

DONALDSON CENTER INDUSTRIAL AIR PARK

Leonard Todd

"Donaldson Center" as the Industrial Air Park is recognized in the Greenville area, was constructed by the U. S. Army Air Force in the early days of World War Two. At the request of the Army, the city and county assembled approximately 2500 acres of almost level farm land down the Augusta Road some six miles from Downtown Greenville to provide a site for the Army to build a training base for flight crews. Since this was a period of intense national pride, and incidentally, the activation of the base would bring many dollars of Army payroll into the hands of local merchants, the land was offered free to the Army.

When the Base was activated in 1943, it was commissioned as the Greenville Army Air Force Base with the purpose of training B-25 crews. The people of the Greenville Area soon became accustomed to seeing these two-motored bombing craft flying the friendly Carolina skies. The Army established a practice bombing range in Northern Greenville County in an almost inaccessible area below Caesars Head known to the natives as "The Dismal." One plane crashed in Lake Greenwood, remaining in its watery grave until 1983, when it was recovered by Navy divers. One terrible day, a group of B-25's were flying in close formation over the Base. Two of the planes' wings tipped. The inevitable crash followed, causing the loss of many fine young men. It was Greenville Air Base's most dreadful hour.

There was a warm feeling between the citizens of Greenville and the troops who were stationed at the Base, many of whom later returned to Greenville, establishing their businesses and homes. They had added greatly to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the area. After the war, the Greenville Army Air Force Base was closed. The Defense Department later decided to reopen the Base as the Global Headquarters of the Military Air Transport Command (M.A.T.S.). But they insisted that the government have title to the land which had been previously leased. Greenville County had an appointed three-man Board of Commissioners, namely, Robert A. Jolley, Sr., B. A. Bennett,

and George Wenk, who would not agree to sign a fee simple deed transferring the property to the government without a reversionary clause being inserted. The military backed off saying that they had never done this and it was impossible since they were planning on spending much money on the Base. There was great concern among the Greenville leadership, fearing that the base would not be reopened. This caused great pressure to be exerted upon the Commissioners who nevertheless did not back down. Instead they resigned and a new Board of Commissioners, James H. Woodside, Chairman, J. C. Keys, Jr., and Ansel Alewine were appointed. Finally, Mr. Woodside persuaded the military to agree to the desired terms allowing the clause to be inserted, which meant that if ever the base was formally deactivated, then it would revert to the city and county. Years later, this wise action of these two Greenville County Commissions would pay big dividends to the citizens of this area. James H. Woodside deserves special commendation for his skillful negotiations in this difficult matter. Major General Robert A. Douglas was the M.A.T. Commander with Colonel Frank McNeese as Base Commander. About 2200 airmen, (the Air Force had now become a separate command) were stationed at the Base with M.A.T.'s planes flying to all parts of the world. M.A.T. supplies all the air support for our scientists on the ice cap near the South Pole. Christ Church New Zealand became the sister city to Greenville and our mayor was flown by the Air Force to New Zealand to partake in the festivities. The Air Force loved Greenville and Greenville loved its Air Base.

In 1950, the Military Commission on Graves and Memorials decided that military installations should be named in honor of a heroic person whose deed had meant much to his country and fellow citizens. At this time, I was chairman of the Military Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Commerce and was asked to make a recommendation to the Commission. Our Committee advertised this affair in *The Greenville News-Piedmont* and we received many recommendations and suggestions. All of these were men who had connections in the Greenville Area and had performed acts of heroism in every war in which we had participated. The one which stood out above all

others was Major John O. Donaldson. The recommendation of the Committee was accepted by the Commission and the Greenville Air Force Base became officially "Donaldson Air Force Base."

Some of you have read this inscription that was placed by the Air Force beneath Major Donaldson's portrait at the Base: "Donaldson Air Force Base was named in commemoration of Major Donaldson on 22 March 1951. Major Donaldson, a native of Greenville, SC was a distinguished pilot of World War I, credited with destroying nine German planes and two balloons. He evaded capture after being downed twice behind enemy lines. Decorations include the Distinguished Service cross, Distinguished Flying Cross, British Flying Cross, Belgian Croix de Guerre, and two Citations from the late John J. Pershing. After the war, he pursued a distinguished career in civil aviation, and met his death in an airplane crash on September 7, 1930."

There is a movement underway currently to establish a museum at Donaldson, which would house historical objects collected over the years of Donaldson's military life and the life of Major Donaldson. County Councilman, Bob Leach, is the driving force behind this excellent idea with Tom Barton, Chairman of the Steering Committee.

This should be of great interest to members of the Greenville Historical Society since our member, Romaine Barnes, was a cousin of Major Donaldson. Romaine's home was constructed in 1863, for my mother's great uncle, Dr. Willie Williams, one of the four founders of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Greenville, later moved to Louisville, Kentucky. Following Dr. Williams, the property was briefly owned by a Colonel Earl, whose daughter was the mother of Dr. John Plyler, former distinguished President of Furman University. In 1867, the home was purchased by T. Q. Donaldson who was Romaine's grandfather and who lived there until his death in 1912. As an additional point of interest to our members, one of Mr. Donaldson's daughters married Dr. Davis Furman, son of Dr. James Furman and grandson of Richard Furman, founder of Furman University. Dr. and Mrs. Furman lived in the home

for many years prior to its acquisition by Romaine Barnes who restored it to its traditional state and it is now on the National Registry.

In the early 60's politics reared its ugly head. Savannah, Georgia needed some economic help. Congressman Carl Vinson of Georgia was chairman of the Military Affairs Committee in the House of Representatives. For reasons unknown, the Military Transport Command was moved - guess where? To Savannah. During his campaign for the U. S. Senate, Olin Johnston stood shoulder-to-shoulder with President Lyndon Johnson on the White House steps and they both agreed that M.A.T.S. would remain at Donaldson. The Air Force people did not like this move from Donaldson and as the trucks moved out of the main gate, many bore the sign "Rolling with Olin."

During one of the periods when Donaldson was inactive, a Congressional Search Committee was formed to locate a home for the fledgling Air Force Academy. Donaldson seemed a natural site and a big effort was made to have this service school located here. Donaldson made "the short list," but as you know, the academy was located in Colorado.

For several years, Donaldson was inactive but the Air Force would not declare it closed, leaving some dozen airmen there to maintain the base. Finally, it was declared surplus in 1963, and with the reversionary clause enforced, the land was deeded back to Greenville City and County. The General Service Administration made an inventory and on August 19th, 1963, offered to return the original land, plus 40 acres that the Army had purchased, plus buildings, roads, and equipment for \$421,650.00. The county and city borrowed this sum from local banks and quickly assumed title.

Prior to the appointment of the Donaldson Management Committee, the City Mayor and the County Senator (only one then) had agreed to sell one hundred acres to Union Carbide, plus buildings thereon, for \$184,500.00 (\$1,000.00 per acre). The Committee sold the electrical distribution system to Duke Power Company for \$304,280.00, the detached radar site to John Perkins for \$12,000.00 and the railroad equipment and

right-of-way to the Southern Railroad for \$125,000.00. As a result of these sales, the Committee was able to pay off the bank loans and set up reserve operating funds. They have never asked the city or county for funds and have given to the two governing bodies approximately \$2,000,000.00 from the sale of land. But of more importance than the money, the Donaldson Commission has, and is, maintaining the longest runway in South Carolina, second only to Shaw Field at Sumter. The main air strip is 8000 X 150 feet. This is in daily use. The second air strip is 5500 X 300 feet and is now leased to Michelin Tire for use as a test track. If need should arise, this runway could be reactivated. The main runway has pilot actuated runway lights, I.F.R. Nav aids, including a Localizer and Glide Slope; a complete Instrument Landing System.

Soon after the acquisition of the base, it became evident that prospective clients did not want to deal with the City Council, the County Delegation and the County Development Board. As a solution to this problem a Donaldson Center Management Committee was formed. This was a four-man Committee composed of a representative from the County Delegation, one from City Council, the Chairman of the County Development Board and the Chairman of the County Planning Commission. A. D. Asbury, a former member of this group, and Chairman of the County Planning Commission was elected as Chairman of the first Donaldson Committee. He remained Chairman for many years and it was under his steady hand that Donaldson set its course. In my capacity as Chairman of the County Development Board for three years, I had the pleasure of serving with A. D. Asbury and can attest to his effectiveness. The first decision of the Management Committee was that the air complex would be preserved as a unit for future use, and that no sales would be made that would encroach on the airfield complex. The aim of the Donaldson Management Committee was to develop and maintain a quality and highly desirable industrial park. The operation has included sale of land and development by owners and the leasing of existing buildings and facilities.

Since the Management Committee was appointed by verbal agreement and had no legal status, the Committee asked that a

Commission be legally constituted. On January 13, 1975, the City and County Councils (home rule government was now in place) approved a joint resolution creating the new Donaldson Development Commission superseding the Donaldson Management Committee. This Commission was composed of three appointees from City Council and three from County Council. One of these three would be a member of the appointing council and the other two appointees elected by Council. These six would elect a seventh (swing) member. Thus the present Commission has Gale Crawford, Richard Ashmore and C. D. Bishop county appointees, and Jimmy Snyder, James Miles, Chairman and Fred Suggs, Secretary, city appointees, Dave Strain, at-large and current Vice Chairman.

The members of the Greenville Historical Society are long time established residents of Greenville. It would be of interest to see how many have been to Donaldson in the last five years. Don't forget that for the last several years, the Chamber of Commerce has sponsored the second greatest concentration of hot air balloons in the country on its three day "Freedom Weekend Aloft." Or the many air shows featuring the Air Force Thunderbirds or the Navy Blue Angels. Raise your hand if you have been on Donaldson in the last five years. Thank you — since some have not had the pleasure, let me show a map of Donaldson Center, and pictures of some of the industry located at the Center. You will notice that the group includes 3-M Company with 2 plants, Amoco Corp., General Electric, Auto Shack, SE Distribution Center, Norwich-Eaton Pharmaceutical, F. W. Woolworth's Southeastern Distribution Center, Reynolds, Smith & Hills, Lockheed, National Starch & Chemical Corporation, Flavor Inn, Crucible Chemical and other well known and highly respected companies. Just off the center is Michelin's U. S. Headquarters. Along with its major automobile tire manufacturing plant. We are very proud of landowners as well as tenants who have selected Donaldson. We also have a County Vocational School, National Guard Armory and Army Reserve Center. A new Navy Reserve Training Center is presently under construction. There is a total of more than 90 businesses located at Donaldson. An F.A.A. fully approved Aircraft Mechanics School will open this fall in a hangar

currently being constructed by Donaldson. This will be a part of Greenville Tech, who also conducts a heavy truck driving school here.

Now look at the map. I would call your attention to the location of these clients. You will also note that the map has been color coded. This indicates the results of our long range Master Plan, clearly separating air-related areas in and around the airfield from the remaining areas of Donaldson Center. Speaking of the Master Plan, this was prepared as part of the "Donaldson Center Development Plan and Market Analysis Study" completed in 1980 under a \$50,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission. This is a very comprehensive report prepared by Economics Research Associates and R. Dixon Speas Associates who are considered to have great expertise in airport related economics. This study was conducted and reported to the Donaldson Commission in three stages. First phase report was the Development Potential of Donaldson Center, second phase - Major Development Alternatives and third, the Long Range Plan and Five Year Development Program. A joint meeting of County Council, City Council, and Donaldson Board Members, was held with the research people presenting and explaining the report and recommendations. Knowing that many of the Council Members would not have time to study this report in full, the Commission prepared a ten page summary with comments from the Board on each section. Six years have passed since the meeting. It is interesting and gratifying to note how much of this plan has been implemented. A good deal remains to be accomplished, especially in the area of the proposed Form of Organization. This would be a creation of a non-profit corporation, wholly owned, by the City and County which would be given a mandate to carry out the development of Donaldson in accordance with the Master Plan. The assets of Donaldson would be transferred to the corporation, and the corporation would be empowered to finance future development costs out of annual income. The Board would be appointed by City and County Councils (the Stockholders). Policy direction would be maintained by the power of appointment, annual budget review, and monthly financial statements. Annual meetings

would allow the stockholders to make any changes considered necessary. This proposed change in ownership has many advantages and is now being actively considered by both councils. The 1980 Donaldson Commission endorsed this concept wholeheartedly and should be complimented for their wisdom and foresight. Donaldson receives no tax monies. It is completely self-supporting, and as mentioned before, has divided more than \$2,200,000.00 between the city and county. Out of the original 2465 acres acquired from the Air Force, the city and county still own 2000 acres debt free. A very fine airfield is being maintained and modernized at no cost to the owners. The peak occupancy of Donaldson Air Force Base was 2000 people with an annual payroll of \$20,000,000. Today's employment is around 3000 people with payrolls in excess of \$50,000,000. Today, there are approximately 90 businesses, large and small, at Donaldson. The Commission has made, and is making, concerted efforts to sell selected properties. For one reason or another, these sales have gone slowly. These efforts will be expanded. The announcement that Lockheed had established a major modification center at Donaldson has been greeted with enthusiasm by all. While the size of their work force will depend upon what contracts they are able to generate, this world renowned company has signed an expensive ten year lease with the Commission and has begun the expenditure of approximately \$2,000,000 on improvements in the leased facilities. They now employ over 350 persons and this large investment would indicate that they expect to be able to get the contracts necessary to support a large work force, and should become one of the area's principal sources of employment. The 3-M Company has just completed a very major addition to one of their two Donaldson plants. Union Carbide has just completed their second plant at the Center which has been purchased and operated by Amoco Oil. National Electric Corporation, an English Company, recently announced the purchase of the original Union Carbide Plant. Auto Shack has just completed its 300,000 sq. ft. distribution center near the Woolworth Center. The Commission is pleased by these evidences of major companies being satisfied with their relations with the Commission.

Recently, the Donaldson Center Fire Service Area was established. They have their own five-man Commission which has taken over the fire station, its trucks and equipment and twelve-man staff. This Commission has representatives from land owners and tenants at Donaldson as well as one member from the Donaldson Board. They are to provide proper fire service and have taxing authority to accomplish this goal.

Most of the publicly owned buildings were constructed between 1941 and 1957. These older buildings require constant maintenance and repairs, which the Commission has been able to provide from rental income. A maintenance staff of nine keeps up the grounds and minor repair work, such as painting, plumbing, etc. Major work such as new roofs on hangars are let on bids. The roads are owned and maintained by the Commission. The disposal plant and sewer trunk lines have been deeded to Western Carolina Sewer Authority.

An up-to-date accounting system has been installed which defines all income and expenses according to three areas: Administration, Airfield or Industrial Park. A rent roll is further provided. The Commission is thus able to manage with more well defined specifics. The auditing firm of Ernst & Whinney provides an annual audit. The office is well run by the Executive Director, Phil Southerland, supported by two capable ladies and an air field manager.

There are as many ideas on how to best run Donaldson as there are thinking people in Greenville. Many of these are good ideas, and doubtless future boards will take them into account. Given the present divided ownership, with the ever-changing political personalities, the restrictions relative to disposal of public land and the lack of any tax income, the present Board would like to keep things as simple as possible.

The Donaldson Development Commission recognizes that the Center is a public trust that must be managed in a way that will provide the best results for the citizens of Greenville County and the City of Greenville. They believe first that the airfield should be maintained and protected at all cost as this is an irrecoverable asset. They believe secondly, that the rentable buildings must be

well maintained so that the rent stream will continue flowing, thus providing the funds to maintain the airfield and the industrial park. They believe that all available land not needed for airfield protection and income producing buildings should be sold as sites for industry. This would, of course, produce cash as well as tax paying and job providing business.

The Donaldson Commission uses the nationally recognized firm of Howard Needles Tammen and Bergendoff as its airport consultants, and in conjunction with them, has established a good relationship with the Federal Aviation Administration. Airspace around Donaldson Airport has been assigned to Donaldson by the FAA and a published instrument approach to Donaldson's runways has been effective since July 31, 1981. Navigational aids to pilots include the non-directional radio beacon, pilot actuated lights, a localizer, and a glide slope. Funds for these aids have been provided by FAA, S. C. Aeronautics Authority, Appalachian Regional Commission and Donaldson's own monies. In agreement with Donaldson's long range plan, the air facilities are being developed primarily for air cargo and the creation of a regional air cargo distribution hub. The runways and ramps lend themselves ideally to handle the large jets and wide body planes used in the business. Secondly, the air facilities are being developed to attract and service the larger and faster corporate executive aircraft which require longer runways. Thirdly, aircraft modification and manufacturing, as exemplified by Lockheed, are a natural.

This is the role that Donaldson Center Air Park can best serve the Greenville Community's air needs. This is a role that complements and does not compete with the very modern Greenville-Spartanburg Jetport with its scheduled passenger air carriers, and the Downtown Airport with its primary pilot training and general aviation and many smaller aircraft activities.

There are many fine industrial parks and good airports in South Carolina. But Donaldson Center Industrial Air Park is "one of a kind" in our state. Greenvillians have every right to be proud of it, because Donaldson is special and because it is special, its potential is being developed in a special way so as to

maximize the economic and community benefits to the citizens of this area.

Presented to the Greenville Historical Society

April 5, 1987

by: Leonard M. Todd, Former Chairman of Donaldson Center
Industrial Park