

# Washburn Community Affairs 1940-1948—The Airport

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During the 1920s and 1930s Americans were awed spectators of flying. They watched with fascination the rapid technological development of airplanes, from flimsy contraptions to sleek metal monoplanes, idolizing the heroes of the air—Eddie Rickenbacker, Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and many others. Only a few well-to-do and fearless people flew on commercial “airliners” or “flying boats” and private flying was practically nonexistent. Airports were few and far between, and the passage of an airplane over a small community was the occasion for comment, while the rare emergency landing of a “barn-stormer,” on a nearby farm field, generated considerable excitement. The prominent role of airplanes in the war, along with the son or nephew, who actually flew one of the bombers or fighters, made airplanes and flying almost commonplace. As the war drew to a close, the aviation industry and commercial airlines predicted a new “air age,” when people of ordinary means could and would fly everywhere in comfort and safety. This enthusiasm extended to private flying. Not only would business executives and other important people “zip around,”—so it was said—in their own airplanes, ordinary people would learn to fly their own light airplanes, including “roadable airplanes,” just like driving the family car.



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But the dream of a new “air age” ran afoul of some hard realities. Mass transportation by commercial airlines was many years away, and while the business sector of private flying did expand, widespread aircraft ownership and piloting among ordinary people never “got off the ground,” so to speak.

The Washburn Times appears to have anticipated this marvelous post-war “air age,” when in 1928 it declared that Washburn should have an “air port,” because an “aerial age is coming,” when a “flying machine” will cost “little more than . . . a fliver.” When in July 1933 a physician from Chicago (L.B. Joslyn), who owned a cottage on the bay shore, flew his own plane to Washburn in seven hours, the Times announced in a triumphant tone that “This flight should bring home to Washburnites the fact that the age of aviation is upon us and should demonstrate the immediate

necessity of building a local airport.” But the following month provided a grim reminder of the reality that lay behind this fantasy of a glamorous “air age,” when the physician was killed in a crash while landing. There was no more talk about an airport for Washburn until 1940, when the city council appropriated \$200 for the construction of a “Sea Plane Base . . . in a suitable place on our bay shore.” The sea-plane base project was sponsored by the federal government as part of a program to construct such bases “in every locality where suitable water facilities are available . . . as part of the preparedness program.” Work on the base, at the foot of Eighth Avenue West, was incomplete when the project was ended in July 1941.

Then in early 1946 it appeared that at long last the dream of an airport in Washburn was to be realized, when Earl Johnson, owner of the local bakery, built an airstrip on the western edge of the city. It consisted of a 1,800 foot east-west dirt runway and a hanger-office building. Local enthusiasts organized a flying club named the “Top O’Wis Flying Club,” and Johnson and two others incorporated the Washburn Flying Service. Advertisements in the Times in early 1946 offered flight instruction at a reasonable cost to interested individuals in Washburn and nearby communities. The success of

the Washburn Flying Service depended on providing flight instruction and air transportation services, but despite the newspaper advertisements, there appears not to have been much demand for either. One of the advertisements offering flight instruction misleadingly stated that learning to fly was “As easy as learning to drive a car.” During the polio epidemic in 1946, Johnson flew 1,200 miles transporting critical ill polio patients to Minneapolis for treatment. One of these emergency flights was made at night even though his airplane was not equipped for night flying. He ran out of gas, managed to land in a farm field, refueled his airplane and continued to Minneapolis. Unfortunately, the patient later died. Then in November 1946, Johnson’s Aeronca Champion crashed on take-off, seriously injuring him. He was unconscious for two weeks but eventually recovered and was able to resume a normal life. This mishap ended the Washburn Flying Service. The deaths of 13 men from 1949 to 1979—one at the Ashland airport and a second at the La Pointe airport in August 1949, two at the Ashland airport in July 1960, three near Cable in November 1967, and six again near Cable in April 1979—ended the enthusiasm for private flying in the Chequamegon Bay region.