

# I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

TUSCALOOSA'S new jet landing airport on Van de Graaff Field with its 6,500-foot paved runway is a monument to the city and a credit to the city's farsighted commissioners.

"Large oaks from little acorns grow."

Let's take a look at Tuscaloosa's first steps toward a modern and adequate airport.

Shortly after World War I with a number of Army Air Corps training planes (Jenny's with OX-5 Curtis motors) sold at bargain prices, a large number of freelance flyers appeared on the scene. They were called "Gypsy Flyers" and their trade called "barnstorming." These flyers traveled around the country carrying passengers for a short hop, usually for a fee of \$2 to \$5. Since this was about the first chance the average citizen had to go up in an airplane they did a thriving business.

Another type of flyer was small groups of aviators called a "flying circus" who were classed as stunt flyers. They put on exhibitions of daredevil deeds which included wing walking, changing from plane to plane in midair or from a moving automobile to an airborne plane as well as putting a plane through a repertoire of loops, barrel rolls, spins, and other maneuvers. These shows were put on for a price, usually by

"passing the hat," and in my opinion the spectators got their money's worth.

With the thought of future passenger, mail and express by scheduled aviation, I brought up in a Junior Chamber of Commerce meeting that if such a facility was desired that it should be initiated early while suitable property close to the heart of the city could be acquired. I was rewarded by being appointed chairman to obtain a landing field.

Since neither the city nor county were interested in such a project at this time it put a difficult aspect to the problem.

The Army airmen of World War I used a vacant field (for practice) east of Pullen Town (east of Hackberry Lane and south of the present Sears Roebuck store). After the war the field was idle and the owner agreed to let us use it gratis with the understanding that we would vacate on short notice. (I think both parties felt that if the project was successful that the city would acquire it by purchase.)

Both the county and city cooperated in leveling the cotton rows with a scraper to give a smooth dirt surface.

On June 2, 1923, Druid Field was dedicated with a suitable ceremony and speeches. The newly former Alabama National Guard Aviation Squadron No. 114 operating out of Roberts Field, Birmingham, cooperated to the fullest extent. Several of its planes were in attendance.

The commanding officer of this unit was Maj. J.A. Meisner, a World War I ace (credited with eight German planes) and a member of Eddie Rickenbacker's famous Lafayette Escadrille.

The log for Druid Field includes the names of several outstanding pilots. Included are Capt. Sumpter

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Smith, Glen Messer, Lt. J.A. Kirkham, Thomas E. and William Quick (Huntsville), Lt. K.D. Brabson, the Gates Flying Circus and Mabel Cody's Flying Circus.

The log for Druid Field concludes with this note:

"Druid Field was sold by its owners and divided into lots thereby closing the field about May 1925.

"No official record was kept after this date. The following list represents some of the planes that visited Tuscaloosa later and is compiled from memory.

". . . Mabel Cody's Flying Circus, Old Gold Cigaretts, Tri-Motored Fokker."

(Editor's Note: to be continued.)