

## *Mason Jewett Airport*

*by Bartlett Smith*

Even though World War II was in full progress some government leaders were looking forward to the future when the Allies would successfully finish the hostilities and start the transition to a normal post-war life. Arthur Jewett, as mayor of Mason, was advised by those people that when the veterans returned an airport would be an important asset to any city or town. Aviation had become a fact of life during the war. The military trained pilots would be seeking continuation of their learned aviation skills, as well as many veterans would have a strong desire to learn to fly. An airport would also provide an attraction for industrial expansion to a city as well.

With this in mind Mr. Jewett purchased the 180-acre Elsworth Fletcher farm south of Mason on Eden Road on December 16, 1943. The house was on the west side of Eden Road while the farm fields and large barn were on the east side of the road. The north border of that farm abutted the south borders of the Ingham County Park and the Jewett farm property.

An east-west grass surface runway of 2,800 feet was constructed in early 1944. This runway was parallel to the farm fields' north boundary and about four hundred feet to the south. Fifty acres were used for this runway while the remaining area was farm cropped. The interior of the hip-roof barn was removed and the concrete floor cleaned allowing the storage of three or four planes. A small building was moved in adjacent to Eden Road, which became the office with restrooms. An underground refueling system operated from the office was installed. Just to the north and the west end of the runway a single hangar building, capable of housing six planes, was completed. Now Mason had its own airport!

The first plane to land on the partially completed runway was a Civil Air Patrol plane from Lansing with Dick Lyons as a passenger. A Civil Air Patrol Squadron was formed at Mason. At this time the Mason Flying Club Number One was formed by Harry Spenny, Maurice Rickley, Harold Barnhill, Marvin Rice, Rudy Bowman and Dick Lyons. They purchased a two place Porterfield plane. For storage in the new hangar the members picked up stones on the new runway and helped with the development of the fledgling airport as did the Civil Air Patrol Squadron members.

The first students to fly from the new airport were instructed by Ralph Martin from Eaton Rapids. In October 1944 Stanley Keck became the first operator of Jewett Flying School. Stan was originally an experienced instructor from Pennsylvania but had recently been stationed at Romulus Michigan in the Air Corps Ferry Command. As student-flying training increased the school purchased used training planes. A second runway was constructed at the east end of the existing runway. This 2500 foot north-south runway formed a lopsided "T" with the east-west runway.

With the end of the war in 1945 the airport and school qualified for a contract with the Veterans Administration to provide flying training to returning veterans. At this same time they became dealers for new Piper aircraft and others.

In late May of 1946 the writer returned to Mason after several months in the European-African area as an Air Force pilot. I was pleased to find Mason now had a thriving airport with a very active training program. New training planes and a second instructor, Ralph Avery, had recently been added to the school. Privately owned aircraft based at Jewett Airport were on the increase. Because of this five individual t-hangars were constructed along Eden Road south of the barn and office building.



Another former Air Force pilot was using Jewett Airport to continue his flying skills. Bob Starr, who had been a P-51 pilot in the Asian Theater, took a refresher course at the school. This enabled him to take the FAA flight check to obtain his flight instructor rating. Soon he was instructing at Mason.

It is interesting to note that at one time four brothers were pilots flying at Jewett Airport. They were Harley, who had been a member of the original Mason Civil Air Patrol Squadron, Glenn, Roy and Bob Starr.

Stanley Keck left Mason the end of December 1946. Frank David from Charlotte took over the management Jewett Flying School. He hired Margaret Crane and Bob Starr as instructors. The end of March 1947 Frank David left the business. The school was continued on by the instructors.

The writer decided to take a break from college at the end of spring term at MSU to return to flying. After taking refresher instruction from Bob Starr I received my flight instructor rating on May 14, 1947. A few days later I started instructing at Jewett Flying School. The first new student I started and soloed was Hugh Silsby Jr., a childhood friend.

The "G.I. Program" attracted many more veterans to learn to fly and the school flourished. Looking forward for diversified business one of the Piper J-3 trainers was converted to an aerial crop duster in the summer of 1947. Bob got the required waivers and flew the dusting jobs, usually insect control or fertilizer applications in the early mornings or evenings.

With usual winter slow down of student activity the writer left in January 1948 to ferry Dr. Joseph Ponton's plane to his winter home in Arizona. Upon return I accepted the offer from Emory-Rearick Aviation of Owosso to operate their school at Chesaning.

In the spring of 1948 Laylin Jewett completed courses at Northrup Institute in California to obtain his aviation mechanics license. He returned to Mason to establish an aircraft maintenance shop at Jewett Airport. With the potential increase in activity the writer also returned to the field on the first of July.

Renovations were made to the barn hangar to provide a modern heated work area with necessary facilities, tooling and equipment. The addition of aluminum overhead doors allowed easy access to the efficient shop.

The activity of the crop duster increased. With these increased demands on his time Bob Starr purchased the crop duster in August to operate as his own business.

A new Stinson Station Wagon four-place plane was purchased by the school in October 1948. This was to make the training fleet more versatile but also to be used for charter service. A kit was purchased to make a quick conversion to an ambulance plane. This resulted in many interesting charter flights and transporting patients to medical facilities such as Mayo Brothers in Minnesota. Occasionally even non-living passengers were flown. Listed below are two of the more interesting of the ambulance flights.

A little girl from Albuquerque, New Mexico came to Mason to visit her grandparents in the summer of 1949. While here she contracted infantile paralysis. In October 1949 she and her mother were flown home in the Jewett Airport ambulance plane. It was necessary to land at the Air Force Field at Albuquerque. Air Force personnel were giving the Governor of Michigan, Kim Sigler, an instrument training course at that field. He recognized me from our previous meetings at fly-ins and greeted me like a long lost friend.



(A few years later on a flight from Chicago to Lansing the Beech Bonanza he was flying under low clouds hit a guy-wire on the Kalamazoo TV tower. Both he and his two passengers were killed.)

On a snowy morning in November 1949 Arthur Jewett received a call from the Gladwin Hospital that Wayne Feighner had been severely burned in an explosion in his deer hunting cabin. They could not properly treat him and felt he could not endure a long ground ambulance ride to adequate facilities. He remembered our ambulance plane and asked the hospital to call Mr. Jewett.. In less than an hour we were in the landing pattern at Gladwin. When we were ten minutes from landing we radioed Flight Service on the field to alert the hospital of our arrival. As we shut down the engine after landing the ambulance arrived. The badly burned patient was transferred to the plane.

Forty-five minutes later we were transferring him to the ground ambulance that we had left in the heated shop at Mason. With Laylin Jewett driving the ground ambulance the patient was transported to Sparrow Hospital to begin weeks of treatment.

Lights were installed on the East-West runway in the fall of 1949 to facilitate night flying. This allowed the expanding of the training curriculum and added user convenience.

A model airplane hobby shop was created in the airport office the winter of 1949 to provide additional interest and business. Subsequently an area at the west end of the runway was maintained for flying U-control model planes.

At the beginning of year 1950 there were more than thirty planes based at Jewett Airport and despite more stringent requirements the training program was active. During the summer the Mason Kiwanis Club once again sponsored the annual Dawn Patrol Fly-in breakfast that registered a record 263 visiting pilots and their planes.

In September 1950 the owner made the decision to close the airport business on October first. The training planes were sold and students and privately owned planes moved to other locations. Runway lights were removed and stored in the barn hangar.

The barn hangar-shop continued to be used for limited work on planes and autos. A welding accident in 1952 resulted in a fire that destroyed the building and its contents as well as three planes and three cars. The other empty hangars were eventually used for storage of farm machinery and crops. The runways had remained though not maintained.

Bruce Love approached the writer to teach him to fly at Mason. In a conference with Mr. Jewett he agreed to reopen the airport on a part time basis if I would oversee it as the licensed Assistant Airport Manager.

Bruce's newly purchased training plane was flown to the airport and training began. A space was cleared in the north hangar for his plane. This began a resurgence of Jewett Airport. Soon fuel was made available and the office was open on a part time basis. As the other hangars were emptied other privately owned planes returned to the field. This very active part time operation and cooperative maintenance continued until 1965.

A full time operation for flight training and aircraft rental was begun in 1968 by Harold Manville and continued until 1974.

Capital Region Airport Authority purchased the full 180 acres of the airport property from Arthur Jewett in March 1977 for an outlying reliever field for Capital City Airport in Lansing. All existing buildings and structures were removed from the property.

A new east-west 3,000 foot. asphalt runway was constructed on the location of the old runway but without the valley that had graced it's mid point. The north-south runway was abandoned when a new terminal building was built on part of its location. A new road was constructed from Eden Road to that terminal building

The east end of Kipp Road had terminated at Eden Road. The Ingham County Road Commission extended Kipp Road to Dexter Trail in 1978. This provided a south entrance to Ingham County Fair Grounds as well as added driver convenience.

In the ensuing years the C.R.A.A. purchased an additional 100 acres of adjoining property. This allowed the runway to eventually be extended to 4,000 feet with the addition of lighted parallel taxi-ways. Due to constant building of new hangar structures at present there are spaces for at least 80 planes to be housed at Jewett Airport plus a large area of surfaced ramp for parking.

Many flying clubs have successfully operated from the airport through the years. The club with the longest operation was the Sycamore Valley Flyers which was started in 1946 and was active until 1966. Harry J. Smith was the only person to be a club member from its beginning to its end.

The Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 55 moved to Jewett Airport 1984 to build a hangar with attached meeting rooms. Their activities through the years have helped promote aviation and the airport.

The first operator of Jewett Airport after it was purchased by C.R.A.A. was Donald Frank followed by Pat Green and then Brent Andrews.

Aero Genesis Aviation, the present operator at the airport, constructed a large modern maintenance hangar and offices in 1998. The owner-CEO of this aggressive, successful company is Eric Swanson.

This is the fifty-sixth year of existence for Mason Jewett Airport. During those years it has provided the aviation experience for a great number of people wither it be their first ride, training or continuation of their flying. For the major number of people it was an avocation or recreational flying. However, for some it became a vocation such as flight instructor, airline or corporate pilot, or other types of commercial flying.

The *Guinness Book of World Records* lists Bob Starr, a former Jewett Airport instructor, as designer, builder and pilot of the world's smallest man carrying airplane.

In retrospect, all of those who fly or have flown from Jewett Airport should be thankful for the foresight and initiative taken by Arthur Jewett so long ago.

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