

THEY WANTED WINGS
CHAPTER FOUR
1940-1945

COUNTY AIRPORT BECAME REALITY IN 1940s

On February 16, 1940, Door County saw the use of an airplane in a lifesaving situation. Aussie Oleson and his brother, Henry, were cutting down trees on Henry's farm on Washington Island when a tree fell on Aussie, breaking two of his vertebrae, a rib and his ankle. Aided by his brother, he walked over a half mile to his home. Pilot Wally Arntzen from Escanaba was called, and Oleson was transported to the hospital there, where he was expected to stay for three months to recover.

The Advocate carried a front page story which sounds as if it came from the pen of Sumner Harris: "Thus again the need of airplane service between Washington Island and the mainland was demonstrated. The actual flying time between Washington Island and Escanaba is between 15 and 25 minutes, contrasted with the usual long time required to get a patient to Sturgeon Bay via boat and ambulance.

"In this case, perhaps the difference in time did not necessarily mean the saving of a life, but time often counts when a person is suffering with a broken back." The story went on to say that in the winter, a plane could land on Detroit Harbor with skis, but Islanders were worrying about what would happen if the airport was plowed up, because of the lack of funds to maintain it.

In March 1940, it was announced that Jack Hadden, the "Flying Fish Peddler," who concocted a plan to fly fish from Door County to St. Louis, was going to replace the plane he cracked up in Decatur, Illinois, with a new one. Hard luck seemed to pursue Hadden; in November, 1939, the plane he had just completed for the fish flights burned up in a hangar in St. Louis. Then, evidently, he'd cracked up another plane intended for the venture.

Records have yet to be found to prove Hadden actually shipped some fish by the first plane. The only evidence uncovered so far is a photograph brought in by Chester Ostram Jr. which shows Chester Ostram Sr. loading fish boxes into what seems like an older plane which looks like a Stinson Jr. or other corrugated metal sided plane.

In April 1940, Dr. Dan Dorchester arrived home from St. Louis where he had visited relatives and brought further news. Hadden would christen a new plane, the "City of Sturgeon Bay," to carry fish to St. Louis and it would be the largest single engine plane to land in Door County.

The big, new yellow plane had attracted about 4000 spectators at the St. Louis airport, Dr. Dorchester said. It was fitted with a 575 horsepower engine, and the only reason it had not become a TWA airliner was that the federal authorities had ruled that new airliners had to be two-engine jobs. Because of that new rule, Hadden got a very good deal on the ship. Also, he was repairing the plane he'd used on his initial fish run from Cherryland Airport.

The new plane could carry 3300 pounds of fish, the previous one 1700 pounds. Dorchester was given a ride in Hadden's new plane while in St. Louis. It would require a longer runway, which Hadden had contracted with the Door County Highway Department to construct. The new runway would extend the runway to 4000 feet. Hadden had planned to take an option on the airport property, since the county board turned down its purchase, but his recent crash had put those plans on hold.

The new plane arrived at Cherryland Airport on Sunday, April 21, 1940, and it impressed many people with its size. One could reach only half way up its side. The christening of the "City of Sturgeon Bay" was scheduled for Sunday, April 28, at 2 p.m., with Mayor D. W. Reynolds doing the honors and Mrs. Dan Dorchester breaking the bottle. The christening went off as planned, and an Advocate photo showed Hadden along with Dr. Dan Dorchester, in front of the new plane.

The shipping of the first load of fish had to wait for the runway to be lengthened, the work being contracted out to Russell Bieri and the county highway department.

For the Cherry Blossom Festival of May 24-26, another airplane promotional event was planned. A big Stinson Trimotor, the largest plane to land at Cherryland Airport up to that time, was scheduled to give rides, under the auspices of Don Nicholas and Lloyd Beach of the West Brothers of Appleton. Elwynn West was scheduled to be the pilot. He was Wisconsin's oldest commercial pilot, having been licensed for 22 years.

The Stinson, with its three Lycoming engines, and a gross weight of four and a half tons, could carry 12 passengers. It was equipped for blind and night flying, hydraulic brakes and other safety equipment. It is said that it was built for Henry Ford (whose famous trimotors were getting outdated) and purchased by the Wests in 1937. Many other planes were expected for the celebration, and a fleet of planes from the Glenview, Illinois naval base was to come.

Dr. Dorchester, Chester Teske, Earlin Smith and Bob Krauss had promoted the event at the Wausau meeting of the N. A. A. Meanwhile,

there was encouraging news in the matter of the county taking over the airport. The federal government had announced a plan to train 10,000 pilots and initiate a program to improve local airfields to aid in the training. Martin Torkelson, the state planning engineer, said at the Wausau meeting that 190 new airports would be created in Wisconsin, in addition to the 36 that existed at the time.

The Advocate article said, "Under county ownership, the field here would gain first consideration for governmental aid and possible establishment of an enlarged flying school, the local N.A.A. group learned. Rolfe Olsen, the local flying instructor, has taken an examination for renewal of his certificate in anticipation of greater demand for his services."

Unfortunately, the festivities didn't take place on the weekend planned because of bad weather. Only a half dozen planes showed up. But Dr. Dorchester announced that plans had been made for the following weekend to have a breakfast at Hanson's Bay Shore Inn for the N.A.A. fliers.

Even though the navy planes didn't show up, the West Brothers brought up their big Stinson Trimotor and two Wacos, and took many people for a flight over Door County. The passengers could only get a glimpse now and then through the clouds, of the cherry orchards in bloom, but they enjoyed what for many of them was their first airplane flight.

The Cherry Blossom Festival went on as planned, with Joanne Volquarts being crowned queen by Mayor Carl F. Zeidler of Milwaukee. Zeidler later entered the military service in World War II, was killed in action, and his brother Frank, who is still living, in the year 2000, replaced him as mayor.

Airport enthusiast Karl S. Reynolds was tied up that weekend; he and his wife were hosting Judge William M. Rutzen of Chicago, the man who judged the Cherry Blossom Queen contest.

That week, Wilmer C. Schroeder took a photograph of another first in Door County in which Mr. Hadden, the "Flying Fish Peddler" was involved. He took a load of crates of cherries for Fruit Growers Cooperative plant superintendent Charles "Bow" Augustine to St. Louis. Hadden had the name of the company printed on the side of his plane.

The same week that the Episcopal parsonage in Jacksonport burned, and Oscar Wagner's brother, Arnold, and Peter Poh, died in separate car accidents, the Advocate carried a story about the thrilling air show the navy put on at the Cherryland airport.

“With their 450 horsepower engines roaring as they zoomed earthward to look things over,” said the Advocate writer, two fast planes of the U. S. Naval air force base in Glenview, Illinois, made a blossom time visit to Cherryland Airport Sunday morning.” The writer, probably Sumner Harris, said their exhibition showed the navy should be well prepared for defense if there were enough of them. 18 months later Harris would break the news that Jacksonport’s George Loritz, of the army air corps, had been killed in an attack on Clark Field at Manila on the first day of World War II. The commander at Clark Field, by the way, was the daring aviator, Lester Maitland, who landed at Egg Harbor in 1928, the year after he piloted the first plane to fly from San Francisco to Honolulu.

The navy flight leader expressed surprise that Door County had such a well-prepared field, and all built by the N.A.A. club members at that. Don Nichols, pilot of the West Brothers plane, which had taken more than 1300 passengers up during the past two weeks from Cherryland Airport, added gloomily that he couldn’t see how an airport of such size could be continued privately.

With war already going on in Europe, the United States was already bolstering its defense effort in the middle of 1940. The personnel officer at Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois, sent a letter to the Advocate appealing to young unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 35 to join the Army Air Corps or enroll in private citizens flying courses. The Army Air Corps offered free training in many other aspects of aviation to those who enlisted for a three-year period.

The Cherryland Airport already was conducting free flying courses under the tutelage of Rolfe Olsen and auspices of the Civilian Aeronautics Authority, but, because it didn’t have runways running in eight directions for a minimum of 2500 feet, it didn’t fit the federal specifications. One runway was 4000 feet long; it was speculated that federal requirements might be relaxed as the need for more fliers developed.

The Advocate editor expressed interest in a request by Adj. General Ralph Immel in Washington for communities to form National Guard Air Squadrons. The editor said that these units gave people a chance to join without leaving their jobs, and help build up the national defense efforts.

At this time, June of 1940, Rolfe Olsen was training people to “Travel by Air,” in Advocate advertisements. He offered charter trips and student instruction. (Olsen’s first name is spelled “Rolfe” and “Rolf” in various places in the paper. The ad reads “Rolfe Olsen.”)

Apparently Olsen went to Marquette, Michigan, to give flying courses during the winter of 1941, for a March 7, 1941, Advocate article announced that he had returned to Cherryland Airport the week before. He was splitting his time between Marquette and Sturgeon Bay, giving lessons two days a week here and the rest of the week at Marquette. He was flying, not from Cherryland Airport, but from Sawyer with skis replacing the wheels on his plane. Some of his students were William Edwards, Paul Dexheimer, Orson May, and Art Cermak, who lives on the north end of the runway at Cherryland Airport. Art has been of inestimable help in writing this history, and has supplied many of the photographs.

Dr. Dan Dorchester had begun using his plane in his medical journeys soon after getting his pilot's license four years before, and the March 21, 1941 Advocate reported how he happened to add a new mode of transportation to the record of county nurse, Ruth Brye.

Of Norwegian heritage, Miss Brye had used snowshoes to perform her duties after a big blizzard. This time, she had to travel to Washington Island for an immunization and inoculation program. To complicate matters, the Island doctor, Dr. Little, had been called into military service, so Dr. Dorchester volunteered to help Ruth on his regular weekly visit to the Island. Dr. Dorchester told Ruth that she could fly along with him to the Island, and she wouldn't even have to drive out to the airport. He picked her up on the ice near her home on Cedar Street. Later that month, Wally Arntzen from Escanaba used his plane to help an Islander, Maynard Olson. He was due to be sworn into the army in Sheboygan, so he left early on the mail boat to catch a ride at Gills Rock, but the mail boat couldn't make it through the ice.

Wally was called, and, although he was busy with government inspectors at the Escanaba airport, he took time off at lunch to fly Maynard and Mrs. Sorenson across the Door and then fly Harvey Jess, John Jessen and Alvin Koyen back to the Island.

In May of 1941, the Cherryland Airport faced a big crisis. Jack Hadden (his name is sometimes spelled "Haddon" in the news articles) had abandoned the fish peddling idea and become a T.W.A. pilot. He'd taken a purchase option on the DeWitt property on which the airport was located, and now there remained the 1941 payment on the property. So that the property wouldn't be lost, Dr. Dorchester and a group banded together and arranged with attorney Thorval Toft to buy the property. Hadden was to retain a small interest in the airport, but stock was to be sold. So in that way, the airport was saved by private interests, who still hoped the county would take it over.

In May of 1941, Capt. Howard Logerquist and several other members of the army air corps inspected Cherryland Airport. (Apparently, he was not a Door County Logerquist. Local people by that name haven't heard of him. He owned a summer place on Glidden Drive, and he visited his family there, according to the Advocate.)

Capt. Logerquist and the other airmen inspected the airport to see if it had military potential. He'd come in a B10 Martin bomber and flew up from Chicago in an hour. No further mention is made of whether the field was deemed adequate for military use, but a military plane did land there unexpectedly during World War II, as we shall see.

This was the last summer before the "Good War." The cherries blossomed early that year; Cherry Blossom Sunday was on May 11, 1941. Radio station WTMJ Milwaukee's Heinie and the Grenadiers (still in vogue, but banned from performing all during World War II because of his allegedly pro-German sentiments and accent) were part of the celebration. But the public was disappointed because the West's planes from Appleton didn't arrive to take passengers up... they'd planned on a normal bloom on May 25, then moved the date up to the 18th. But they couldn't re-schedule for the 11th. However, the Wests did manage to come up on July 2 and offered a schedule of rides.

The war clouds were darkening, and a U.S. magazine even predicted that if Japan attacked the U.S., a likely spot would be Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Jack Howard beat the draft, which was already taking many Door County men, by enlisting in the army air corps. An Advocate report said that he'd already completed two-thirds of his training toward his "wings" at Randolph Field, Texas, the "West Point of the Air." His pay was to be raised to \$205 a month. That was a second lieutenant's pay for one of the most daring and dangerous jobs in the world.

The airport completed its incorporation in September of 1941. Dr. Dan Dorchester was named president; John Purves, vice president; Tom Pinney Sr., secretary treasurer; and Wally Thenell and Felix Debroux were members of the board. Chester Teske was engaged as executive secretary. The airport was leased to the Cherryland Flying Service, of which Dr. Dorchester was operator, and he in turn leased some of the land to Seraphin DeWitt, the farmer who had owned the land. Jack Hadden retained some of the stock in the airport. In two months, the airport would be closed, due to the country going to war and the airport not having the required methods of security for a nation at war.

WORLD WAR II LED TO PURCHASE OF AIRPORT BY COUNTY

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and on December 8, the United States declared war on Japan.

The declaration of war had immediate effects here at home; all radio amateurs, like Clayton Cardy, W9OVO, were told to get off the air. He remembers that day well, for he was on the air that day, when the message came through for all radio amateurs to cease operating. The amateur radio bands were used for military operations from then on until the war ended. The federal government also did not want to take a chance that amateur radio equipment could be used to furnish information for the enemy, or serve as a signal for enemy planes to home in on.

Also, all airports that did not have 24 hour security and a manager were closed. The government did not want unsupervised landing spots where enemy planes could land with a commando or invasion force. Cherryland Airport was closed; it did not have the requirements for wartime operation.

Naturally, this closing caused great concern for all those interested in operating Cherryland Airport. Dr. Dorchester moved his own plane to the Green Bay Airport (not Austin Straubel, because Lt. Col. Austin Straubel from Green Bay was still alive and flying in late 1941 and early 1942. He was killed while flying in New Guinea against the Japanese a few months later, and the present airport is named for him.)

The Green Bay airport stayed open until early May of 1942, when both its managers were called into military pilot instructor positions. The lack of managers meant that the Green Bay airport had to be closed, and Dr. Dorchester's and all the other planes at Green Bay either removed or dismantled. And there were no other airports in operation this side of Manitowoc and Appleton.

By late May of 1942, Dr. Dan and the others interested in his flying service, had taken steps to open Cherryland Airport. They had hired a young Sturgeon Bay High School home economics teacher, Dorothy Cretney, to be the airport manager at Cherryland Airport.

Dorothy Cretney was not the first female airport manager in Wisconsin. Ruth Harmon was the first one, being the manager of the Kenosha facility. Dorothy Cretney was a remarkable woman, as those who remember her will tell you. Born on June 12, 1916, she had graduated from Dodgeville High School in 1933. Later, she studied at the University of Wisconsin, where she received a bachelor of science degree in 1941.

Dorothy Cretney worked at several jobs to finance her education; she spent six months as a 4-H leader at Gaylord, Minnesota, was

