

Topic: The Airport

A University President Creates an Airport
by Liz Gibbons

In 1930 Purdue University was the first college to build an airport. This had been a dream of Purdue's president at that time, Edward Elliott, who was very interested in aviation. He was friends with a wealthy graduate, David Ross, an 1893 Purdue graduate who built a successful company, Ross Gear, located in Lafayette. Ross was on the Purdue Board of Trustees and had a passion for improving the world and giving back to his alma mater. Ross found 100 acres of land for sale on the edge of the campus, bought it, and donated it to Purdue for the airport.

At first the airport was used as a classroom for the aeronautical engineering department which was moved from the campus to the airport. Additional land was later added to the airport to encompass 517 acres, and for many years it was the second busiest airport in Indiana. But it no longer has commercial flights for the runways are not long enough for large commercial planes. Only private planes now use the airport.

On Sundays after attending Sunday school and church my family usually ate lunch at the Purdue Union Cafeteria, which had excellent food. (Incidentally, the Purdue Union was another gift from Ross to Purdue.) After lunch we occasionally drove to the airport to watch the activity there from the observation deck atop the classroom building. In 1938 Purdue was the first college to accept a grant from the U. S. government to develop a flight school under the Civilian Pilot Training Program. In 1942 this program was changed to the War Training Service under the Navy Department. They used Stearman biplane trainers, which were painted bright yellow and blue, to train pilots for the Navy. On one of our trips to the airport one of my dad's former students saw us and came over to talk. He was in the pilot training program and offered to take my brother up in one of the biplanes. My brother was eight or nine and declined the offer.

In 1934 President Elliott and Amelia Earhart were both speakers at a Conference on Current Problems sponsored by *The New York Herald Tribune*. President Elliott was very impressed with Amelia's speech. He was forward looking and felt a co-ed college should train women for careers outside the home. Here was a woman who was interested in inspiring women. At that time most women at Purdue were enrolled in the Home Economics School. The few who enrolled in the engineering or agriculture schools never made it past their junior year. President Elliott invited Amelia to come to Purdue. It took a little over a year for him to find funding and for them to decide what her role there was to be.

In conversation with Amelia's husband, George, President Elliott learned that Amelia desired a bigger, faster plane for research in aviation. By the end of a dinner party that Elliott arranged in the fall of 1935 at which Amelia spoke about her dreams, \$73,000 dollars had been donated to buy her a plane through the Purdue Research Foundation. While the plane would be registered in Amelia's name to freely use, it would also belong to the Foundation, and any proceeds from her writings or research from the use of the plane would be shared with the Foundation. Her plane was housed in the hangar at the Purdue Airport. This was the plane that Amelia used when she was lost in her attempt to fly around the world in 1937.