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Island Airport

By LELAND HAWES

Tampa's Hillsborough Bay might have another goodsized island between Ballast Point and Davis Islands if the city had carried through with original proposals on a $750,000 bond issue.

Freeholders passed the bond issue in 1929, a year usually remembered for more calamitous economic events. The airport-in-the-bay scheme was a 30-day wonder, but it demonstrated the almost desperate zeal of aviation boosters of the Twenties to put Tampa on the airline routes of the era.

A sudden campaign developed that fall after drastic problems threatened the progress already made to develop airmail links domestically and potential passenger and freight service to South America.

Drew Field was considered the municipal airport, although it was simply a leased tract of land from John H. Drew, and it contained few airport amenities. The old City Commission had agreed to pay $500 annually for five years, starting in 1927, and gave Drew the gas and oil concessions on the field.

Candidates for queen of the Tampa air meet were chosen each year by the Tampa Aero Club in its effort to promote development of Drew Field as a municipal airport.

LELAND HAWES is a columnist for the Tampa Tribune who specializes in history and nostalgia.
The 180-acre tract stretched from Tampa Bay Boulevard southward to Michigan Avenue (not called Columbus Drive until 1933), and it did not provide smooth sailing to start with. The city paid $10,500 to Drew to dig up stumps and clear the land, but the work must not have been completed by September 1929.

Heavy rains brought complaints that the airport had become a huge mudhole, with stumps scattered about petrifying pilots seeking to land or take off. Conditions were so adverse that the company providing airmail service to Tampa announced it was switching to Lakeland until things improved.

Sheriff L.M. Hatton, flying a small plane, reportedly hit a soft spot on the field and took a nosedive into the mud. The A.B. McMullen Flying School stopped solo flights by its students until the airport dried out. And worst of all, there was real concern that the city might lose its status as a stop for the New York, Rio and Buenos Aires airline (NYRBA).

The recently constructed $19,000 hangar didn't have a solid floor, and aviators complained that the structure had been built "near a low corner, not near the center" of the property, according to The Tampa Tribune. In other words, the mud was making a mess of the hangar, too.

On Sept. 12, the Montevideo, a NYRBA airship, had to land off Davis Islands, where a yacht waited with a signal torch. A telegram to Charleston had warned the pilot not to hazard the mud at Drew Field.

Another amphibian plane put down into the bay near the Bayshore Royal Hotel after a heavy storm broke as the pilot approached Drew. A Tribune reporter and two small boys rowed the crew ashore. Later the decision was made to move the plane to Drew Field, but another "blinding rain" brought a "perilous landing" and the airship hit a stump.

All of these incidents were described in detail by The Tribune in what became a concentrated campaign to arouse the citizenry to action on the airport problems.

It didn't take much arousal, for Tampa's eyes already were lifted skyward, in hopes aviation...
might give it a lift following the "bust" of the Florida land boom. And this was the era when the exploits of Charles Lindbergh, and other long-distance aviator heroes had created a frenzy of fervor for flying across the nation.

Historian Anthony Pizzo remembers how excited he was as a teenager, riding his bicycle to Drew Field to watch the planes. One night when he was about 16 he spotted a "monstrous tri-motored Ford flying over the city towards Drew Field." Overwhelmed with excitement at seeing the big plane, he jumped into his father's Hupmobile without permission (no one else was at home at the time) and drove from Ybor City to Drew Field. He maneuvered the car up to the hangar - and found the five occupants of the plane standing there, wondering how to get downtown.

Pizzo was their only "greeter" and he was eager to be of service. So he drove them to the Tampa Terrace Hotel. "Sonny, you come back tomorrow - we'll give you a ride," one of the aviators told him. The thrilled young aviation enthusiast did return the next day for the ride, along with his father, mother and sister. And the plane crew had Christmas dinner at the Pizzo home.

Mayor D.B. McKay and city delegation greeted the Southern Star when it arrived at Drew Field in 1929.

Students of the McMullen Aviation School posed at Drew Field in July 1928.

The commercial passenger plane Northern Star made a stop in Tampa in January 1930.
Emilio Pons was active in the Tampa Aero Club which promoted air meets and social events to raise money for projects such as shell for the hangar floor. And he recalls the intense efforts to attract airplane manufacturers to Tampa.

But all those hopes and aspirations were dependent upon the city’s providing a first-class airport. And not just a landlocked airport.

All the emphasis was on seaplane facilities, for amphibian plans appeared to be in the “wave of the future” for flights to South America. The pontoon planes had the advantage, of course, of staying afloat - and mishaps were fairly common.

Drew Field was still a rather primitive operation. Commander C.C. Blackburn of the Chamber of Commerce’s aviation committee

The Tribune published an extra on the morning of Dec. 12, 1929, after an arsonist torched every plane in the hangar at Drew Field.

- Copy courtesy Tampa Tribune Library

An air meet drew this crowd to Drew Field in April 1929.
--Burgert Brothers print courtesy Tampa/Hillsborough County library
said it "had the makings of a good field," but he noted that during recent National Air Races pilots "nearly nosed over on their landings in soft spots."

On Sept. 18, Mayor D.B. McKay proposed a $750,000 bond issue to build a new airport that could handle amphibian planes traveling to and from South America. And he left the question of location in the hands of the Board of Aldermen’s aviation committee.

By Sept. 26, the aviation committee, chaired by Alderman Don Thompson, came up with its solution to the problem: a 160-acre island dredged up in Hillsborough Bay between Ballast Point and Davis Islands. It would be connected to the mainland by a 2,660-foot causeway that would handle streetcars as well as automobiles. And it could be approached on three sides by seaplanes.

Seven other land sites had been submitted to the aldermen, but they came out in favor of the airport-on-an island. And The Tribune began running almost daily articles quoting supporters of the island proposal. Among the first, Davis Islands Corporation president George M. Osborne endorsed it, saying "It will be no nuisance to Davis Islands ...There will be no idle flying about."

The date for a freeholders’ election on the bond issue was set for Nov. 27.

Meanwhile, Drew Field’s deficiencies were delineated frequently. The chief pilot of NYRBA was quoted as saying: "Tampa is not giving these planes a safe landing field. It has one of the biggest fields and longer runways along the entire line, but unless the low places are filled in and rolled and the runways are outlined they will continue to be a hazard to pilots..."

Civic groups began to organize, but the first rumble of public opposition was heard Oct. 10. W.F. Stovall, former owner of The Tribune, blasted the site, calling it "ignorance" and "stupidity" to create an airport by pumping up bay-bottom. He favored a 22nd Street Causeway location.

Stovall drew a rebuttal from Chamber of Commerce manager Charles McKeand, who asked critics to "play fair," and implied Stovall had personal or business interests in a competing site.

Well into October the publicity drums beat steadily on the advantages of a sea/land airport in the bay. The former president of the state engineering society declared other locations would be "second-rate." And A. Pendleton Taliaferro, Jr., chief of field services for the U.S. Commerce Department, came out unequivocally for the island site while on an inspection trip.

While all this was going on locally, headlines from Wall Street vied for front-page space to describe the carnage taking place on the New York Stock Exchange. And liquidators were attempting to put together a plan to pay off a percentage of the losses suffered by depositors.
when Tampa’s Citizens Bank and several of its subsidiaries collapsed.

By mid-October, something silenced the campaign for an island airport. Mayor McKay and the city aldermen decided to place selection of a site in the hands of a "non-partisan committee" which would include local people as well as representatives of the U.S. Commerce, Navy and War Departments.

Although nothing appeared in print at that point, it is apparent that powerful forces scuttled the island proposal. Writing years later, historian Karl Grismer said, "Many residents of the Bayshore district objected strenuously to the proposed island airport, saying that it would lower their property values."

Since many of Tampa’s most prominent citizens resided in stately homes bordering the Bayshore, it is likely that Mayor McKay and the city aldermen heard heated protests from constituents they could not ignore.

The city wasn’t the only one to shift its position on the site question; The Tribune did, too. Abruptly, there was no more mention of the island airport. After Oct. 18, the newspaper stressed that all proposed sites would be given a fair shake by an "unbiased" committee.

On Oct. 19, the NYRBA line, which had expressed strong interest in establishing its southeast headquarters in Tampa, announced it would invest nothing more until a combination sea/land airport was completed.

On Oct. 20, a mass meeting of the merchants association was held to underwrite an endurance flight proposed by a St. Louis businessman. The Florida Citrus Exchange put up $5,000, and another $5,000 was subscribed by merchants to back the effort to keep a plane aloft more than 420 hours.

Within several weeks, the plane christened Sealed-Sweet (brand name for Citrus Exchange oranges and now the corporate name) was circling in the sky. A companion plane called the Mor-Juice was to supply fuel through a 50-foot rubber hose and food in canvas bags dangled from above.

The endurance flight attracted plenty of attention, and a Tribune reader’s letter warned: "Don’t let this deferred choice of airport site or the endurance flight that is being staged (to get you up in the air so that you will vote for the bonds?) camouflage the fact that you must pay for those bonds."

Registration was slow at first, and one-quarter of all Tampa property-owners had to sign up for the election to have any effect. But the chamber of commerce and The Tribune exhorted firms to get out the vote among qualified employees. Eventually, 2,073 freeholders registered, and they were targeted for personal lobbying by members of chamber committees.

Walter Beech, a former Tampan and president of Curtis Wright Corp., came out in support of a combined land/sea airport, and R. Wallace Davis, the city’s superintendent of public works, cautioned, "We must remember that no site had been decided upon."

Mayor McKay pledged that every one of the sites offered (a dozen by then) would be judged equally. And he named his local choices for the site selection committee: F. L. Judd, general manager of the Tampa Union Terminal, and architect Franklin O. Adams. Both insisted they would remain impartial until they surveyed the sites.
A Tribune editorial warned again that Tampa would be out of the picture" as NYRBA's southeast base if a new airport were not under way shortly.

On the morning of the election, the lead article in The Tribune started out: "Registered property owners will decide by their ballots today whether Tampa is to move forward or stand still."

On Thursday, Nov. 28, 1929, a triumphant headline proclaimed: AIRPORT BONDS CARRY BY 1117 TO 416 VOTES. Alderman Thompson declared, "It was a great step forward and a reply to the pessimists."

The triumph proved to be hollow. Passing the bond-issue was no cure-all for Tampa's aviation aspirations.

There was still the lingering doubt that the committee might recommend the island site after all. The Tampa Garden Club - whose officers included Mrs. William Fielder, Mrs. J.A. Trawick, Mrs. Howell T. Lykes and Mrs. Walter S. Barrett - presented petitions calling an island airport "unsightly, offensive and nuisance-producing."

Public Works Superintendent Davis soon noted Mayor McKay's "desire to drop the island project" and said the nonpartisan committee would have plenty of alternatives from which to choose. The Tribune took editorial note of the strong opposition and decided the island would have dammed the bay to the "extent of endangering public health."

Then several startling events jolted the city. On the ninth attempt to establish an endurance record, the problem plagued Seald-Sweet crashed near Kissimmee, injuring its two pilots. The supply plane, the Mor-Juice, got caught in a heavy fog over Drew Field and one wing tipped the ground. The airship catapulted onto its nose and burst into flames, killing its two occupants, Stanley Smith and "Boots" Dempsey.

On Dec. 12, The Tribune came out with an early morning extra with the headline "$100,000 FIRE SWEEPS AIRPORT; 13 PLANES LOST." A firebug was blamed for invading the Drew Field hangar and torching every plane housed there.

Mayor McKay's hopes to include governmental representatives on his nonpartisan site selection committee were thwarted, too. None of the federal departments wanted to be involved. Finally, through the efforts of Florida's Sen. Duncan Fletcher, he was able to line up two reservists, Capt. George K. Perkins and Lt. Philip Pratt, both of Washington, D.C.

The site committee looked at 17 sites offered by various property-owners. And it came up with a selection that turned out to be more visionary than immediate: Catfish Point, at the southeastern tip of the Interbay peninsula.

Unfortunately for the proponents of a quick airport, Tampa's city aldermen held the final say on the site - and they had no intention of following the committee's recommendation. Although The Tribune berated the board for delays (and even more pointedly printed a primer for recall elections), the aldermen didn't budge. They simply came up with additional dodges and excuses, shifting from one site to another, then back again.

By February of 1930 NYRBA was making regular flights to South America via Miami. The impasse held tight in Tampa.

That August of 1930, the New York, Rio and Buenos Aires airline merged with Pan-American Airways. And in later years,
historian Grismer and local politicians referred to the city’s loss of Pan-American’s southeast facilities because of the board’s shenanigans.

Had NYRBA’s hub been established in Tampa, nobody knows whether Pan-American would have followed through with that plan in the merger.

Although Catfish Point got no bond money then, it got something bigger in 1939 -what was then the largest airbase in the Southeast, MacDill Field, later MacDill Air Force Base.

And Tampa did get a seaplane base several years later, when Works Progress Administration funds from the federal government made possible the building of Peter O. Knight Airport on Davis Islands.

The city succeeded in acquiring Drew Field by foreclosure in late 1933 for $11,000. Runways were expanded and improvements made, and by 1940 it was considered vital in the nation’s buildup for World War II. Thousands of servicemen trained there during the war, and Drew still plays a vital role in Florida’s aviation as the site of Tampa International Airport.

What about that airport proposed for Hillsborough Bay? Although dredge-and-fill projects were not weighed for ecological impact in 1929, the opponents were probably correct. For another island undoubtedly would have produced an adverse effect on that end of the bay.