Road Department. Using his equipment and our volunteer labor, we finally got our first improvement to the runway using the chip seal process. We bladed and oiled the main ramp at that time as well.

Since that time, we have enjoyed several improvement projects, each one making the airport better. We have an Airport Board to oversee all issues regarding the airport, and with the help of the FAA have recently been able to create the wonderful airport that we have today. I believe we now have 47 hangars on the field, and I think around 70 aircraft based here. We also have several businesses based here. The Governor and other government entities use it. We have had turbo-prop and private jet use here as well.

In those humble beginnings, I never envisioned the wonderful airport we enjoy today. The thought of using all of us business people and flyers as pawns in a power struggle with outsiders is to me unthinkable.

Write this number down: (801) 257-5020. That is the phone number of the Salt Lake Flight Standards District Office of the FAA. If anyone is flying low, and is harassing people on the ground, get their registration number and make the call. Believe me, they will discover the true meaning of the words "FEDERAL CASE" when the FAA comes to call. When a pilot's license is on the block, they all get the message real quick. With all the time and money it takes to become a flight instructor, the pilots will comply immediately when it is all on the line, and if you have the evidence to back up your charge, they will at least suffer a significant suspension, which means the loss of their livelihood.