

Visions of an Apostle Island park and airport

Washburn During The Roaring Twenties—Part 6

A second "grand vision" was for a national park for the Apostle Islands. The idea for a park to include one or more of the Apostle Islands, which had been casually suggested over the years, was revived and endorsed by the Tri-County Association and by the Bayfield and Ashland County Boards. A banquet meeting was quickly held, during which a long roster of speakers covered every aspect of the proposal, from the history of the Apostle Islands to the ownership of the land that might be included in the park. The Times described the meeting as "One of the most enthusiastic gatherings ever held in this region," which "crystallized public sentiment on the project and marked its transition from the realm of the visionary to a status as a feasible movement with organized support and good chances of success." But "good chances of success" notwithstanding, an Apostle Islands park did not become a reality in the 1920s and provided little benefit to Washburn when it finally opened in 1970.

The third of the "grand visions" foresaw Washburn as

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**Lars
Larson
Guest
columnist**

a center for commercial aviation in the north country. The 1920s saw the beginnings of the aviation era with "barn storming" pilots (usually fliers from the Great War) generating excitement at county fairs and farm fields across the nation, great advances in technology, records of various kinds made and broken, the first commercial passenger and air mail service in the early 1920s, and numerous attempts to conquer the Atlantic, consummated by Charles A. Lindbergh's solo flight from New York to Paris in May 1927. The Times and many other "interested citizens"—two of whom were "just 'itching' to purchase an airship"—joined in the enthusiasm for an airport. The airplane, the Times declared, "is the coming means of travel and we might as well prepare for it, for cities with landing fields are going to be the ones

that will forge ahead." So if Washburn "wants to be up with the coming times we should begin to think about an air port" with "suitable ground for a landing field" available near the cemetery. The usual committees were appointed to study the matter, but people soon realized that there was no reason for anyone to fly to Washburn or to fly from Washburn to anywhere else, and the vision—or fantasy—of "wings over Washburn" came to nothing.

While these "grand visions" promised a bright future for Washburn, community leaders, not wanting to leave anything to chance, revived the pre-war spirit of boosterism. There were numerous luncheons, dinners, dances, and picnics intended to bring people together to encourage cooperation and fellowship and to boost Washburn. For example in March 1924 the Woman's Council sponsored a "big community luncheon and program" at the Du Pont club, the Times reporting that "the good that this meeting will have in instilling confidence in people cannot be foretold for everyone went away from the meeting filled with enthusiasm and a determination to pull together for the best interests of the city." Another

booster event was a big "gala day" sponsored by the Booster Club to anticipate what Washburn would look like when the "grand visions," or some other miracle rescued it from decline. The idea was to attract 20,000 people to Washburn, the Times explaining that "the object of the day is to see just what a city of 20,000 people would look like in Washburn. For years we all had dreams of becoming a metropolis, but there has never been 20,000 people in the town at one time and if united effort can bring this about Washburn people are going to be able to see what a 20,000 crowd really looks like." The main attraction that was supposed to bring people to Washburn was a chance to win in a drawing a "new Chevrolet touring car." Since Washburn's population was about 4,000 people, to create this one day metropolis over 16,000 people would have had to travel to Washburn from the surrounding region, an impossible one-day mass migration. But the ever-optimistic Times reported that the gala day was "the biggest event ever put across in this city" with an estimated (but unlikely) ten thousand people attending.