

BIRTH OF AN AIRPORT

From Mines Field to Los Angeles International
L.A. Celebrates the 50th Anniversary of Its Airport

by Paul D. Friedman

What the choice of a harbor means to a seaport community of the present and past, the selection of a great metropolitan airport means to the community of the future, and even more, it is anticipated. Giant liners of the air to which the present ships are mere pygmies, in a comparatively few years will make port here, with hundreds of passengers where one to a dozen now travel by air.

Lloyd B. Hamilton, City Editor
The Inglewood Daily Californian
March 17, 1928

Los Angeles Municipal Airport in August 1929 (also known as Mines Field). The airport at that time consisted of a 2,000-foot-long oiled runway and two buildings, Hangar No. 1 at top and Hangar No. 2/3 at bottom. In between the hangars is the Interstate Cafe. Notice the open land surrounding the field. (Los Angeles Department of Airports)



Los Angeles Municipal Airport was officially dedicated on June 7, 1930. The flower girl stands before Hangar No. 2-3.

LOOKING AT Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) today, it is difficult to visualize what it might have been like over 50 years ago. Today this multimillion-dollar facility is capable of handling most modern jet aircraft. One of the busiest airports in the world, over 28 million people used LAX last year. Yet who could have predicted back in the 1920s, when airplanes were made of little more than fabric and wood, that this relatively obscure field near Inglewood would one day become a jet-age terminal. Even more remarkable, the city of Los Angeles has operated an airport on this spot since 1928. This year marks the 50th anniversary of Los Angeles International Airport. To trace the history of LAX we have to go back to the very beginnings of commercial aviation.

Los Angeles, it seems, has always been fascinated by airplanes. In 1910 the nation's first air meet was held at the Dominguez Rancho. Over 40,000 people came out to see such pioneer aviators as Charles Willard, Glenn Curtiss, and Louis Paulhan perform. The *Los Angeles Times* called Paulhan's flight from Dominguez to Santa Anita and back "the greatest sporting event the world has, perhaps, ever seen."¹ Glenn L. Martin was building gliders in an abandoned church in Santa Ana as early as 1907. By 1915 Martin operated a small airplane factory near the

site of what is now Los Angeles International Airport. In 1920 a former Martin engineer, a young graduate of MIT named Donald W. Douglas, opened up his own aircraft company in the back room of a barber shop on Pico Boulevard. Later relocating in Santa Monica, the Douglas Aircraft Company grew to become one of the leading airplane builders in the country and established Los Angeles as a center for the nation's aircraft industry.²

In the 1920s airplanes were still something of a novelty. It had only been 20 short years since the Wright brothers had taken off in the first powered flight, and aviation technology had not greatly advanced since then. The airports of that time were "little more than abandoned cow pastures or the infield area of race tracks."³ In Los Angeles the best known air fields of the early 1920s included Venice Airport, located near the corner of Venice and Washington Boulevards, and Mercury Field and Chaplin Airport, which were across the street from each other where Wilshire Boulevard now meets Fairfax Avenue. The first commercial airlines were ill-fated ventures which inevitably went bankrupt or folded. In July of 1919 Syd Chaplin, Charlie Chaplin's brother, organized an airline company which offered six round trips a day from Wilmington to Santa Catalina Island using a Curtiss MF flying boat. When Chaplin Airlines went out

of business in the latter part of 1920, the route between Los Angeles and Avalon was taken over by Pacific Marine Airways.⁴ The life span of these early airlines was short because the public viewed flying as a hazardous occupation.

The commercial airline industry was not stabilized until the federal government took an interest in aviation. The Air Mail Act of 1925, better known as the Kelly Act, encouraged the growth of commercial aviation by taking the delivery of air mail out of the hands of the post office and offering contracts to private companies. One of the five original air mail contracts went to Western Air Express, which operated out of Vail Field in Montebello, to fly the mail between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. Soon Western was carrying passengers as well as the mail. Other companies also took advantage of the air mail contracts to initiate passenger service. Pacific Air Transport, which flew the route between Los Angeles and Seattle included passengers along with the mail bags in their Ryan M-1 s. By 1929 there were six regularly scheduled airlines flying out of L.A.⁵

The Kelly Act was one of the first actions taken by the United States government towards the development of a national policy for aviation. The next step was the formation of a federal department to oversee aviation activities. The Air Commerce Act of 1926 created the so-called Aeronautics Branch within the Department of Commerce with the responsibility for making safety rules, providing for the maintenance of airways and navigational facilities, and the regulation of civil aviation in general. The 1926 Air Commerce Act did not, however, provide for federal assistance in the construction of airports.⁶ Thus it was up to local communities or private investors to build landing fields.

Local governments and private entrepreneurs were more than willing to finance the development of air transport facilities because of the relatively minor cost involved.⁷ Aviation had assumed a national importance after the passage of the Air Commerce Act of 1926, and many civic leaders did not want to see Los Angeles left behind. It was felt that the establishment of a public air field was essential to the financial well-being of the city. Analogies were commonly drawn between the municipal operation of an airport and the development of harbors or roads. As one article argued:

If we cannot furnish adequate facilities for the use of aircraft, we cannot hope for rapid development in this kind of transportation. At this point we must expect our local government to step into the breach and supply the needed landing fields, just as it has supplied the good roads for the automobile.⁸

The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce began to vigorously push for the creation of a municipal airport. On October 20, 1926, the Chamber published a survey of various landing fields in the Los Angeles area compiled by meteorologist Dr. Ford A. Carpenter. This report reviewed 13 potential locations for the municipal airport. For each site mentioned there was a photograph and a brief description of the facilities offered there. One of the air fields listed was an area of open farm land known as the "Inglewood Site."⁹

At that time the Inglewood field was little more than a level section of ground where tenant farmers grew wheat, barley, and beans. Local flyers occasionally used the spot as a makeshift landing strip. The Inglewood site eventually became known as Mines Field, after William W. Mines, the real estate agent who han-



On August 25, 1929, the city's new airport was visited by the famous dirigible, the *Graf Zeppelin*, on its record-breaking round-the-world flight. (Los Angeles Department of Airports)

dled the offer of this property to the City of Los Angeles.

The active promotion of the Inglewood site as a potential airport began in June 1927, when a group of local citizens, realizing the importance of having a major air terminal located nearby, began to push for its development. This group was led by George Cleaver, an oil lands developer; Frank D. Parent, chairman of the Aeronautics Committee of the Inglewood Chamber of Commerce and president of the Centinela Valley Improvement Association; and Harry Culver, real estate promoter and founder of Culver City. These men managed to obtain an option on the Inglewood site and began to hatch plans for a "super-airport" to be built there, which would include a manufacturing center as well as air field facilities. They attempted to interest the Ford Motor Company in investing in the field, and even convinced William B. Mayo, Ford's chief engineer, to come out and inspect the property. A letter was also written to the Daniel Guggenheim Foundation for the Promotion of Aeronautics asking for funds to develop the Inglewood airport plan. Both Ford and the Guggenheim Foundation refused to invest in the project. This, however, did not deter the Inglewood boosters. Harry Culver helped Jack Maddux, the owner of a local Ford car dealership, to organize a commercial airline company. On July 21, 1927, the Maddux Airline Company began passenger service between Los Angeles and San Diego using Ford Trimotors. At first

the airline operated out of Rogers Airport (on what is now Crenshaw Boulevard), but it was Maddux's intention to move to the Inglewood field as soon as facilities were developed there. In a brilliant act of promotion, the Inglewood group was able to induce Charles Lindbergh to land a Maddux Trimotor at the Inglewood site. Having brought considerable attention to the field, the Inglewood promoters began to press the Los Angeles City Council to select the site as the location for the municipal airport.¹⁰

The Los Angeles City Council had been slow in considering the airport issue. Their inactivity, however, was shattered in May 1927, by Charles Lindbergh's electrifying solo flight across the Atlantic in the *SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS*. This achievement made Lindbergh a hero of international stature and gave the United States aircraft industry a needed boost, enhancing the reputation of American aviation and convincing the public of the importance of the airplane as a new means of transportation. In Los Angeles the excitement generated by Lindbergh's flight motivated the City Council to move forward with the selection of possible sites for a municipal airport.¹¹ In July 1927, the City Council began accepting bids from owners or agents who wanted their property considered as a location for the field.

The Inglewood field was not the only property in competition for the municipal airport. In all, a total of 27 sites were originally offered to the City. Of these, eight were selected by the City Council for serious consideration. They were Vail Field, the Bandini site, Hellman Field, and the El Monte site, all on the east side of town; Sesnon and the Van Nuys site, both in the San Fernando Valley; and the Dominguez air field and Mines Field, which were located in the southwestern portion of the city. The City Council wanted to operate more than just one airport in the Los Angeles area. It was advocated that one air field site should be located near downtown, one in the San Fernando Valley, and one in the southwestern section of the city.

The City Council then requested that the municipal Bureau of Budget and Efficiency produce a detailed survey of the eight sites under serious consideration. These reports, completed by the end of 1927, described each site by giving its name, owner or agent, and location. Then the sites were rated on wind conditions, fog, power lines and obstructions, physical features, clearing and grading, landmarks, accessibility, available services, and fire protection. Of the eight sites only Sesnon, Van Nuys, and Mines were located within the city limits. Mines Field received the best score overall, closely followed by Van Nuys, Sesnon, and Vail Field.¹²

Relying mainly upon the Bureau of Budget and Efficiency reports, as well as their own investigations into the matter, the Finance Committee of the Los Angeles City Council attempted to select the three best available sites for the location of the municipal airports. Unfortunately the Finance Committee was unable to reach total agreement over which fields the City should acquire. When the Committee submitted its recommendations to the City Council on March 16, 1928, the majority report, presented by Councilmen Arthur Alber and Charles Randall, stated that the City should purchase the Hellman site as the downtown airport, the Sesnon tract in the San Fernando Valley, and Mines Field to serve the southwestern area. The Committee's minority report, given by Councilman Peirson M. Hall, agreed with the selection of Mines Field, but suggested

that Van Nuys should be the airport for the San Fernando Valley. As to a field close to downtown, Hall felt that the matter should be postponed for future discussion, although it was known that he favored the use of the Griffith Park landing strip in this regard.¹³

On March 23, 1928, the City Council met to resolve the disagreement over the selection of airports. It was decided that Vail Field, rather than the Hellman, should be the site to serve the downtown. The selection of Vail Field was apparently influenced by pressure applied by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the *Los Angeles Times*, and Western Air Express.¹⁴ It was also decided that the Sesnon tract should be the air field for the San Fernando Valley. Mines Field, the only location that both minority and majority reports of the Finance Committee had agreed upon, was easily picked as the third airport.

The Los Angeles City Council then passed an ordinance on April 4th, which placed a \$6 million airport bond issue on the May 1st ballot. This was for general obligation bonds to purchase land for the municipal airports, within or without the city limits, and for the construction of the necessary facilities. The wording on the bond issue was vague and no specific sites were mentioned. As a result the proposition failed to carry.¹⁵

Although the City Council had originally favored the acquisition of three airport sites, the failure of the May bond issue made this economically unfeasible. It was therefore decided that only one location should be purchased. On June 25, 1928, Mines Field was selected as L.A.'s municipal airport. Mines was chosen because it had been highly rated by the Bureau of Budget and Efficiency; both reports of the Finance Committee had found it acceptable; and because it had recently been selected by the California Air Race Association as the site of the 1928 National Air Races to be held in September.¹⁶

When the National Aeronautics Association first announced the approval of Los Angeles as the host city for the 1928 National Air Races, a frantic search had begun for an appropriate facility. The California Air Race Association narrowed the choices down to three sites: Long Beach, El Monte, and Mines Field. In April 1928, it was decided that the air races would be held at Mines. This decision was influenced by the selection of Mines Field by the Los Angeles City Council in March as one of the three locations for the municipal airport, and by the lobbying efforts of Frank D. Parent, one of the promoters of the Inglewood field.¹⁷

All during the summer the field was made ready for the air races. Mines Field lacked proper facilities; there were no buildings, hangars, or permanent runways. Clifford Henderson acted as Managing Director and helped oversee the preparations. Three runways were laid out, graded and oiled, grandstands were erected, a large exposition building of lumber and canvas was constructed, fencing was put up, roads leading to the field were paved, utilities were installed, and sanitation facilities were provided. The air races were held between September 8th and 16th, with a total of \$125,000 in prize money being offered. The highlight of the air show was the surprise appearance of Charles Lindbergh with the Army Air Corps exhibition team known as the "Three Musketeers." Lindbergh was replacing Lt. J.J. Williams who had been killed in a tragic crash while performing a stunt during the third day of the meet. The air races proved to be a tremendous success, as over 200,000 people flocked to Mines Field to see Lindbergh fly.¹⁸

LOS ANGELES MUNICIPAL AIRPORT: 1928-1937

At the conclusion of the air races the City of Los Angeles took over the operation of Mines Field. The lease for the airport, which had been approved by the City Council in August, was signed on September 26, 1928. The tract, to be a mile square, was acquired in two parcels. The southernly 480 acres were leased from James R. and Pauline Martin, and the northernly 160 acres were leased from the Los Angeles Extension Company, of which Martin held an interest. The terms of the lease called for the City to rent the land for 10 years, with an option to buy, commencing on October 1, 1928. The rental for the first year was \$96,000, and \$124,000 a year was to be paid for the remainder of the lease.¹⁹

There were several reasons why the City chose to lease Mines Field rather than purchase the property outright. The defeat of the May bond issue meant that the acquisition of a municipal airport was not an overwhelmingly popular issue. The City Council could ill afford to proceed with the development of an air field without the backing of the electorate, and it was much safer politically to lease the land. Such a lease would allow the City to experiment with municipal airport operations and decide whether or not the Mines site was suitable. It was known that some people opposed the selection of Mines Field, and because of intense pressure from various interests lobbying for other sites, the Council was afraid to make a long-term investment in a single airport property.

The Los Angeles City Department of Airports (DOA) was created on September 25, 1928, when the City Council adopted Ordinance No. 61,923, which was to go into effect on October 1st. Some members of the Council had favored the formation of a five-member "Airport Commission" to supervise the operation of the Department.²⁰ When the final ordinance was drawn up, however, the provision for an independent commission was omitted. The Director of Airports was to be the chief administrative officer of the DOA, but he was directly responsible to the Finance Committee of the City Council. Thus the City Council held the real power over the operation of the airport, retaining the right to pass all rules and regulations and to approve all leases.

Clifford Henderson, formerly Managing Director of the National Air Races, was appointed the first Director of Airports on October 16, 1928, at a salary of \$400 a month. The offices of the Department of Airports were located in City Hall, and the staff consisted of Henderson, a secretary, a Superintendent of Airports, and two airport attendants. The first Superintendent of Airports was Ralph T. McKinnon. Henry G. Bakes was hired in December 1928 as one of the first airport attendants, and he was actually stationed at Mines Field to perform the various maintenance and police duties. Because of the lack of adequate facilities, Bakes was forced to work out of a phone booth for the first few months of the airport's operation.²¹ Although the field was officially known as Los Angeles Municipal Airport, it continued to be called Mines Field until after World War II.

One of the first goals of the newly created Department of Airports was the acquisition of another airport closer to the downtown. It was suggested that the City take over the operation of the landing strip at Griffith Park. This air field was used by the Air Service of the California National Guard through a special



In 1936 Los Angeles Municipal Airport once again hosted the National Air Races. (Los Angeles Department of Airports)

arrangement with the Los Angeles City Park Board. The idea, as formulated by certain members of the City Council led by Pierson M. Hall, was for the Griffith Park air strip to be used as an auxiliary field to supplement Mines Field. This idea met with heated criticism. The Park Board and Municipal League of Los Angeles, among others, were both strongly against the taking of park land for use as a downtown air depot. This opposition forced the Department of Airports to abandon its plans for a Griffith Park Airport.²²

Because the City Council was unable to use the Griffith Park air strip, the Department of Airports was left with Mines Field as the only municipal airport. After having just taken over the operation of Mines Field, the DOA sought to build proper facilities there. In 1929 the first permanent hangar was constructed at the airport by the Curtiss-Wright Company. This Spanish-styled building, known as Hangar No. 1, housed the flying school run by the Curtiss Flying Service. Later that same year the City of Los Angeles built its first hangar at Mines Field. This structure, known as Hangar No. 2-3, was really two separate hangars connected by an administration building with a tower and beacon on top. This was not used as a control tower, since all air traffic was directed from the ground with the use of flags. With the completion of Hangar No. 2-3, the offices of the Department of Airports were moved from City Hall to the municipal airport on November 1, 1929.

At this time the first permanent runway was constructed. The runways built for the 1928 Air Races were merely graded strips of adobe field covered with oil. Whenever it rained they turned into muddy quagmires and could not be used. So in 1929 the Department of Airports laid out a 2000-foot-long runway which was graded and covered with decomposed granite and oil. Because they lacked a roller, the airport crew gathered together as

many automobiles as possible and drove them up and down the runway to pack it in. The City of Los Angeles then erected two more hangars at the airport. Hangar No. 4 was built in 1930 and occupied by a flying school run by Larry Talbert. The last of the City's original airport complex on the south side of the field was Hangar No. 5, completed in 1931, and used by Pacific Aeromotive as an aircraft engine repair shop.²³

During the Department of Airports' first year of existence there was a major shakeup in its management. In April 1929, Clifford Henderson, the first Director of Airports, resigned under pressure to take a full-time position as Director of the National Air Race Association. Henderson had been criticized for spending too much time dealing with the National Air Race Association and not enough time with the Department of Airports.²⁴ The job of Director of Airports eventually went to Colonel Richard Barnitz, a retired Army Air Corps man. Mines Field was officially dedicated as Los Angeles Municipal Airport on June 7, 1930. Later that same year the City renegotiated the terms of the lease of the airport property. The lease was extended to cover 50 years and the City had the option to purchase the land at \$3250 an acre until September 30, 1935, and \$3500 an acre until September 30, 1940.

The first decade of operations at Mines Field was a troubled period. The airport failed to develop as planned into a major air transport center, and it was used primarily by flying schools, repair shops, airplane agencies, and private pilots. Funds were not forthcoming from an apathetic electorate or a tight-fisted City Council to finance improvements there. As the Great Depression descended upon this country, Los Angeles Municipal Airport, like airports throughout the nation, found itself in a financial crisis and operating at a loss. During the Depression the Department of Airports was poorly managed. The Director of Airports, Richard Barnitz, was an alcoholic and frequently absent from his job. The airport was actually run by his assistant, Woodruff DeSilva. One former airport employee remembered "that consciously or unconsciously Colonel Barnitz was opposed to the airport development because he was afraid it would become very quickly too big a job for him to handle."²⁵

During the 1930s the airport met with some very serious criticism. Many people believed it was located too far from the center of town and that no one would use so isolated a field. The Reverend Robert P. Schuler, who had a large radio following in Los Angeles, was particularly vocal in his opposition to Mines Field. Commercial airline companies showed little desire to locate at Los Angeles Municipal because the facilities offered there were inadequate to handle commercial traffic. Most of the major airlines flew out of Grand Central Airport in Glendale or United Air Terminal (later Lockheed) in Burbank. Originally Maddux Airlines had planned to operate out of Mines Field. However, when the City Council was slow to fund airport development, Maddux decided he could do better elsewhere and so he moved his airline to Grand Central Airport in February 1929. Because the municipal airport failed to attract commercial airlines or generate a respectable revenue, it was soon branded a "white elephant."²⁶

The competition from rival airports was intense. Owners of other air fields hoped that the City would choose to terminate its lease of Mines Field and transfer its operation of a municipal airport to another site which could offer better facilities. Certain

segments of the population disapproved of the City extending its ownership of public utilities. In 1935 a suit, supposedly inspired by Grand Central and United Airports, was brought against the City of Los Angeles to invalidate the lease of the municipal airport.²⁷ It was argued that the lease of Mines Field should be voided because the citizens of Los Angeles had never been given the opportunity to vote on the issue. The case was settled in the City's favor when the State Supreme Court decided that it was well within the powers of the City to lease a site for a public airport.

There were a few bright spots during the gloomy early years. The famous dirigible, the *GRAF ZEPPELIN*, landed at Mines Field on the night of August 25, 1929, on its record-setting trip around the world. The airport also hosted the National Air Races twice during the Depression, in 1933 and 1936.

While Los Angeles Municipal Airport did not succeed in becoming a base for commercial operations during the 1930s, it did manage to attract aircraft manufacturing firms. The first airplane company to locate near the municipal airport was Moreland Aircraft, Inc.²⁸ Unfortunately the Moreland company failed to produce a profitable airplane and went out of business in 1932. At that time the Moreland building, which was located opposite the airport on what is now Imperial Highway, was taken over by the Northrop Aircraft Company.

The Northrop Aircraft Company was the second of three companies with that name created by John K. Northrop in the course of his long career in aviation. It was organized in 1932 by Northrop in partnership with Donald Douglas. The company moved its operations into the Moreland plant in January 1932. In 1934 the Northrop Aircraft Company vacated the Moreland building and moved into the Pickwick Nightcoach building located nearby in El Segundo, adjacent to the airport. In 1938 John K. Northrop resigned from the firm in order to form his own company, and the Northrop plant was completely taken over by the Douglas Aircraft Company and became known as the El Segundo Division of Douglas Aircraft.²⁹

The Department of Airports' biggest coup of the Depression was the lease of 20 acres at the southeastern corner of Los Angeles Municipal Airport to North American Aviation, Inc., in 1935. James Howard "Dutch" Kindelberger, the newly appointed president and general manager of North American, had been chief engineer for the Douglas Aircraft Company in Santa Monica and believed that Southern California offered the ideal conditions for the aircraft industry. Along with James R. Martin and other L.A. airport proponents, Kindelberger was able to convince the board of directors of North American to approve the move from Dundalk, Maryland, to Los Angeles. Temporary quarters were established in the old Moreland building, and in January 1936 the new factory was opened at the municipal airport.³⁰

The North American lease had been negotiated primarily by James R. Martin. Richard Barnitz, the Director of Airports, was totally kept out of the affair because Martin did not feel he was competent. James R. Martin had a considerable investment in the airport property. As owner of the land he stood to gain only if the airport was successful and the City was happy with the lease. It has been estimated that Martin probably spent fifty thousand dollars to help get the airport going.³¹

In spite of its burgeoning role as a center for aircraft manufac-



Aerial view looking northwest, circa 1941. (G.P. Macha Collection)

turers, Los Angeles Municipal Airport still had not developed proper air transport facilities and no scheduled airlines used it. Harold Story, an aide to James Martin who was in charge of public relations for the Department of Airports, sought to advertise the airport's potential for commercial traffic. In 1934 Dr. Ford A. Carpenter had written a report which praised the weather conditions at Municipal Airport. Story included the Carpenter article in a document which was published by the DOA and distributed to various airlines.³²

In 1935 Transcontinental and Western Air, Inc., hired Dr. Irving Krick, a well-known meteorologist from the California Institute of Technology, to substantiate the claims made by Carpenter. On the basis of the Krick report, TWA indicated a desire to transfer its operations to Los Angeles Municipal Airport. American Airlines also announced its intentions to move there. The airlines sought to move because both Grand Central and United Airports were proving too small to handle the new generation of airplanes, such as the DC-3, which were being produced in the mid-1930s. L.A. Municipal with its flat 640 acres, the largest airport in Southern California in terms of size, and favorable wind conditions offered an excellent spot for a future major air terminal. By 1937 all five of the major airlines serving the city had agreed to move there.³³

The airlines were well aware of the many shortcomings of Los Angeles Municipal Airport, and they asked the City to make improvements there before they moved to the field. The City of Los Angeles, lacking the necessary funds, sought assistance from the federal government. During the Depression the United States government attempted to stem the tide of growing unemployment by pouring money into public works projects. Airports were one type of public works to benefit from President Roosevelt's many New Deal agencies. In 1935 Los Angeles received

\$558,000 from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for improvements at Mines Field such as a new runway, grading, and a sewage system. The City also applied for \$1,240,271 in aid from the Works Progress Administration to continue to upgrade the airport. In October 1935, the allocation of WPA funds was withheld by the United States Bureau of Air Commerce because Los Angeles leased rather than owned the airport property. Unless title to the land was acquired, Los Angeles could not participate in the federal program for airport improvements.³⁴

Stunned by the Bureau of Air Commerce's decision, the City Council began to consider the possibility of purchasing the airport property. Finally, on September 29, 1937, the Council adopted a motion to acquire fee title to the municipal airport for \$2,692,162.41, including interest at 4½ percent to be paid in installments over a 10-year period.³⁵ Having taken over full ownership of the airport, the City soon received its allocation of WPA funds. An extensive program of airport improvements was undertaken throughout 1938 and 1939. Construction was begun on a new paved east-west runway to be 300 feet wide and 4650 feet long. New sewer lines were put in on the north side of the field, a new water main was installed on the east side, and the power lines on the westerly boundary of the airport were removed.

LOS ANGELES AIRPORT: 1937-1946

In 1937 Fletcher Bowron became mayor of Los Angeles. His predecessor, Frank Shaw, had left the office in scandal, but he had been an airport enthusiast. Shaw had personally gone to Washington to argue for federal aid for L.A. Municipal. Bowron, who opposed public ownership of utilities, was at first disinclined to support airport development. "I might just as well tell you," Bowron said to one of his aides shortly after his election,



North American Aviation's flight line, circa 1944. Note BF-109G facing camera, left center. (G.P. Macha Collection)

"that I am proposing to do away with the municipal airport and just abolish the Department of Airports. I don't think that is a proper municipal enterprise."³⁶ Bowron, however, soon changed his mind and became converted into an airport proponent, working hard for the passage of bond issues to improve it. During the Bowron administration the DOA shook off the problems caused by the Depression, and the seeds were laid for future airport expansion.

In an attempt to allow the Department of Airports to exercise a greater measure of autonomy over airport operations, the new mayor recommended that the City Council create a three-member Board of Municipal Airport Commissioners. On March 14, 1940, the City Council approved Ordinance No. 82,511, which provided for the three board members to be appointed by the mayor, subject to the confirmation of the Council. The ordinance did not change any of the financial procedures of the Department of Airports, and the Board could not act independently of the City Council. The first persons to be appointed to the Board of Municipal Airport Commissioners were Robert Gross, Wayne Fisher, and Zach Farmer. Gross, the Commission's first president, was head of Lockheed Aircraft Company and thus had considerable experience in aviation matters.

In December 1940, Colonel Richard Barnitz finally retired, citing health reasons. Woodruff DeSilva then took over as Director of Airports. On July 9, 1941, the City Council gave the airport the official title of Los Angeles Airport by adopting Ordinance No. 85,109. The DOA hoped that by changing the airport's name the common usage of "Mines Field" would be discontinued. The name Mines Field was felt to have negative connotations, harking back to the financial troubles of the 1930s.

The further expansion of Los Angeles Airport into a major air terminal was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. The construction of a new administration building and terminal complex on the north side of the field was halted because of wartime material shortages. During the war military operations dominated the activities at the airport. In January 1943, the City turned the actual operation of the airport over to the federal government, "for the duration." The hangars and offices were taken over by the Army and Navy air transport services. L.A. Airport became the delivery base for the thousands of military

aircraft being produced by North American, Douglas, and other nearby airplane firms. To hide the vast amount of military activity occurring there, and to protect the facilities from a feared attack, the airport was camouflaged to look like a farmhouse from the air.

Although the war had curtailed the Department of Airports' plans to improve the airport, leases were signed with the five major airlines in June 1943, assuring the city that the airlines would transfer their base operations to Los Angeles Airport at the conclusion of the war when the new terminal buildings could be completed. The 1940s was a time when the Department of Airports mapped out the future of L.A. Airport. To coordinate the various plans which had been formulated, and to solicit public support for airport expansion, the mayor set up the Aviation Ways and Means Committee in October 1943. This group, comprised of 23 civic and business leaders, was headed by Oscar A. Trippett, a prominent local attorney. The Mayor's Committee met with the Board of Airport Commissioners, which had recently been expanded from three to five members, and a select group of aviation experts, known as the Board of Airport Engineers. The result was the formation of the Master Plan of 1944, which Robert L. Smith, president of the Airport Commission, called "the fruition of a plan which has been worked on over the last two years . . . the distillation of many plans which were developed, modified, refined and checked by many aviation experts."³⁷ The plan showed that the airport would eventually be expanded into a \$25 million complex. The expansion was to take place in two stages. The first stage would provide temporary facilities on the north side of the field. The second state envisioned a massive new complex arising on over 1800 acres to be acquired west of Sepulveda Boulevard with parallel sets of east-west runways to be built north and south of the terminal. To a great extent, the 1944 Master Plan was to determine all future development at Los Angeles Airport.

To finance the various improvements at the airport, the city of Los Angeles placed several bond issues before the public. With strong backing from many civic leaders the Department of Airports was able to pass a \$3,500,000 bond issue in 1941. These bonds were used to pay off the purchase of the airport property. In 1945 the voters of Los Angeles approved \$12,000,000 in general obligation bonds to be used to acquire additional land, extend the runways, and build the intermediate air terminal complex.

When the war ended, military activities at Los Angeles Airport decreased and were supplanted by charter or non-scheduled aircraft operations. The City once again took over total control of the airport, and preparations were begun to ready it for use by commercial airlines. Work was started on the so-called "Intermediate Facilities" on the north side of the field. Four temporary frame buildings were erected to house the airline passenger facilities and the administrative offices of the DOA, airplane loading ramps were built, and the runways were lengthened to a maximum of 6000 feet. On December 9, 1946, TWA, American, United, Pan American, and Western Airlines moved to L.A. Airport and literally overnight began regularly scheduled service.³⁸ Although the "Intermediate Facilities" were meant to be temporary, it was to serve as the base for commercial air operations for 15 years.

By 1947 it had become evident that the operation of a major airport was too difficult a task to be constantly overseen by the



The Intermediate Facilities at Los Angeles Airport were built on the north side of the field after World War II. (Los Angeles Department of Airports)

City Council. It was proposed that the City Charter be amended to allow the Department of Airports to become an independent authority within the city government, like the Harbor Department and the Department of Water and Power. In April 1947, the people of Los Angeles approved the Charter revisions, giving the DOA independent status and control over its own finances. The Department was still run by the five-member Board of Airport Commissioners. The Commission was to appoint a General Manager whose responsibilities included executing the policies set down by the Airport Commission and overseeing the actual operation of the airport. The first General Manager hired by the newly independent department was Colonel Clarence Young. Young, who had formerly been Director of Aeronautics for the U.S. Department of Commerce, a member of the Civil Aeronautics Board, and general manager of Pan American World Airways' transpacific division, was highly qualified to take over the reins of the DOA. Woodruff DeSilva stayed on as Airport Director.

LOS ANGELES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT: 1947-1978

The airport was on its way to becoming a huge success. The commencement of scheduled commercial airline service made it the most important terminal in Southern California and put the Department of Airports in the black for the first time. Once the airlines had moved into the intermediate facilities, the airport began to expand through the acquisition of additional land. The property west of Sepulveda Boulevard was undeveloped and the DOA acquired much of this land during the late 1940s. By 1949, the airport's total size had increased to over 2550 acres.

One of the problems that arose at this time was the extension of the main east-west runways at Los Angeles Airport. When the runways were lengthened to 6000 feet, Sepulveda Boulevard had to be rerouted. Still later the airport was forced to rig up a signal to halt traffic whenever one of the Boeing Clippers took off. These planes flew to Hawaii and when fully loaded they were so heavy they could barely clear the end of the runway. The Department of Airports had to place gates at the end of the runway which would be railed back whenever one of these planes took off.³⁹ This problem was solved by the construction of the Sepul-



The airlines moved to Los Angeles Airport in December 1946, and the field soon became the major air terminal in Southern California. (Los Angeles Department of Airports)

veda underpass. This project, begun in 1950, routed traffic underneath the runways by way of a 1900-foot-long, six-lane tunnel. The underpass, which cost an estimated \$3,400,000, was completed in April 1953, and the south runways were then extended to 8,000 feet in length.

In recognition of the airport's new "international" rating given by the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the Los Angeles City Council passed Ordinance No. 96,520 on May 17, 1950, which officially changed the airport's name to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). A changing of the guard at the top management level occurred as well. In 1950 Clarence Young quit to return to Pan American, and Admiral John W. "Black-jack" Reeves replaced him as General Manager. Reeves, who had recently retired as head of the Naval Air Training Command, served as General Manager of the DOA until July 1952. In September 1952, Robert A. McMillan, former Assistant City Attorney, took over the post.

Since the initiation of commercial airline service at LAX, air traffic rose continuously. In 1947 some 1,233,619 passengers flew into or out of the airport. By 1952 that number had grown to 2,213,887 people. While the growth of air traffic was a financial boon for the Department of Airports, it also resulted in a severe overtaxing of the intermediate facilities. Plans were then formulated to complete the development of the airport as outlined by the 1944 Master Plan. The DOA was unable to motivate the electorate to support further airport expansion, however. Twice in the early 1950s, once in 1951 and again in 1953, the voters of Los Angeles rejected airport bond issues.

The Department of Airports realized that in order to complete the airport according to the plans of the 1940s, a new design for the terminal must be drawn up and another airport bond issue passed. In 1954 a firm of economic consultants, the Aviation Services Company, was hired to analyze the future demands which would be made upon the airport. This firm produced a series of documents, known as the Osterberg Reports, which projected future physical requirements as well as future costs and revenues for the airport through 1970.⁴⁰ The Board of Airport Commissioners then hired three well-known architectural and planning firms to produce a schematic terminal design based upon the Osterberg Reports. The so-called "Joint Venture" of



The new air terminal at Los Angeles International Airport was built in the late 1950s. Here the parabolic arch-shaped Theme Building, to house a restaurant and observation deck, is being constructed. (Los Angeles Department of Airports)



LAX today. (Los Angeles Department of Airports.)

Pereira & Luckman, Welton Becket & Associates, and Paul R. Williams attempted to lay out a terminal complex which could handle the new generation of commercial jet planes which would soon be in service.

With the plans for a new terminal in the works, the Department of Airports went all-out to promote the expansion of the airport. An extensive public relations campaign was waged to convince the people of Los Angeles that new airport facilities were desperately needed to insure the continued growth of air travel. On June 5, 1956, a \$59,700,000 airport bond issue was approved by 86 percent of the electorate, and Los Angeles was on its way towards the construction of a new jet-age airport.

The terminal complex in use today was built shortly after the passage of the 1956 bond issue on 265 acres of land the DOA had acquired west of Sepulveda Boulevard. The first designs drawn up by the Joint Venture proposed the loading of passengers through a finger concourse system. This was eliminated and the satellite concept adopted. Contracts for the main terminal complex were awarded in October 1959, and work began on the ticketing and satellite buildings in January 1960. One of the southside runways (25-R) was lengthened to 10,115 feet and the other (25-L) was extended to 12,000 feet to better handle jet traffic. On the north side of the field a new east-west runway (24-L), running 8,925 feet long, was built in 1959. A second north runway (24-R) was completed in 1970.

The jet age was officially inaugurated at Los Angeles International Airport before the new terminal was completed. On January 25, 1959, American Airlines opened the Los Angeles to New York route, using a Boeing 707-123. Along with the construction of the new terminal, the Department of Airports found itself with a new General Manager. On May 1, 1959, Francis T. Fox, previously the Assistant General Manager, replaced Robert McMillan as head of the Department. In 1968 Fox left to work for Howard Hughes, and Clifton A. Moore, the present General Manager, took over. The new airport was officially dedicated on

June 25, 1961, with Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson as the guest speaker. On August 18, 1961, United Airlines became the first carrier to begin operations out of the new terminal. By June 1962, almost all the other airlines were using the new complex. Throughout the 1960s air traffic grew at a phenomenal rate. As air traffic increased, so did airport revenues. The Department of Airports actually became financially self-sufficient in 1963 when a City Charter amendment was passed allowing the Department to issue revenue bonds.

Today the Los Angeles City Department of Airports operates as a regional airport authority. In addition to LAX, the Department is the proprietor of Van Nuys Airport in the San Fernando Valley, one of the busiest general aviation airports in the world. The DOA also shares the responsibility of running Ontario International Airport, through a joint operating agreement with the city of Ontario. In 1975 Ontario International handled over one million passengers. The fourth airport controlled by the DOA is the Palmdale Air Force Plant #42. The Department of Airports plans one day to build a large international airport on 17,000 acres of land it has acquired next to the Air Force facility in Palmdale.

In retrospect, Los Angeles owes its modern airport facilities to the foresight of those who could envision a major air transportation center arising where once tenant farmers grew beans and barley. Despite the many problems it has faced over the years, Los Angeles International Airport continues to serve the community which built it. Those who appreciate the convenience of air travel must applaud the efforts of the many individuals who helped make Los Angeles International one of the greatest airports in the world. Happy Birthday LAX!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul D. Friedman is currently working on his Master's degree in Public Historical Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. In 1977 he was employed as a historian by the Los Angeles City Department of Airports. The article was drawn from his Master's thesis on the history of Los Angeles International Airport. Paul's interest in aviation is a lifelong vocation. His father sells vintage World War II aircraft and parts for a living, and Paul can remember playing in his very own B-25 as a child. Besides aviation history Paul is also involved in American urban history, and historical archaeology.



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