

Airports, Airlines, and Airplanes in Harlingen—A Brief Survey

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10/29/18 Returning home for his brother Gordon's funeral, Lon C. Hill, Jr. lands the first airplane ever in Harlingen. The light bi-wing aircraft puts down in a football field close to where the present Harlingen airport exists. In his trip from San Antonio he has refueled at the King Ranch and approaching Harlingen looks for sheets spread along side the grass field selected for his landing.

1923 The first locally owned plane is brought to town. Lemman Nelson and Clay Rader have purchased a surplus WWI bi-plane, still in its crate. They purchase an engine for it bringing the total cost to \$600. Later it is destroyed by high winds. In time Lemman Nelson and Bill Williams open a flying school. Two students plan to hi-jack the plane to Central America. With Nelson in the front cockpit, the student shoots him while airborne, intending to dump the body in the Gulf, land, and pick up his accomplice. Instead the novice crashes between Harlingen and San Benito. As rescuers move to the plane he commits suicide.

The site of the municipal airport is a 72 acre triangular piece of land wedged between the Arroyo Colorado on its east and the Main Canal on its west side. It is at the south end of the municipal golf course. It possesses a gravel-dirt airstrip.

6/29 The *Harlingen Star* on its editorial page daily promotes among others the following for the city and area: A Modern, Fully Equipped Airport.

11/29 Harlingen boasts that its airport was the first in the Valley to be rated by the Department of Commerce. In May after a committee was appointed to find a new 400 acre site for a city airport, it begins to draw up plans to enlarge and modernize the existing facility and equipment. Mid-year efforts to entice Pan American Airlines here from Brownsville had fallen on deaf ears despite occasional flooding of the Brownsville strip.

1930-34 A Valley resident since 1930, C.W. Blackwell has a flying school in the area. Mr. and Mrs. O.N. Joyner's daughter Evelyn is one of his students and is considered to be the youngest woman pilot in the country. After she earns a flying license, her father purchases a plane. Blackwell makes most of his living with his pioneer agricultural dusting service and will manager the old Harlingen Airport for a number of years. At age 67 on 5/15/59 Blackwell passes.

3/41 Army Air Corps officials in Washington announce approval of Harlingen Air Training Base and in May this is confirmed. Later authority to proceed comes with the approval of a \$3.8 million appropriation.

7/41 Harlingen Army Airfield is established for the training of gunnery students. By 1945 more than 48,000 gunners have utilized the facility, now the Valley International Airport. With its palm-lined streets and flowering shrubs it was known as the "showplace of the air force."

11/28/41 Col. John R. Morgan, who will become the airfield commander, lands first base aircraft, a BT-13, on new southeast runway. At this time only a one-chair contractor's shack exists.

1/43 The 72 acre municipal air field is leased to an individual concern.

1/5/46 The first hint of the closure of the Harlingen Army Air Field comes in an AP story noting it will be declared surplus, the last of four such bases in this area to be deactivated. Others have been Moore Field, the Brownsville Army Air Base, and the Laguna Madre Sub-Base of the HAAF. Col. Louis R. Hughes is commanding officer of the 5,000 men, both trainees and permanent personnel, now here. By 1/29 negotiations start on the use of HAAF. On 2/1 the base is placed into inactive status and four days later declared surplus property. HAAF base commanding officer Col. Roy T. Wright had received orders on 9/17 to go overseas. Col. Lewis R. Hughes, deputy CO as of 4/13, then took command of the base. On 10/5/45 Col. John R. Morgan, commanding officer of the 79th Flying Training Wing with headquarters at HAAF, had been ordered to assume command at Keesler Field, Mississippi. He had been here since 1941.

In 1946 E.O. Young establishes the Young Flying service. It is purchased by Wayne French in 1979. By 1985 it is a full, fixed base operation handling fueling, and on-call maintenance of smaller aircraft, air charters, sale of new Piper and Cessna airplanes, and rentals. Its 43 employees have a payroll of \$437,000 by 1984.

2/46 Harlingen Army Airfield is deactivated and formally taken over by the city on March 21. On 3/21/46 the field is taken over by the city.

9/7/46 Harlingen Field dedicated as a municipal airport by Rear Admiral C.A.F. Sprague, commander of the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. From this field is flown the first air cargo ever from the Valley. It is a planeload of strawberries for Canada. From 1947 to 1951 when it is reclaimed by the military the airport is called the All-Valley Regional Airport.

4/22/47 Nationwide Air Transport flies into the All-Valley Airport, Harlingen with the its first international air cargo ever. The DC 3 carries 7,000 lbs. of shrimp from Carmen, Mexico.

1947-48 Trans Texas Airways, with its 21 passenger DC 3s, offers twice daily flights.

The city is advertised as the "Valley's Commercial, Industrial and Transportation Center."

3/2/48 Trans Texas Airways has its first flight between Harlingen and San Antonio.

1949 Merle Huston is manager of the Harlingen All-Valley Airport.

1949 Val Air lines headquartered in the Madison Hotel building operates two flights daily to San Antonio and return to Harlingen.

6/21/51 The Defense Department seeks \$15,462,000 to construct Harlingen facilities at the All-Valley Airport. It is to be transformed into a school for Air Force navigators. In the end

\$14,721,000 is appropriated as part of the defense spending bill, \$100,000 of which will be used to repurchase real estate sold since the army air field closed.

4/1/52 The once deactivated military air field turned into a city-owned regional one is reactivated as the Harlingen Air Force Base. While the original Harlingen Army Airfield cost just over \$20 million, the reactivation this year will cost \$15 million. Its mission is to train navigators, an urgency brought on by the initiation of the Korean War in June 1950. At its peak there are 3,500 military personnel and 600 civilians. The annual payroll comprises \$15 million.

1952 Charles A. (Cut) Washmon is Mayor (12/15/52-12/15/56), when the Harvey Richards Field, Harlingen's municipal airport is opened on August 3, 1954 (but dedicated in November) in what is now the Harlingen Country Club in Palm Valley (26.2 N/97.76 W). It has a small terminal and a 3,650' runway. A 1963 directory shows that it had by then two paved runways with the primary one (19/35) being 4,900' asphalt, a third runway, taxiways, an apron, several hangars, and a terminal building. Operators listed were the Elliott dusting Service, Elliott Aviation Co., Valley Flying Service, and Young Flying Service. It is updated in 1959. Air travel times from Harlingen to major Texas cities are: Houston 3 hrs 22 min., San Antonio 2 hrs 32 min., and Dallas-Ft.Worth 4 hrs 50 min.

Texas International Airline operates from Harlingen. In 12/55 it is given permission by the CAB to provide four a day plane service from Harlingen to Dallas with stops in San Antonio and Austin. It pulls out 12/74 and returns in 4/75. In May 1979 it leaves again. Later it is merged into Continental Airlines, which commences flights into Harlingen in the 1990s.

1/12/59 \$600,000 construction funds are set for the planned Harvey Richards Municipal Airport expansion six miles west of the city. One half of this amount will come from the FAA and one half from the Harlingen Airport Board, whose chairman is C. Grant Kloperstein. Others on the board are J.R. Fitzgerald, Harvey L. Richards, A.J. Wittenbach, E.D. McDonald, H.W. Bahnman, and D.B. Blankin. No local tax monies will be involved.

With the purchase of 160 additional acres a runway of 4,900' is constructed.

1/29/59 Mayor C. Worth Wood announces a 25 year lease for city-owned land of 1,489 acres for the Harlingen Air Force Base.

4/30/60 The Harvey Richard Municipal Airport is rededicated with its \$70,000 terminal building which is but part of a \$400,000 improvement program. Congressman Joe M. Kilgore gives the dedicatory address. Trans-Texas Airways is to move here on 7/1/60.

3/19/61 The first public announcement is made that the Harlingen Air Force Base is to be closed.

1962 The Harlingen Air Force Base closes and throws the city into an economic slump of major proportions. Between April and December the military complement at the base drops very sharply as does civilian employment.

Harvey Richards Municipal Airport is operating. Four flights arrive daily while six flights depart. The north-south runway is 4,950'; the NW-SE one 3,400'. It also has a third turf runway, taxiways, an apron, several hangars, and a terminal building. Operators at the field are Elliot Dusting Service, Elliot Aviation Company, Valley Flying Service, and Young Flying Service. In 12/67 the facility is to close as the airlines move to the much larger runways of the former HAFB.

2/21/63 A City Commission resolution to establish a regional airport in Harlingen elicits protests from McAllen and Brownsville interests.

8/65 By a four to one margin Harlingen voters approve a \$1.25 million bond issue to convert the former HAFB to a major jet international airport.

4/14/66 The proposed movement of the airport from Harvey Richards Field to the former HAAF is opposed by some, but the economics are there as well as the future of an industrial park at the site.

11/66 George Young is Mayor. He is to serve from 12/13/66 to 12/8/70. Under him the municipal airport moves into the former HAFB and the Confederate Air Force is invited to establish its facilities at the airport.

11/1/67 The old Air Base becomes the Harlingen Municipal Airport and Industrial Air Park and the commercial airline facility. Between 1/68 and 2/18/69, a total of 3,000 passenger boardings occur. In January Trans Texas Airways starts its jet service to Harlingen on a newly extended runway.

1968 The Confederate Air Force, an organization formulated to preserve World War II military aircraft in flying condition, outgrows its facilities at Rebel Field , Mercedes, where one of its founders Lloyd Nolan runs a flying service, and moves to several hangars and buildings on the north end of the old Aerial Gunnery School facilities at the Harlingen airport. This has been facilitated by the \$25,000 September 1967 fundraising campaign spearheaded by Dr. George Willeford and Don Bodenhammer.

2/24/69 With work having commenced 1/26/68 the new Harlingen Airport terminal is dedicated.

1/71 Spartan Aviation, a Los Angeles company, now has 500 employees in its over 150,000 square feet hangars at the airport. It repairs airplane engines. Its time here is short-lived. Plans to start a small plane manufacturing operation here are given considerable publicity but never reach fruition.

7/25/72 It is announced that the Hawaii firm Murray Air will build giant agricultural crop dusting planes here under the company name EMAIR and with George Roth as partner. The company is to occupy Hangar 38 at the airport.

7/30/73 EMAIR rolls out the first of its giant crop dusting aircraft manufactured here.

1974 Lamar Muse announces that Southwest Airlines, founded in 1971, has plans to fly to the Valley. With its unusual no-frills method of operations and a single type of aircraft, the Boeing 737, it becomes a phenomenal success while other national airlines struggle.

2/16/75 Texas International Airlines announces plans to pull out of its Harlingen operations and concentrate its services in McAllen. It had provided three daily non-stop flights to Dallas, San Antonio, and Houston. Southwest Airlines will fill the void with 12 flights daily on Boeing 737s.

10/78 Mexicana Airlines begins service here but pulls out in 11/82 due to the peso devaluation and losses.

1980 Don Wiles establishes Gulf Avionics when he makes a lease/purchase arrangement with Eddie Anderwald for his avionics shop, then a part of Air Central, Inc. at the Harlingen Industrial Airpark. He officially opens for business 1/1/81. Months later David Garza is brought in as a general partner. The business remained a partnership with the name later changed to Gulf Aviation when aircraft maintenance was added to the services. In 1987 the business was incorporated as Gulf Aviation, Inc. In 1990 Wiles left the company and started Gulf Avionics, Inc., which is continuing to operate at the Valley International Airport in 2004. Garza bought out Wiles' interest in Gulf Aviation in 1993.

1981 The Eagle Bus Company leases a large hangar at the airport to manufacture buses but goes broke the following year.

11/26/80 Continental Airlines is cleared to commence flights into the city and will do so in early 1981.

3/13/81 Mal Kasanoff becomes chairman of the Harlingen Airport Board. Architect Whitey Fletcher will present it a \$2.7 million plan for terminal expansion to the north, parking and drainage improvements, and radar acquisition.

9/9/81 Braniff International begins Harlingen service with four flights daily to Dallas-Ft. Worth. In December American Airlines begins Harlingen service, at first only to Dallas. It spends \$1.3 million/yr here. On 5/13/82 Braniff files for bankruptcy and closes its operations forever.

11/18/83 The Valley International Airport has its grand opening with the very attractive and efficient terminal being welcomed. Its size has grown to 21,000 sq. ft. Fire Station No.5 at the airport will be manned by Harlingen Fire Department personnel, but the physical facility is under the Airport Board.

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12/82 Trailways starts a bus-making plant in Harlingen after obtaining a building in March. By October 1984 work for 175 people diminishes. Through 2/85, 55 workers recondition older buses. By April only 11 people are left at the plant.

5/87 General Dynamics Services Center is set up in Harlingen. An immense super-modern hanger and support facilities are constructed at the southwest side of the airport. It is able to accommodate the largest commercial aircraft. In 1/91 the unit's name changes to General Dynamics Base Systems. In 5/94 the Martin Marietta Corp. acquires the facilities. In 3/95 this company is merged into Lockheed and the facility is under the aegis of Lockheed Martin. It has been assembling one component of the Atlas missiles. In the beginning of 2004, 234 employees are at the plant.

1991 In a major tourism loss to the city, the Confederate Air Force organization headquartered in Harlingen departs its Harlingen Airport base for Midland, TX which has offered it a \$1 million facility/museum.

1991 The CAF has nearly 7,000 members nation-wide and about 140 flyable WWII aircraft.

11/96 Minneapolis-based Sun Country Airlines begins to serve Winter Texans of the mid-west with direct flights to Harlingen. It will serve VIA seasonally from November through April. For a time after the 9/11 terrorist attack it will pull out of the market but resume by 2003. It sets records for passengers carried when it goes to five flights a week in 2004. By November 2006 it marks its 10th anniversary with the local airport scheduling three round-trip flights per week and four during the holiday season.

12/02 Lockheed Martin added 36 employees to its Harlingen payroll during the year. The current total stands at 225. The plant at the Valley International Airport puts together components for the Atlas launch program, F-16 jetfighters, and Theater High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD). The latter is an interceptor missile.

12/30/03 Valley International Airport (Harlingen) controls 53% of the domestic boardings of the three Valley airports. The Texas Dept. of Transportation attributes \$52.9 million as VIA's direct contribution to the local economy. The 245,000 annual visitors it handles are estimated to contribute \$97.2 million directly to the economic output. The VIA's total economic activities stand at \$259.5 million. Besides Continental and Southwest Airlines (and Sun seasonally), other major tenants are Lockheed Martin, FedEx, UPS, Airborne Express, Gulf Aviation, Gulf Avionics, and Amigos Aviation. Roy Rodriguez is chairman of the aviation board, and Ernie D. Arredondo, director of marketing.

3/14/04 The NAFTA CargoPort has opened in the 60,000 square foot facility built by LYXNS Holdings. In addition to Bax Global and Menlow Worldwide, Swissport, a company which works closely with air cargo carriers, will be a tenant. The setup will facilitate the movement of parts into northern Mexico for manufacturing operations there.

4/14/04 FedEx ,which handles air freight to the Valley using Harlingen as a terminal, replaces its standard cargo airplane with a larger and more fuel efficient aircraft. This is the French-

manufactured Airbus A310 which may carry up to 40 tons of cargo. Increased business to the Valley and northern Mexico necessitated the change. The twin-engine plane has 25% greater holding capacity than presently use craft.

5/12/04 As its aerospace business slows, the local plant of Lockheed Martin Space Systems Co. lays off 19 employees. The Denver-based company will retain 211 people in Harlingen.

5/10/06 Valley International Airport becomes "international" again when FedEx commences a five times a week flight schedule to transport freight between Harlingen and Monterrey, Mexico.

1/08 This month saw the demolition of an historic World War II Army Air Field building. This was Hanger 38 with its distinguishable orange and white stripes. Its longtime lessee, EMAIR, ceased operations in 2002. Also to see the dust this month were the Field's four railroad-accessible warehouses just across the road from the museum. The tracks, which once connected to the Southern Pacific Brownsville route, paralleled Loop 499 and were torn out many years ago.