

Plane travel has long history at Lake Tahoe



TWA was one of several airlines that flew into Lake Tahoe Airport in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Del Laine

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Aviation on the South Shore is nearly 100 years old, with the first recording of planes landing in the 1920s on the water. It was a bi-wing floatplane near Camp Richardson.

Swaths of land have served as air strips, plans were drawn up that never came to fruition, and some airfields are talked about but historians are not exactly sure where they located.

Local historian Dave Borges gave a brief history of Lake Tahoe aviation during the June 19 Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe lunch at Harrah's. He is a past history instructor at Lake Tahoe Community College and is on the board of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.

It was the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympics that led the charge to develop what is now Lake Tahoe Airport. It was completed in 1959. The land was home to the Barton dairy before it was paved over for planes.

The runway was extended and the current terminal added as the years went by.

“It was paid for with a lot of casino money,” Borges said.

It was in 1983 that South Lake Tahoe bought it from El Dorado County for \$1.

Several commercial airlines flew in and out of the airport. The highest passenger count was in 1978 at 294,188. The last commercial flight was in 2000.

Borges showed an ad for a flight from the Bay Area to South Lake Tahoe costing \$11.95. A pamphlet claimed that a DC-3 could bring passengers from Oakland to Lake Tahoe Airport in 50 minutes.

The deadliest crash at the airport was on March 1, 1964, when 85 people died. The flight originated in Oakland, went to Salinas, and then San Jose before heading to Tahoe. While officials claim the weather was good when they took off, it was stormy in the Sierra, plus mechanical issues contributed to the crash.

Before Lake Tahoe Airport opened most of the planes flew in and out of Sky Harbor Airport in Stateline. This strip is essentially what the mobile home park on Kahle Drive now sits on. It operated from 1946-56.

“They would fly from the mountain side to the lake to alert the cattle. The planes made so much noise,” Borges said. Then they would go out to the lake and circle around to land. “From a pilot’s perspective it looked like they were going into the mountain because Kahle Drive goes uphill.”

A fence had to be erected so the cows would not eat the fabric on the wings.

In the area was also the Sky Harbor Casino.

Johnson Field existed in the 1930s and '40s, but where exactly is not known because old maps don't have it pinpointed. But the old drive-in is said to have moved to the Johnson Field. The Johnson family used to own much of the Bijou area.

The Dunlap Ranch-Tamarack Dairy near what is now the Tahoe Keys was going to be an airfield in the 1930s, but never came to fruition.

Borges showed plans from 1938 for the Meyers Lake Tahoe Airport.

"I've talked to a few people. A Meyers airport would be horrible," Borges said, explaining that the current airport is already challenging for pilots.

In 1951 there was a proposal by the California Aeronautics Commission for a tarmac that could hold 400 aircraft near Pope Beach.

"It's what the Tahoe Keys would have been if the Tahoe Keys didn't happen," Borges said.

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Note:

For more information about Lake Tahoe Airport, revisit the three-part series *Lake Tahoe News* published in July 2012:

- Part 1
- Part 2
- Part 3.