

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Ripon had own airfield prior to EAA AirVenture

Next week, the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) in Oshkosh will host its annual AirVenture fly-in event, which attracts people from all over the world.

During this time, airplane traffic over the city of Ripon increases and Ripon College offers dormitory housing to EAA attendees and spectators who drive daily to and from Oshkosh.

Many people may have forgotten that Ripon once had its own airfield. The "Jack Gerrie Field, located east of Ripon off Highway 44, opened in 1946. The airport's name was chosen in honor of Jack Gerrie (1919-1944), who lived at 221 Grant St. and graduated from both Ripon High School and Ripon College.

Gerrie obtained the rank of captain in the U.S. Army during World War II. He is most noted for his leadership in France and was awarded several medals for bravery and heroism. Gerrie is buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

The Ripon Aviation Co. owned and operated the airport, which was founded by local aviation enthusiasts who stepped up to form this business. The city of Ripon originally was offered to own and operate the airport as municipal businesses, however, the city declined ownership due to projected operating costs.

The Ripon Aviation Company became privately owned by four men as founders.

The first was James A. Stuart (1920-1997) a pilot and eventual Chairman of Ripon State Bank.

Joining Stuart was Clyde Lynch (1920-2009), a commercially licensed pilot who taught flying lessons; Frederick W. Kohl Jr. (1922-1972), a military veteran, former Ripon mayor and eventual owner of Kohl's Hardware (building now is Farrell's Fine Furnishings); and Frank Farvour (1919-2006), who served the United States during World War II and eventually became owner of the Farvour Insurance Agency and Ripon Land Surveying Co.

All four of these men were close in age, grew up near each other on Woodside Avenue and Thorne Street in Ripon, and attended Ripon schools. Most attended Ripon College, and also served in various capacities and ranks in the U.S. military.

Both the Ripon Aviation Co. and the separate airport were incorporated Jan. 21, 1946 after 12 months of work to raise funds and also elect a board of directors. The first-ever aviation



RIPON AVIATION CO. owners, from left, Frank Farvour, James Stuart and Frederick Kohl Jr. stand next to one of their three airplanes. Clyde Lynch also was an owner.

company board meeting was held Jan. 30 of that same year.

Airport location, infrastructure and grand opening

After investigating many potential sites, the airport became located on Highway 44, 2 1/2 miles east of Ripon on what may have been the Stellmacher farm property. It's uncertain if the land was purchased to create the airport or leased from the Stellmachers or possibly the Clyde Clausen family.

The airfield was made of turf — rolled for smoothness, seeded and planted in both grass and oats. At first, spectators and people wishing to pay for flights arrived and parked on both sides of Highway 44, causing car traffic problems. Later, a parking area off the highway was established. Two Quonset hut steel buildings were erected that measured 20-feet-by-24-feet and 40-feet-by-60-feet in size.

The smaller building became the airport office, while the larger building became storage.

The grand opening of Jack Gerrie Field took place July 28, 1946. Forty-three local Ripon businesses sponsored advertisements in a souvenir program, congratulating the new airport and aviation company, as well as wishing them success.

A large airplane hangar was planned for the future, a four-seater airplane was placed on order for delivery and telephone and electricity poles were put into place.

The master of ceremonies for the opening event was Wisconsin showman and entertainer Tommy Bartlett (1914-1998) and an airport dedication speech was made by then Ripon Mayor Les



A PLANE LANDS at Ripon's Jack Gerrie Field Airport circa 1949.

T. Chelstrom (1904-1965).

The airport also invited guest planes to fly in and land, there were aerial safety demonstrations, aviation flight demonstrations for 16-year-old boys and girls, free airplane rides for the oldest man and oldest woman at the ceremony, and an aerobatics show which included an Army plane flyover.

Ripon Aviation Company Offering

In effort to build enthusiasm for both the Jack Gerrie Field and Ripon Aviation Co., the owners decided to purchase additional used airplanes that could be flown for special events and rides to paying individuals.

These planes also could be used for instruction and experience to those wishing to obtain their own pilot's license.

The first plane the aviation company purchased was a 1941 Aeronica tandem two-seat trainer with a 65 horsepower engine that could be flown solo from the rear seat while the instructor sat in the front seat. The second was a surplus army trainer known as a PT-23, flown from the front seat with the instructor sitting in the back. Both of these planes used battery-operated phones that enabled the pilot and

instructor to speak to each other using headset speakers.

The third plane that was purchased was an ERCO Ercoupe, which had a metal body but fabric wings with metal wing flap control surfaces and side-by-side seats that carried a pilot and instructor. These three planes were constantly on display for the general public to view, ask questions and admire.

Four students immediately signed up to obtain pilot license certification, took their courses and first-solo flights at Jack Gerrie Field. Eventually, "ground school" night classes for adults and youth were taught by the Ripon Aviation Co. at Ripon High School on Monday evenings, where interested individuals could learn about flight radio, meteorology and navigation.

Thirty hours of ground school were part of students' curriculum for obtaining their pilot's license, as well as in-flight air instruction plus hours of flying requirements.

A 1947 *Ripon Commonwealth* advertisement stated that people could stop at the airport to tour the facility and take a \$5 (which equates to \$67.45 today) sight-seeing trip, flying with a pilot over Ripon and Green Lake. For \$64 (which equates to \$863.40 today), individuals could be taught to become a pilot by a licensed instructor.

Interesting Ripon

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Ripon Aviation Company

GERRIE FIELD
2 1/2 Mi. East on Highway 44
PHONE 3010

A 1947 RIPON Aviation Co. advertisement tries to get people to learn how to pilot the Ercoupe.

submitted photo

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Commonwealth newspaper mentions

The July 27, 1947 *Commonwealth* reported that "Divellio, the famous parachute jumper, will make a sensational jump from the altitude of 400 feet at Ripon's new Airport. Bargain Day for Passengers — A Trip Through the Clouds for two passengers \$5.00 dollars, BE THERE!"

The Aug. 4, 1950 *Commonwealth* stated "a four-seater airplane pilot forced his plane to land and flip upside-down on the Sherwood family farm just east of Ripon when his airplane engine lost power after taking off from the Jack Gerrie Airport. No one was injured."

The Jack Gerrie Airport closed in 1960 due to waning public interest and a vote to dissolve the business by its private owners. The airport land then was converted into a dirt-racetrack hosting Saturday night demolition derby race cars for several years.

Individuals who have memories or photos of the airport are asked to email the Ripon Historical Society at riponhistsoc@gmail.com or call 920-748-5354.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.



FOUR LADIES POSE with a Ripon Aviation Co. airplane circa 1947.

submitted photo

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