

Sheep Pastures, Barnstormers, Aircraft Factories, Go-Karts and Jets!

In 1927 two Chicago pilots purchased approximately 600 acres of sheep pastures, just east of Saint Charles, Illinois where they started barnstorming. They built a grass strip to land on, and built a hanger, to store their planes.

At the time, they didn't (I haven't been able to find out these two pilots names, but I am working on it), know what they had started. Their land was next to one of Col. Bakers' four farms; more on him later!

In 1941, the two pilots sold the land to the U.S. Navy, so they could use the property for training purposes; aircraft carrier landings in particular. The Navy built two runways, brick hangers and barracks, all of which are still standing and being used today.

In 1942, one year after the Navy bought the property, a company named Howard Aircraft Corporation, moved to a new location, east of Powis Road, just across the street from the training center. Benny Howard was a test pilot, self taught aeronautical engineer, (he worked at Curtiss-Wright and knew Marcellus Foose, see below) and the founder of Howard Aircraft Corporation. Howard started racing and producing airplanes in the early 1930's, at a factory located at Midway Airport, known back then as Chicago Municipal Airport, on Chicago's south side. His DGA (known as Damned Good Airplanes) were used for air ambulances and observation aircraft by the Navy and Army-Air Force. After WW II broke out, Howard found he needed more production room then he had at Midway, so he moved to the West Chicago, Illinois, location.

My grandfather worked as an executive for Air Associates from 1936 until 1941, which was also located at Chicago Municipal Airport. Air Associates went on strike in 1941, (it was one year of solid violence against employees, trying to get everyone unionized), and my grandfather, (who knew Benny Howard) decided to move from Air Associates to the new Howard Aircraft location. There wasn't anyone getting beat up at Howard, so I would say it was a pretty smart move on Gramps' part.

My grandfather told me of a test pilot whom he befriended, while working at Air Associates, by the name of Marcellus Foose, who also worked for Air Associates part time, while he was attending the Curtiss-Wright School of Aviation in Chicago. Marcellus is still alive and living in Blue Island, Illinois, and over the years has been a great contributor to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

When Howard Aircraft, was in full production, they produced many different models of planes; but the DGA-11 and DGA-15 were the majority of what they produced. The airplanes were designed for short field take offs, and with a nine cylinder 450 H.P. Pratt & Whitney radial engine mounted on a four seat airplane, could be airborne in under

1200 feet, and they could achieve over 220 M.P.H.,(I use M.P.H. instead of knots, call me old fashion), which is pretty fast, even by today's standards.

When the planes were finished, they were pushed off the assembly line, across Powis Road, for testing at the Naval Training Center. Howard Aircraft was sold after the war, and Benny Howard became a test pilot for Douglas Aircraft, (McDonald Douglas as it is known to most people) and later a specialist for Carroll Shelby Racing, where he did wind tunnel testing on race cars, most notably the Shelby/Ford Mustangs of the late 1960's.

After the war, the Navy sold the training center to DuPage County in 1946, for \$1.00. The Airport became know as DuPage Airport, as it is today, and is governed by DuPage Airport Authority.

DuPage Airport is located just east of the Kane/DuPage county line; Kautz Road, being the dividing line, and is also the eastern edge of St. Charles, Illinois. I was born and raised in St. Charles, which was a small town (Pop: 8900) back in the 60's; and grew up having the usual kids' toys. Enter Craig's and mine go-kart!

Craig, Paul, and Ed were friends of mine, who lived a block away from the airport, their homes since purchased and torn down, by DuPage Airport, and that is where Craig and I kept our go-kart. We used to take our go-kart out on the runway 10/28 (4751 ft.) and run it up to over 125 M.P.H. (it had 3- West Bend 820 engine's, 12 carburetors, running alcohol). I know; we were crazy! But we had fun! We would vacate the runway, when the controllers in the control tower, would signal us with a light, that a plane was going to land or take off. We could then go back to using the runway, once they gave us the all clear. That was the good old days! A go-kart ride down runway 10/28 today would probably get us a couple of years making sand out of big rocks.

Another thing we kids did back then, after I obtained my drivers license, was go to the airport, and buy high octane AV Gas for our cars. 400 + HP Chevy engines just loved the stuff!

Enter Martha Lunken! After reading her article in January 2008 issue of Flying Magazine, I realized she was the FAA examiner/inspector at DuPage Airport about the time I was illegally riding my go-kart around the runways. So, I decided to call Martha and had a short, (she had an appointment with a student I think she said) but fun conversation; and found out, she lived three blocks from where I lived in St. Charles. Somewhere we crossed paths, but we didn't know it.

If a kid had to grow up in any town, St. Charles was the town to grow up in! St. Charles is a, "Main Street America" river town; and we had the pure luck of having a couple of citizens, who were millionaires/philanthropists. These people really helped shape my home town into what it was, and is today. John "Bet-A-Million" Gates was the person who purchased the patent rights to barbed wire, from a fella in DeKalb County, Illinois, and was very successful in marketing it in Texas. Gates also was a wildcatter, and he started a little oil company back in the 1920's, by the name of Texaco. He also owned a rubber company in Colorado named Gates Tire and Rubber Co.

After Gates' death, his fortune was further lavished on St. Charles, by his heirs, Col. Edward Baker, and his niece Delora Angell Norris; who knew and attended many social functions with Benny Howard and his wife "Mike" Howard.

Col. Edward Baker owned several dairy farms around Saint Charles, one of which was the farm right next to the barnstormers' property, which later became Pheasant Run Lodge and Resort.

Fast forward to 1985; where DuPage Airport expanded from 600 acres to 2800 acres, and today they presently have four and a half square miles of land. Over the years, DuPage Airport Authority purchased all the land that they could surrounding the airport, and the rest of the remaining property is all industrial/commercial property, putting them in an enviable position to never be encroached upon by housing and complaining citizens, about noise.

DuPage Airport is a huge FBO, with four runways and plenty of jet and turbo-prop traffic; and in the past 84 years has seen many changes. It is a big airport with a small time friendliness, (before 9/11 anyway), and has had an interesting transition from the days of barnstorming, airplane building, to what it is today. As for driving go-karts down runway 10/28; well I don't see that happening anymore, but one can dream.