

The Aviation Years of

LOS ANGELES EASTSIDE AIRPORT

by Martin Cole



It was called the Los Angeles Eastside Airport. The name was hardly appropriate. Los Angeles was 10 miles down the road. Actually, the location was in the rural community of Pico. To be more specific it was where in 1846 the Battle of San Gabriel was fought; a battle between American forces and Mexicans. An American victory paved the way for ending the war that in turn gave California to the United States. So much is history.

But the history of Eastside begins with Avery Black, a World War I pilot, and John Newsom. Together, they leased the property from Frank Haas, a hog rancher. The year was 1928. Located on the south side of Whittier Boulevard—really a country road, it was sufficient to provide a 3,500-foot runway.

At first the field was referred to as the Whittier Flying Service Airport. Not known is whether the name applied to the boulevard or to a town by that name a mile or so away. One of the many who took an active interest in flying was Roy Patten, a wealthy Whittier man, who made his money in Texas oil.

Roy Patten's interest continued to grow. In 1929, with his ready money, he took over the Haas lease, then leased adjacent property. With the expanded airport, he

renamed it Los Angeles Eastside Airport. Avery Black continued as airport manager at a time many operators were barely making it. It was at a time Southern California was dotted with an overabundance of



Herbert "Spud" Manning receiving congratulations from California Governor Roth at the Sacramento State Fair after making a delayed parachute drop. (Vera Manning Photo)

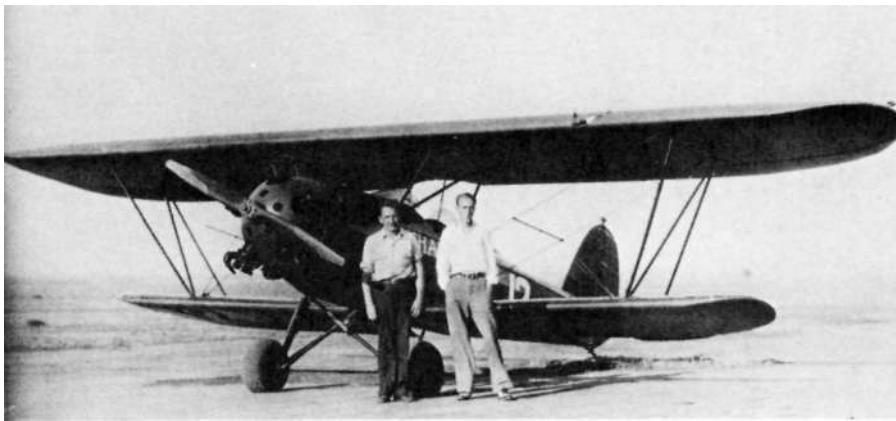
This dramatic scene painted by Harvey Doering features Tony LeVier taking off in a Velie Monocoupe with John Nagel's Travelair warming up in the background. (Lane Leonard)

windsocks and landing strips. It was at a time when many a pilot confessed the greatest hazard was not flying but starving to death.

In 1931 when Avery Black went with Varney Airlines, John Nagel, who had learned to fly at Eastside, took over the active management of the field. Patten continued as owner. Nagel had gotten his start in the automobile business. Blessed with that keen sense of business acumen, Eastside became a viable airport in the Los Angeles area.

There were airshows. Several world records were established. Motion pictures were filmed here. An experiment was made in airmail drops. A kid grease monkey went on to become one of the world's great pilots. All of this in addition to everyday, bread-and-butter flying activities. However, it is the unusual that makes a highly readable story. So let's begin with a teenage boy known as Spud Manning.

One day in 1928, actually it was February 12, some of the local fellows, all teenagers, emptied their pockets to contribute



a couple of dollars to pay the cost of repacking a parachute. They had just witnessed a parachute jump at the Pico airfield, and one of the fellows on a dare from the others said, "Sure, I'll make a jump if you guys will ante up the cost of packing a chute afterwards."

From this obscure beginning, Herbert Manning, whom everyone called Spud, went on after making a successful jump to become the world's greatest parachute jumper. His act was the highlight of nearly all the air spectacles and races of the early thirties. His specialty was the delayed opening of the parachute, while trailing flour from a sack to mark his fall. It was the sort of daredevil feature that drew crowds.

The highlight of Spud's career took place at the Los Angeles Eastside Airport. On that date, March 31, 1931, his body tightly bound with tape and confidently harnessed into his two new Irvin chutes, he gained altitude with pilot John Nagel. Far above Eastside, Nagel wished him a happy landing, and Spud left the plane. The altitude was 16,665 feet. For a distance of 15,285 feet he fell before opening his parachute. It was a record of delayed opening that stood for seven years.

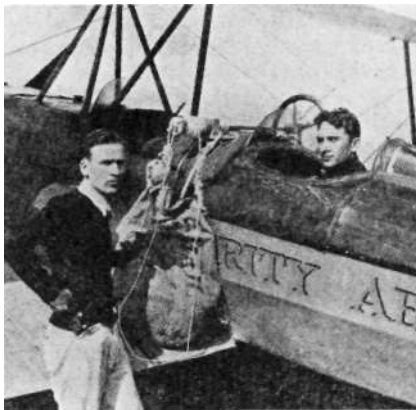
Spud Manning's fame became sufficient to be the subject of an article in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

It was probably inevitable that fate should finally catch up with this flaunter of gravity. When it did, his death was not the direct result of a perilous parachute jump. Ironically, it was in his 24th year of life, on September 6, 1933, Spud Manning lost his life in an Autogyro mishap over Lake Michigan. The theory was that the aircraft, bucking heavy winds, ran out of fuel before reaching the opposite shore. All three persons aboard perished.

Our scene at Eastside now shifts to an experiment that offered great promise. But first to set the stage.

The *Fresno Bee* newspaper toyed with the idea of extending their circulation beyond the immediate Fresno area with aerial deliveries. At first the idea sounded great. But after investigating the matter came the fear that with only cow pastures

Milo Burcham (left) with student and Bird biplane. The author met Burcham during the Henderson Brothers air meet at New Orleans in 1934. At that time Burcham was flying a Boeing P-12. (John Nagel Photo)



Bolton Jones (left) with Milo Burcham experimented with air drops in an effort to solve aerial deliveries of mail and other items in the days of inadequate airfields. (Bolton Jones Photo)

for landings at the isolated towns would an extended rainy season cause grave problems? The answer seemed to be soggy cow pastures could scrub the whole program. It was while management was considering the pros and cons that a young

pilot at Eastside, who was aware of the proposal, came forward with an idea.

His name was Milo Burcham, and what he proposed was novel indeed.

Simply put, what Burcham suggested was to install a windlass on an OX5 Eagle-rock biplane. Experiments would be conducted by flying low at a target drop, where the bundle of newspapers would be lowered and at the same time it was caught in a net, the lightweight cotton rope would be severed by a sharp sickle-bar device.

With an okay from the newspaper people, a windlass was installed. It was activated by a passenger in the rear cockpit, the pilot flying from the front cockpit. For lowering or raising the item attached to the windlass rope, an automobile steering wheel was located on the right side of the plane (facing front) and within easy reach of the passenger. Connected to the wheel was a rod just above the fuselage and between the cockpits. It extended cross-ways and activated the windlass pulley on the opposite side of the plane. Thus, in this manner, turning the wheel lowered the bundle of newspapers on approaching the target drop. The device, crude as it was, was sufficient for the experiments.

The whole idea of the Burcham drop gave promise for mail deliveries as well as newspapers. It was in itself a simple method of receiving the airplane drop.

Picture, if you will, two upright standards of 3" pipe set in concrete, each 20 feet high, set 20 feet apart. Connecting the tops of the standards was a 20-foot sickle bar. Add a fish net below the sickle bar for catching the item dropped the moment the cotton rope was severed by the moving force against the sharp edges of the sickle plates, and you have the device constructed by Burcham at one end of the Eastside Airport.

For the uninformed a sickle bar was a common item on farms in the 1930s. It





was the cutting device used on mowers and binders. In short, it was applied for mowing hay and harvesting small grain, such as oats and wheat.

During the experiments, young Bolton Jones assisted Burcham. He was the one who rode in the rear cockpit and operated the windlass. To guide on the drops small flags fluttered from each standard, while up ahead at a short distance was a flag set in the ground to give the centerline of flight. At first a 50-pound bag of sand was used. The bag was a mail bag furnished by the local post office. Later to get the right

John Nagel with Travelair at Eastside. Since Eastside days, Nagel has remained an air operator, with base at the Torrance (California) Airport. (John Nagel Photo)

feel for the task, bundles of *Fresno Bee* made up the drop. Jones and Burcham even experimented with making a drop of eggs with success.

After informing the management of the newspaper that the whole idea held prom-

John Nagel (left) and unidentified pilots pictured at Eastside. In the immediate background is Whittier Boulevard and directly beyond are the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad. (John Nagel Photo)

ise, they procrastinated in putting the program into practice. It was then Milo Burcham turned to another matter that for the sake of publicity made his name known in every hangar in the country.

In an era of flagpole sitting, marathon dances, and other headline crazes, it was not surprising that some pilot would be inspired to challenge an inverted flying record set by Tito Falconi of Italy. At Eastside the inspiration hit young Milo Burcham. After talking it over with John Nagel, he seriously began preparing himself for the challenge. To condition himself for the grueling test, he spent a certain amount of time each day seated in a kitchen chair suspended upside down from a rafter in the hangar.

A Fleet biplane was modified by installing a Kinner engine in an inverted position. When all was ready, a flight was made from San Diego to Eastside. John Nagel flew chase plane in the Travelair. The time of the inverted flight was one hour, 47 minutes. It was sufficient to establish a new record.

But alas, Burcham's record stood only one day. For on the following day, Falconi took his plane up, flipped it over and remained inverted for two hours, eight minutes. Burcham met this challenge with



During the heyday of World War I movies, some scenes were filmed at Eastside. This unidentified photo of a pseudo-Fokker was among John Nagel's collection of Eastside photos. (John Nagel Photo)

more conditioning in the upside-down kitchen chair, and with determination took off and flew inverted for two hours, 20 minutes.

The seesaw duel between Falconi and Burcham continued, with Falconi once again breaking the record with a time of three hours, six minutes.

To set a record that still stands, Burcham decided to use the Bird biplane. The Kinner engine was removed from the Fleet and installed in the Bird in the same inverted fashion. This time the flight operations for the all-time record was moved to Long Beach Municipal Airport.

On December 29, 1933, with Joe Nikrent, official timer for the National Aeronautics Association flying a chase plane, Burcham took off in the modified Bird, and droning above the San Fernando Valley he succeeded in establishing a new record of four hours, five minutes.

Perhaps the best source of information that includes names, planes, and various day-by-day activities is found in the early chapters of *Pilot*, by Tony LeVier (Harper Bros., N.Y., 1954). Tony's story is one of dedication and courage. Moreover, it is a story of sheer determination in an Alger-like manner. It tells how Tony, while yet a teenager, licked the adversity of not hav-



The Waco 10 biplane in which Tony LeVier made his solo flight at Eastside. Aviation buffs should read the story of Eastside as told by LeVier in his book *Pilot*. (Tony LeVier Photo)

ing advantages that are common to most boys while growing up. Nevertheless, Tony prevailed, became a pilot at Eastside, and in the after years made his name known in every hangar as a famous race pilot, and one of aviation's great test pilots.

The Los Angeles Eastside Airport remained active until 1936. That year the Department of Water and Power of the city of Los Angeles erected hazardous power lines alongside the field. John Nagel had no other course but to close the field. Today all traces of an airport are gone. Light industry has taken over the area.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1982 the Rio Hondo Community College selected author Martin Cole for the "Distinguished Service Award." Included in the list of "Whereas" there states: "His interest in early aviation was reflected in serving as editor of the *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*." Martin served as a director and editor during the years of 1974-1978. He also contributed a dozen or so articles. Since retiring as editor he has written several books, together with magazine articles.

