

## **An Abridged History of Chicago Municipal Airport and Chicago Midway Airport**

With the ushering in of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a spectacular new element in Chicago's transportation structure was the rapid development of air traffic. Chicagoans had an early interest in aviation, and by the late twenties, air travel was no longer a daredevil affair. People were taking it seriously and funding new ventures on an increasingly consistent basis. And what would later become Chicago Midway Airport was poised to play its major role in the destiny of modern civil air transportation.

In the early 1900s, much of private or civil aviation took place under the sanction of the Aero Club of Illinois, founded by some of Chicago's most prominent and successful men, among them Charles Dickinson, who was likely its staunchest supporter. The aviation in Illinois and in Chicago that had begun to develop in the early 1900s had been restricted during the War, but had likewise begun to literally explode with activity at its close in 1918. By that time, there were only two significant non-military fields in Chicago: Grant Park and Ashburn. Ashburn was located on a 640-acre tract of land with 83<sup>rd</sup> Street as its Northern border, and in the vicinity of 4500 West. Aviation in Chicago thrived at Ashburn in the immediate postwar years, eclipsing Grant Park which was smaller and lacked the flying facilities necessary to accommodate, maintain and accept larger numbers of aircraft and heavier air traffic.

At the same time, the U.S. Post Office Dept. was looking for a Western Terminus for their new, regular Chicago-Cleveland-New York air mail service. Charles Dickinson, a true aviation visionary, saw that an air mail base at Ashburn Field would add prestige and substance to the field, and lobbied to have that airport chosen as the Western Terminus. But surprisingly, the final choice was made in favor of Grant Park. However, over the next eight years, the Post Office Department would be forced to shift its operations between three airports: Grant Park, Checkerboard and Ashburn.

A new field in suburban Maywood had just been established by Alfred Decker & Cohn, makers of Society brand Clothes, to allow air deliveries of its Chicago-made clothing to stores outside the Chicago area. A route of 5 cities, served by two War Surplus Curtiss JN-4D "Jenny" biplanes, was begun and air operations went under the supervision of former Army lieutenant, David L. Behncke, who had been in charge of aircraft testing & inspection Chanute Field in downstate Rantoul, during the War. The wings of both biplanes based there were painted with a checkerboard pattern for visibility, and the airport soon became known as Checkerboard Field.

As it began to become more apparent that Chicago would need a new, permanent airfield appropriate to the demands being placed upon fledgling air carriers, the Aero Club of Illinois with their leader Dickinson, met with the Chicago Aviation Commission on July 18, 1919 at the Congress Hotel to discuss the city's future aviation needs. Dickinson campaigned for city approval and backing to improve Ashburn field. Another respected Aero club member and consulting engineer, Bion J. Arnold, spoke on behalf of the need for an all-weather field, "...plainly marked and equipped with sounding apparatus so that even on cloudy days when vision is impaired, aviators would know where to land. The ideal field should be seen, felt and heard. Grant Park, though not bad on a perfect day, is unsuited at present for that purpose. It cannot be readily found. We must have a capacious field that can be used winter or summer." The consensus at that meeting built in favor of Ashburn as the city's new showplace of modern air commerce, and the city's planners appeared willing and ready to invest time and city funds into Ashburn. But fate was about to intervene.

Three days after this meeting, the Goodyear Airship *Wingfoot Air Express*, loaded with Hydrogen, exploded and crashed into a bank building in the Loop, killing and injuring many people. This horrifying and tragic accident caused some of the aldermen who had attended the meeting 3 days before to denounce all aviation as unsafe. The Aero Club's posture on Ashburn quickly took the defensive, as they found themselves fighting to keep aviation alive in the city. The issue of

improving Ashburn would all but vanish, even though the city would come around in its thinking about aviation's viability and potential for Chicago in the years following the disaster.

Another grave defeat for Ashburn came the following year in January, 1920, when the Post Office Dept. shifted its air mail operations from Grant Park to Checkerboard Field. Owners Alfred Decker & Cohn ceased air operations the same year, and subsequently, David Behncke bought both Curtiss Jennies, continuing to operate Checkerboard as a commercial airport, which was financially facilitated by the beginning of Air Mail Service flights from there. And as service expanded, the field began to grow in prominence, and more commercial operations added, along with the purchase of 20 additional acres of land.

However, less than a year later, with Congress refusing to appropriate sufficient funds for the Air Mail Service to operate any route other than its transcontinental ones, the recently added St. Louis and Minneapolis routes were discontinued on June 30, 1921. That same year, most of the buildings on the airport were destroyed in a fire. At that point, the Post Office moved its operations across First Avenue to land owned by the government, and called it Maywood Airport, which became and remained the official air terminal in Chicago until it would move to the one-year-old Chicago Municipal Airport in December, 1927.

Long before the last flight airmail flight out of Maywood, it was obvious to Chicago's political establishment that if Chicago was to remain a major center of commerce in aviation, a new and modern airport would have to be built on a site large enough to sustain considerable physical growth. The Aero Club's Dickinson was, in the meantime, lobbying on behalf of Chicago's private pilots for improved facilities. Because men listened to Dickinson, his efforts resulted in several smaller, satellite airports being built around the city—one being just South of Checkerboard Field.

Chicago's airport plan of 1922 envisioned building flying fields on the fringes of the city, on several sites. Then mayor of Chicago William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson, also talked of his vision of an airport-in-the-Lake, a \$10 million Island Airport off of the Field Museum, linked to the mainland by a tunnel.

But the only airport built as envisioned by that plan of 1922 was a flying field on a square mile of open land on the city's Southwest Side. On October 1, 1922, the City Aeronautical Bureau dedicated the flying field at 59<sup>th</sup> and Cicero as Chicago Air Park. It was with this particular tract of land that city planners would eventually find that their search for Chicago's permanent, new, modern showplace airport, had ended.

The square mile tract of land, bounded by 55<sup>th</sup> Street on the North, 63<sup>rd</sup> Street on the South, Cicero Avenue on the East and Central Avenue on the West, was a "school-section mile" as designated under the Northwest Territories Ordinance of 1787, and was owned by the Board of Education. In 1922, the new *Chicago Aero Park*, at 59<sup>th</sup> Street and Cicero Avenue, was initially operated by Col. Phillip Kemp, and the park offered passenger rides as well as flying lessons. In 1925, the city began leasing the land upon which it would later erect Chicago Municipal Airport, from the Board of Education. The remaining land was occupied by the Nathan Hale Elementary School (erected on its Southwest corner in 1926), a few truck farms and the railroad tracks of the Belt Railway Company, which virtually divided the tract into a Northern and Southern half, near 59<sup>th</sup> Street. Planning continued by the city for a modernized, expanded facility to take the place of the airpark and to become a model for air commerce in Chicago and for the world.

That same year of 1922 saw the Post Office Department clamoring to develop all weather airports in the United States for the carriage of the airmail. It was already involved in planning facilities for instituting and carrying out night routes between Chicago and San Francisco: In 1923, it began installation of the very first aerial navigation facilities: a series of 289 electric, rotating signal beacons erected every 25 miles along the route, between Chicago and Cheyenne, Wyoming. At the same time, land was rented and emergency airstrips were built along the route.



Chicago Aero Park, 1922, looking Southwest, from just North of the Belt Railway tracks at 59<sup>th</sup> & Cicero.

With these new airway facilities in place, July 1, 1924 saw the Post Office Department beginning 24-hour service between New York and San Francisco, with Chicago as the hub. Aviation began to expand rather rapidly after this, and with the understanding that commercial airlines were right around the corner, pressure to build Chicago's all-weather, modern municipal airfield mounted. The earlier idea for smaller, scattered fields in and around the city was abandoned, and 2 weeks into the new transcontinental mail service, Chicago Plan commission Chairman Charles H. Wacker petitioned the City Council to lease from the Board of Education the square mile of land bounded by 55<sup>th</sup>, Cicero, 63<sup>rd</sup> and Central, to be developed "as a municipal airplane landing field."

On May 8, 1926, Chicago Municipal Airport was dedicated by the city, with a new crisscross pattern of cinder runways at the Southeast quadrant of the square mile, and larger, improved operational facilities. The celebration took place amidst much fanfare, but with very little activity. The first plane to land there was a Curtiss Carrier Pidgeon aircraft, flown in from the airfield in Maywood by National Air Transport, or N.A.T. (later United Air Lines) and flown by Edmund Marucha for the opening ceremony. Afterward, the plane, christened "Miss Chicago," was flown back to Maywood to prepare for a flight to Dallas with a load of airmail.

After its dedication, Chicago Municipal Airport remained all but deserted for the next 18 months, until the time that all airmail flights were finally transferred there from Maywood. However, before the decade of the 1920s would end, Chicago Municipal Airport would be operating with 11 airmail, cargo and passenger lines and 40 flights daily. And the timing couldn't have been better: A sandy-haired youth flying the Chicago-St. Louis airmail route out of Maywood, changed forever the face of aviation by his epic flight in May, 1927, barely a year after Municipal Airport was dedicated—and accelerated the Air Age to a degree that would prove both the need for and the viability of, this new Chicago airfield. Aviation exploded with possibility in the ensuing years.



The new Chicago Municipal Airport, dedicated on May 8, 1926, with a pattern of crisscross, cinder runways occupying the Southeast quadrant of what would later become Midway Airport. View is to the Northeast, and the street shown in the lower portion of the photo is 63<sup>rd</sup>.

In 1930, Chicago Mayor Anton J. Cermak approved the use of funds to build longer runways, a passenger terminal and administration building. As a result of this increased size, Chicago Municipal Airport served more than 100,000 passengers in 1932, when it earned the title of World's Busiest Airport.

Within the next few years, extensive runway developments were completed, and the airport now had a large number of runways from which to operate. However, the greatest problem facing planners at that time was one of expanding access of aircraft and major operations to the north, beyond the existing tracks of the Belt Railway, which ran completely through the square mile at its midpoint and effectively divided the airport in two. From archival photographs taken of the field, it appears that despite the existence of the tracks, the planners had decided to go ahead and build the runways to traverse the entire square mile, allowing one to assume that they'd been planning all along on having the tracks moved completely off the field. Nevertheless, negotiations in 1941 with the Belt Line were long and involved; however, the tracks were removed and the runways joined (at 27Right/9Left, midfield).

It quickly became obvious that Chicago's hegemony on land and sea was indeed matched by its increasing importance as the center of air transportation between the two coasts. Its primacy was built on the growth of Chicago Municipal in the 30s, into the 40s and postwar. By 1945, the airport was handling 80,000 aircraft and 1,300,000 passengers annually, as the Air Age was reaching full maturation.

The years following were revolutionary ones for Municipal. New arrival/departure gates were added. The parking lot was redesigned and expanded. The primary method of air navigation into and out of the airport began its changeover from the Low Frequency Radio Range to the VHF Omnidirectional Range, or VOR\*. A very sensitive form of VOR signal was also commissioned for use by the CAA (forerunner of the FAA) and integrated with another, height-above-ground radio beam signal, to form the brand new Instrument Landing System, or ILS. The first ILS at the airport was commissioned for Runway One-Three Right, Midway's longest runway. This made the field a state-of-the-art facility and among the most advanced in the nation, if not the world. For airliners coming in "on instruments" or with little or no ground reference after flying in the clouds, this became the chief factor for development of airport systems allowing all-weather landings. A massive array of bright approach lighting aligned with Runway 13 Right was erected to provide a clearer visual runway environment for airplanes making instrument landings into Municipal Airport. Constant improvements such as these marked Municipal's growth in the years following World War II, and in 1949, the Chicago City Council voted to change the airport name to Chicago Midway Airport, in honor of the WWII Battle of Midway—the decisive air victory of the War in the Pacific. The newly-christened Midway was now fully poised to continue Chicago's role in leading civil aviation into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This was accomplished easily, and in 1959, 10 million passengers moved through Midway Airport, breaking all previous records.

During and after WWII, radar was constantly in development. In the 50s, air traffic was becoming increasingly more dense in the skies over Chicago, and around Midway in particular. Increasing traffic around O'Hare Field, inaugurated in 1955, along with private aircraft moving in and out of at least 15 smaller, general aviation airports within a 30-mile radius of Midway, was becoming nightmarish. All aircraft approaching or departing Midway and O'Hare control areas in the mid-fifties were required to call in by radio at various, compulsory checkpoints, known as Intersections or Fixes, but these position reports were by voice, not visual. In those days, Chicago's air traffic controllers were writing everything down and acknowledging purely by voice and visual recognition (once the aircraft were seeable from the field), but if errors were made by aircrews, the system as well as aircraft were at the mercy of chance. Clearly, radar's hour had come. The first of all the air traffic control radars to be installed in a control tower began with Midway. An air route traffic control center (ARTCC) as well as a terminal radar approach control facility (TRACON) and local (Control Tower) radar traffic control system had already been in development, following a government mandate after the tragic midair collision of two commercial airliners in 1956 over the Grand Canyon, killing all aboard both aircraft. Radars for just such

purposes were already operational at airfields in Britain. Not only was radar needed for en route air traffic, but especially in the higher density air traffic areas surrounding the nation's busier airports. By 1958, Ground Control Approaches (GCA, or "Contact" approaches, utilizing radar exclusively) were one of at least three types of Instrument Landing System available at Midway Airport, and tower controllers could now "see" aircraft near the field, greatly enhancing safety in the skies over Chicago and allowing for closer spacing between inbound and outbound aircraft over the feeder fixes.

The year 1961 began to see a major shift in airline traffic from Midway to the relatively new O'Hare, on the city's far Northwest Side, which began commercial service in 1955. Midway's square mile had a built-in limitation: The newly-certificated (in 1955) Boeing 707/720, Douglas DC-8, Convair 880 and similar large jet transports needed much longer runways from which to operate, and this required more airport land. O'Hare held that particular distinction, and in 1962, for the very first time, took on its newly acquired status as the world's busiest airport. Within a number of years, however, new jet traffic would return the airlines to Midway by way of the Douglas DC-9, the Boeing 727 and the 737. In the meantime, the piston-engined aircraft operated by United, TWA, American, Delta, Eastern, Braniff, North Central, Northwest, Piedmont, Capital, Pan American and the other major air lines of the 40s and 50s, began to disappear in ever increasing numbers, into the late 1960s. The last of TWA's fleet of beautiful Lockheed Constellations was eventually retired at the Burbank, CA terminal facility in 1967, never to grace the skies again as TWA's first jet passengers moved through the expansive terminal facilities of O'Hare Field, to take to the skies in the first of the jetliners of the Boeing 707 era. Within one year, Midway had tipped her hat to O'Hare and had, with the same gesture, bade farewell to the Air Age—the jet age had officially arrived.

The "midsize" jet transports of Boeing and Douglas would be responsible for a large resurgence in passenger activity through Midway's gates in the latter part of the 1960s, and development continued at the airport. The onset of jet traffic there also eventually saw construction of a new air traffic control tower, built South of the original facility, which had been located atop the main terminal building. This period also saw closure of four of Midway's runways, both of the North/South and both of the East/West runways. Portions of the runways were then assigned use for taxiways or for tiedown areas for the rapidly increasing numbers of corporate and general aviation light aircraft. Many smaller flight schools and charter operations were allowed into the now mostly vacant hangar offices of Midway's TWA, American and United hangars after the airlines had moved their major operations to O'Hare Field. Older institutions such as Monarch Aviation on the West Ramp and Aviation Training Enterprises in the old American Hangars, originally a school that trained American Airlines pilots, stayed on at Midway. Nevertheless, the airlines continued to use Midway as a reliever for flights within the United States and using the smaller passenger jetliners. Traffic continued at its hectic pace at Midway into the early seventies. However, on Dec. 8, 1972 a United Air Lines B737 on approach to Midway's Runway 31 Left, slammed into the ground in a heavily populated residential district, blocks short of the runway after the pilots had tragically misread the airplane's altitude in the clouds, and with no visual ground reference available before it was too late to pull up. Many from that flight and on the ground were killed, and this horrifying incident seemed to deliver a head wound to scheduled airline commerce at Midway in a very short time period. During the following six years, she would struggle along, almost a ghost of her former self.

When I began flying into and out of Midway nearly six years later, in April of 1978, only two of the major airlines had any aircraft there: Delta and Northwest. Each had one flight out per day, as I remember it. The rest of the air traffic consisted of corporate and general aviation, recreational and flight school airplanes. I personally flew a piston single based at the North Ramp, directly in front of the old TWA hangar on 55<sup>th</sup> Street. That tiedown was later moved to the Old, closed Runway 18 Left directly across the tarmac to the south of TWA, when Midway Airlines moved in. I also knew many who were based in the other hangars there, and as I remember Midway from that time, I recall that she was every bit as bustling with smaller planes as any airport in the area, if not even more so.

Midway's second awakening as a major force in Chicago Air Commerce began in November of 1979. A brand new carrier, Midway Airlines, inaugurated service at the former TWA arrival and departure gates and opened its maintenance facility in the former, refurbished TWA hangar on the North Ramp. Soon afterward, Southwest Airlines moved into Midway and one by one, new air carriers began operations at the newly-bustling, major reliever. In 1981 as well as subsequent years, the city and the federal government would target Midway for modernization of her facilities and terminal, runways and equipment. And because she operates as a major player in Chicago's ongoing air saga, emphasis continues to this day on modernization, redevelopment and the building up of this airport into a 21<sup>st</sup> Century air transportation center, placing her alongside Chicago's O'Hare as a crown jewel of modern air commerce. At present, some 11 million passengers fly into or out of Midway yearly—well in excess of her record-breaking year of 1959 as the World's Busiest Airport!

---

\* Prior to the postwar commission of the ILS, a much less accurate, yet ingenious method of regular radio navigation into the airport consisted of 4 separate, distinctive radio "beams" known as the Adcock Range, or Low Frequency Radio Range, which had been developed for use in the 30s for aircraft flying along designated air routes and into terminal areas, such as Midway's and those in other cities. Almost exclusively in use by the airlines for instrument flight or flying conditions without a visual reference, the pilots would tune into a low frequency range such as Midway Radio's 350 Kilocycles (Kilohertz), and listen for a dot-dash (letter A) or a dash-dot (letter N) Morse Code signal, which would indicate where they were in relation to the radio station, and therefore, to the airport. Though often next to useless due to the static generated by lightning strikes in thunderstorms and by snowy conditions, all airliners inbound to Midway tuned into "MDW" on this frequency. The pilots could also talk to "Midway Radio on this same frequency, or to the tower at Midway via another low frequency (278 MC), to gain weather and flight reports. The station was located about 3.5 miles Northeast of Midway Airport and roughly lined up with Runways One-Three. The five radio transmitting towers on Ridgeland and 39th St. (Pershing Road), which made up the Midway Radio Range, would faithfully transmit their signals for at least three decades—from the CAA's commission of the station in the thirties, on into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, long after the ILS had come into vogue. It wasn't until the late sixties that these ranges began to disappear, and indeed some were left to serve as "Marker Beacons" for inbound instrument approach fixes to the runways at airports such as Midway. Another postwar marvel of radio navigation, the Very High Frequency Omnidirectional Radio Range, or VOR, also nicknamed "Omni," became the primary method of navigating into and out of the airport. A specialized radio which can transmit and receive voice or morse code signals, the omni serves as both a radio station capable of voice transmission and reception, or of directional navigation signals which can be detected by centering a needle on the instrument panel of the aircraft, determining location and direction of the aircraft, or by homing in on the station transmitting the signals. The Omni (and glideslope, together making up the ILS), along with a more recent development called Distance Measuring Equipment, or DME, have been the primary navigation instrumentation and methods for most aircraft since those postwar years at Midway. Only recently are they being eclipsed by newer methods such as Global Positioning (GPS). Also, ILS has been improved over the years into a series of categories that have allowed an aircraft to land in zero-zero, or totally obscured runway conditions. And now, Differential GPS takes up where ILS has long been the standard, with highly computerized signals which, coupled with the aircraft's autopilot and course/bearing information accurate to within a few feet or meters, can land a Boeing 747 in zero visibility—something that the average air traveler certainly takes for granted. This, however, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to technological developments that grace Midway Airport and its air carrier traffic today. Coupled with her newest improvements, she is truly a 21<sup>st</sup> Century airport and the original planners of the 1920s would be proud to see her today!

Compiled and edited by Dave Kent