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Century of Flight – Part VII

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NOTE: This is the seventh of 10 Ramblin' columns I'm writing from July 5 to Sept. 6 about the first 100 years of flight in Iowa.

TIPTON — About 500 spectators are expected at the Tipton airport Sunday for its seventh annual open house. Among the sights will be a flight simulator, a National Guard helicopter, gliders, vintage aircraft and, around noon, parachutists displaying the American flag. For \$20 you can take a short airplane ride.

If you live more than half an hour from Tipton, this may be no big deal. But Mathews Memorial Airport serves its community admirably. It's an ideal example of how a small airport is born and how it strives to succeed.



"The primary hope of the airport is for economic development in the community," says Jim Rohlf, airport manager.

Aviation in Iowa has an economic impact estimated at \$18.4 billion as pointed out last week in this, my series of ten columns on aviation in Iowa in honor of the first powered flight in Burlington 100 years ago. I'm writing about it Mondays from July 5 through Sept. 6.

Iowa has eight commercial airports, 101 publicly-owned general aviation airports and eight private airports open to the public, according to the Office of Aviation for the Iowa Department of Transportation.

With 6,000 landings and takeoffs a year, the city owned Mathews Memorial Airport pales in comparison to The Eastern Iowa Airport south of Cedar Rapids which has that many in a couple of days.

But, for Tipton, a community of about 3,100 people, agriculture aviation at the airport is a \$2 million to \$3 million annual business, Jim says.



"One day this year we had seven (crop dusting) planes on the ramp," says pilot Dave Kruse.

With 12 airplanes based here, that's a big deal. But the hope is to build another hangar this fall for another four planes. It's a symbol of resurgence similar to the effort 40 years ago of local businessmen who pushed for the 3,000-foot concrete runway, hangar and small terminal building southwest of Tipton.

"This is the airport that was dedicated in 1970," Jim says.

"It has changed very little."

"I can remember when they were thinking about this airport," says Dave, owner of Dave Kruse Konstruction. "The whole town was excited. It was going to bring them into the 20th Century."

That's when Edith Mathews donated \$90,000 in the name of her husband, Lewis, as seed money to replace a private grass field on the east edge of town.

For 30 years or so, minimal maintenance at the airport was fine. But a new group of people that envisioned improvements for the future stepped up.

That group has helped secure state and

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other funding to replace runway and apron lights, to improve the fueling system and to get that new

hangar built. Just last year the airport became one of the smallest in the United States eligible for federal funds.

"We made the city aware of the jewel they've got here, as long as they maintain it," Jim says.

That coincides perfectly with the 2004 DOT study that projected 20-year increases in statewide aircraft operations from 1.3 million to 1.7 million, in passenger enplanements from 1.5 million to 2.6 million and in Iowa-based aircraft from 2,364 to 2,877.

Tipton was projected to increase to 7,500 take-offs and landings each year.

In addition to Sunday's show, the third-annual aviation camp for children is Saturday morning at the Tipton airport.

"We need the kids to be interested in aviation," Jim says. "You want to get the seed sowed early."

You never know when it will sprout, as in Dave's case. Now 55, he didn't take flying lessons until five years ago. He bought his 1977 Cessna-172 which he keeps at the airport. And while he doesn't fly as often as he'd like — a couple of times a week in the summer and less in the winter — he's always itching to head for the wide open sky.

"Any reason you can find," Dave says with a smile. "Or anything you can make up."

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