Orchard Place/Douglas Field;
Better Known Today as Chicago O'Hare International Airport

by Hayden Hamilton

Orchard Place/Douglas Field toward the end of WWII. (Photo from the Des Plaines Public Library collection)

It's early 1942 – American is now at war due to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the country is gearing up for the war. One of the earliest decisions was to build war production plants in the heartland of the U.S. – far from its coastal shores and thus less likely to be attacked. In early April, Maj. Gen. H.H. Arnold sent three men to Chicago as a "Board of Officers" and site selection committee to inspect and approve a site for a Douglas plant. Douglas was already constructing a plant in Oklahoma City to build the C-54 Skymaster, but had been convinced to have the Oklahoma plant build the C-47 Skytrain and relocate the C-54 production to the Chicago area at a plant and location to be determined by the site selection committee. The three officers, Maj. Marlboro K. Downes, Maj. Albert J. Wehrell, and 2nd Lt. Harold B. Neely convened their Board in Chicago on April 23, 1942.

A total of nine potential Illinois sites would be evaluated with three becoming "finalist" – a Ford site at Lansing, Rubinkam Airport at Harvey and Orchard Place near Bensenville. These three sites were extensively examined from the perspective of construction time and costs, drainage, soil quality and structure, wind speed and direction, possible obstructions to clear zones for aircraft operations and access to transportation and housing. While none of the sites were perfect, Orchard Place represented the best location for the new Douglas facility. The Board submitted their recommendations to the War Production Board in May and, after review, the War

Douglas Aircraft Chicago facility in 1944. The main assembly building (background), covering over 42 acres, was

The main hangar and control tower at the field. (Photo from the Des Plaines Public Library collection)

The administration building. The original building was completely destroyed by fire on July 18, 1944, but had been completely rebuilt by the following October. (Photo from the Des Plaines Public Library collection)

Production Board approved the Orchard Place site in June 1942, authorizing the Army to purchase 1,347 acres for the facility and $20 million dollars for initial construction.

At this point, things began to move at a rapid pace. Public hearings were held on June 18, 1942, at Park Ridge City Hall, to rezone Orchard Place from agricultural land to industrial use, which was approved with Judge William J. Campbell signing the order to condemn the property for government use. The Army began to acquire the land for development and by July was clearing the area of fences and architectural and engineering work was initiated through the combined efforts of the Austin Co. (prime contractor), Douglas, and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Construction of the first building was begun on June 30, 1942, and the main factory building was begun on August 24. The first section of the factory was turned over to Douglas for operation in November, with the personnel and administration buildings and cafeteria being finished shortly thereafter. As the plant was needed only for the duration of the war, it was built mostly of materials of non-strategic importance and having short operational lives. The main Assembly Building (T6) totaled more than two million square feet (42 acres) and was thought to be the largest all-timber manufacturing plant in the world. Trusses and columns were constructed on-site and the shop fabricating them handled more than 31,750,000 board feet of lumber.

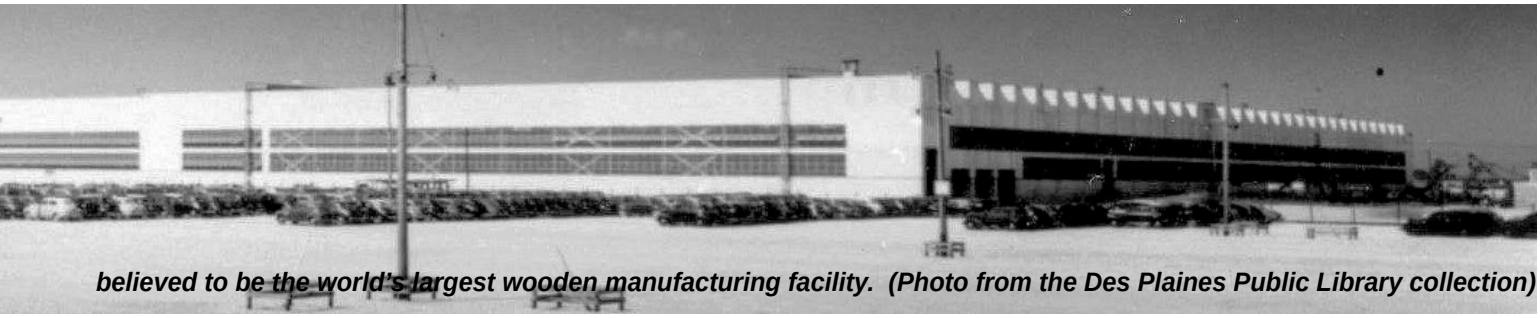
The airport construction included four runways with the main runway being oriented in a northwest-southeast direction. This orientation was chosen to be parallel to Chicago Municipal Airport's main traffic pattern for safety and operational reasons during instrument flight conditions. The four runways were each 5,500 feet in length and 150 wide. They were built on a 15-inch stone base that was covered with seven to 10 inches of concrete without steel rebar being used to reinforce it due to the strategic demand for steel elsewhere.

By April 1943, 10 months from initiation of construction, the main factory was ready for full operation. Beside the plant, an administration building, boiler house, garage, cafeteria, health center, paint shop, hangars, airfield, a paved surface area of 1,300,000 square feet and a parking area for 6,300 automobiles had been built ahead of schedule and meeting all contractual requirements including the use of non-critical materials. Total project costs came to $40.5 million.

The Work Force

With so many men away fighting the war, manufacturers were forced to employee women in order to meet production schedules. The women workers in the aircraft industry eventually became known generically as "Rosie the Riveters."

Douglas Aircraft was no different, but recognizing the special needs required to produce aircraft, implemented an extensive training program. In Chicago, they partnered with the American Aircraft Institute to provide two-three months of fundamental training that was followed up by onsite specialty training.



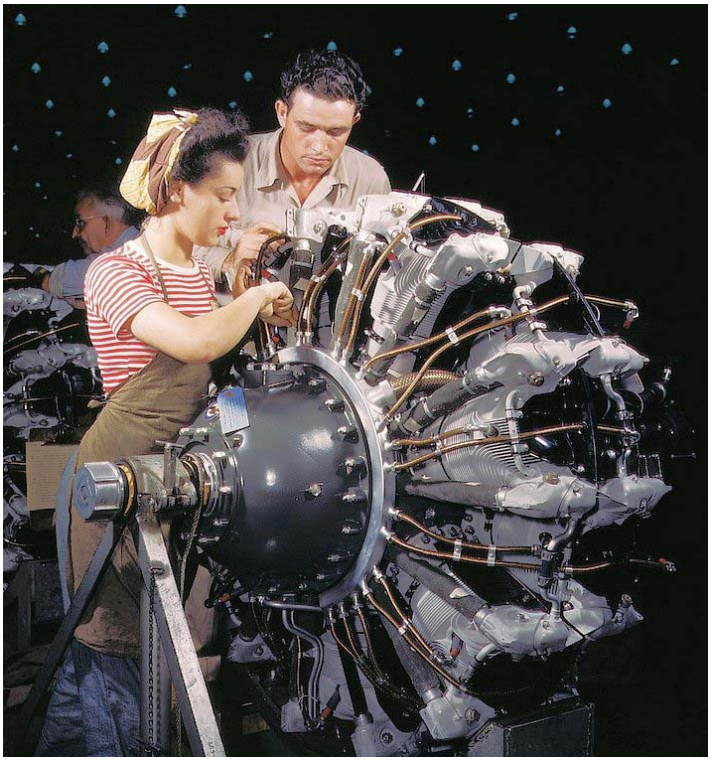
believed to be the world's largest wooden manufacturing facility. (Photo from the Des Plaines Public Library collection)

Left: *Because of their petite size, "Rosies" often performed jobs in tight or restricted spaces.* **Right***: "Rosies" became skilled shop technicians after careful training in the school at the Douglas Aircraft Co. plant. (Photos by Alfred T. Palmer from the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs collection at the Library of Congress)*

At many of the facilities, Chicago included, Douglas provided day-care on the plant site for non-school age children. This allowed women with young families to drop their children off, work their shift and then easily pick their children before heading home.

Production

The concerted effort of all parties resulted in the first C-54 being completed just three months later launching from Orchard Place/Douglas Field on July 30, 1943, for its first flight. Test pilot Win Sargent was at the controls of the aircraft that had been built at a location that just slightly more than a year before had been agricultural farmland. Full production would continue until the last plane was completed in October 1945 and the plant was shut down. In total, 655 C-54s would be built at the facility. After the war there was some talk of producing large commercial airliners at the old assembly plant, but nothing came of it as aircraft manufacturing re-consolidated on the West Coast and the Chicago area returned to more traditional production activities.



Women are trained as engine mechanics in thorough Douglas training methods. (Photo by Alfred T. Palmer from the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs collection at the Library of Congress)

Post-War

Following the war, Chicago asked the federal government whether it could convert the facility to a commercial airport to relieve some of the expected congestion at Chicago Municipal Airport, now Midway. Permission granted, the name Douglas was dropped, creating Orchard Field.

A group of children in the day-care facilities at the Chicago plant. (Photo from the Des Plaines Public Library collection)

The assembly line in the Douglas Aircraft plant in Orchard Place on July 7, 1944, where wings are attached to the fuselage of big C-54 cargo planes. The plant was 15 percent ahead of schedule in June 1944. (Douglas Aircraft photo)

Douglas C-54 in final assembly at the Orchard Place plant in early 1944. (Photo from the Des Plaines Public Library collection)

In 1949, Col. Robert R. McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, suggested Orchard be renamed for WWII Navy ace Edward "Butch" O'Hare, and the City Council complied. Chicago Municipal Airport was renamed for the Battle of Midway the same year. Interestingly enough, O'Hare still retains as its airport identifier the ORD designation from the original Orchard Place/Douglas Field.✈

MOVING

IF YOU ARE PLANNING TO MOVE, PLEASE SEND US YOUR CHANGE OF ADDRESS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. We cannot get your *Journal* to you if we don't know where you live. To ensure uninterrupted service, please let us know at least six weeks in advance.

AAHS Photo Archive CDs Series

The Society has recently started development of a series of photo CDs. These CDs contain high-resolution scans of negative, slides and prints from the AAHS Image Library. The resolution of these scanned images is sufficient to make an 8"x10" photographic quality print. Each CD focuses on a particular aspect of American aviation history - be that a particular manufacturer, type or class of aircraft.

As of this date, five CDs are available. Each CD contains between 120 and 140 images. The CDs that are available are:

1001	Douglas Propeller-Driven Commercial Transports
1006	Lockheed Constellations, Part I
1007	Lockheed Constellations, Connies in Color
1009	Lockheed P-38/F-5 Lightnings
1011	Curtiss Transports
1021	Boeing Propeller-Driven Commercial Transports
1031	Golden Age Commercial Flying Boats

These CDs are available to members for a donation of $19.95 each plus shipping ($2.50 U.S., $5.00 International - add $1.00 for each additional CD). Donation forms are available on-line and on request, but a note along with your donation specifying your particular interest is sufficient. Proceeds go to support the preservation of the photo archives. Do you have a particular interest or suggestion for a CD in this series? Drop us a line or email the webmaster (webmaster@aahs-online.org). We are currently researching the possibilities of offerings covering the following areas: XP-55, XP-56, Northrop X-4, Bell Aircraft, and Early Lockheeds.