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## Spirit Airport History



People in aviation have always been a special breed. Fearless dreamers who find solace in flight or in the machines that make it possible. Even today, people involved in aviation have a certain knack for seeing the big picture of how things lend themselves to another, no matter if they are a pilot, maintenance technician, air traffic controller or just someone who loves airplanes. The love of aviation is what binds them together. The story of how Spirit of St. Louis Airport came to be is no different.

Paul D. Haglin had aviation in this blood. As a young man in the late 1950's, he had successfully melded his love for aviation into a career as an aerospace engineer working for McDonnell-Douglas in St. Louis, Missouri. As an avid aviator and private pilot himself, Haglin often took to the skies as part of his business and, more often than not, for pleasure. At the time, Haglin's airplane, a blue and white Cessna 195, was based at Lambert Field.

In late 1958 and early 1959, not long after he arrived in St. Louis from Minnesota, Haglin started to experience first hand much of what he had heard about Lambert; the dense air traffic and continued growth of the field toward a major commercial airport. Haglin would sometimes wait for clearance to take off for upwards of 45 minutes. Having to wait for commercial flights and other aircraft higher in priority was past being a nuisance and fast becoming a real problem for the general aviation aircraft that utilized Lambert. Officials estimated the traffic would reach a saturation point at that airport within five years. The idea of an airport located in St. Louis County to serve the needs of business and general aviation in the area was born during one of those lengthy delays in taking off from Lambert. In the year that followed, Haglin found himself flying over various existing airfields, landing and taking off, to see if any of them could be expanded into a desirable executive airport. Most of the sites he visited were too small to be expanded to the extent that Haglin has envisioned and he quickly came to the realization that he would have to start from scratch and build his dream.

As Haglin's vision progressed, he began to realize there were some very obvious needs that his project could fill. The first was obviously that the region needed the type of airport he was proposing and second, that St. Louis County would benefit from a hybrid airport that incorporated an industrial park into the design. It would allow access to the airport to companies who utilized aviation in their operations, and be the anchor to further industrial development in the future.

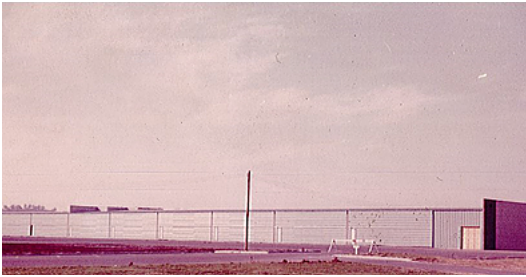
Soon after, Haglin partnered with a local attorney, William C. Honey and formed Haglin & Co. to find the perfect location. In 1961, they found it. That location was known as "Gumbo", a stretch of farmland in west St. Louis County. Haglin & Co.'s proposal to the County Planning Commission called for 1,037 acres of the land, 343 acres for the airfield complex and another 694 acres for the related industrial park.

The proposed cost for the land acquisition was \$7.9 million dollars. Since most of the land in the area at the time was farmland, Haglin & Co. spent the next 2-3 years negotiating with some 37 landowners in the area to gain options to the needed space, as well as struggling with St. Louis County to get the farmland re-zoned as industrial. Meanwhile, the search was on to secure financing for the airport. That eventually came from Republic Nations Life Insurance Company in Dallas, TX.

With financing in place, and the Planning Commission's blessing, Haglin & Co. secured the needed land by purchasing approximately half of it outright. The remaining half was acquired through negotiated 99-year lease situations.

After a series of delays, the rezoning of the land for the proposed airport development was finally approved and the land acquisition plan began to move forward. Haglin now had to deal with another issue. An existing airfield was located just ½ mile directly across what is now Chesterfield Airport Road from Haglin's proposed airpark. Lobmaster Sky Ranch Airport was a small airport that was home to small aircraft operations including flight training, skydiving and some charter activities. The field itself was small and the runway short, thus limiting the types of aircraft that could operate there safely. It did not have a tower and most of the aircraft that operated there didn't even have radios at the time.

The construction of Spirit of St. Louis involved building the necessary access roads and infrastructure as well as the runway and terminal building. The runway was to be 5,100 ft. long and 75 ft. wide with a full taxiway and aircraft parking area, twice the size of the existing Lobmaster facility. This only added to the dilemma of how to keep costs from skyrocketing. Haglin & Co. enlisted a local concrete company and soon found his answer. The runway was to be built from soil cement, a process where concrete is mixed with the native soil in the area. It was also a process that would not work just anywhere, but the conditions happened to be just right in Gumbo. The original runway was constructed with 22 inches of compacted subgrade, 7.5 inches of soil cement and 2.5 inches of asphalt on top of that. This helped Haglin keep costs under control while still being able to construction a first class runway. With a runway solution in hand, next was the construction of a 1,500 sq. ft. terminal building and a row of T-hangars.



Meanwhile, concerns over the two airports operating so close together increased. Haglin worked diligently with David Lobmaster, the operator of Lobmaster Sky Ranch during this time. Soon, an agreement was reached. Lobmaster would close and relocate all of their services and facilities to the new Spirit Airpark. Unfortunately, Lobmaster was killed in an airplane accident shortly thereafter and the agreement was never put in writing. The subsequent owner of Lobmaster did not acknowledge the previous deal. What ensued was a legal battle between the two airports. By this time the majority of the construction at Spirit was complete, but since Lobmaster was still in operations, the FAA determined that two airports in such close proximity did represent a safety hazard since neither one had an air traffic control tower. The answer came in the shape of Federal Regulation Park 93, Subpart G, which ultimately said that Spirit must have a tower to be operational and that the traffic at Lobmaster would have to obey instruction from the Spirit Tower.



In early 1964, with construction of the main facilities complete, Haglin still had the tower issue to overcome and he had to do it fast. Spirit had to fund the tower and its controllers on its own per the FAA's decision. The new tower was constructed primarily of storm doors and windows on top of four telephone poles. There was only a trap door for entry and no restroom facilities. By August of 1964, Spirit had hired full-time Air Traffic Controllers to man the tower. One of those men was Richard Hrabko. With the controllers in place, Haglin was free to open his airport and finally did on August 30, 1964. The first airplane to land was his Cessna 195. "That tower wasn't pretty, that's for sure. It would get 135 degrees in there in the summer because our window air conditioner wouldn't work all the time," said Hrabko. "We used to call it 'Old Shaky' because the wind would get it to rocking and the windows would rattle. In bad weather we used to have to duck below the frames because we were afraid the glass would implode, but we never did have any problems like that," he continued. "Old Shaky" was used as the tower for Spirit from 1964 to 1970.

With the airport operational and the facilities complete, Spirit was out to make a name for itself within the aviation community. Superior service and facilities quickly made people notice what was happening in "Gumbo". Spirit not only was the airport, but also acted as an early FBO, selling Shell Aviation Fuels. The airport had its own fuel farm installed shortly after opening and had new fuel trucks on the premises.

The next four years were pivotal for Spirit (1964 to 1968) as Spirit and Lobmaster operated simultaneously, both taking direction from one tower. Most of the airplanes based at Lobmaster did not have radios which presented a unique challenge to the controllers who had to transmit signals to the pilots with a light gun device. Since the Spirit runway and the Lobmaster runway were perpendicular and the final approach courses crossed, the controllers had to be extra careful.

In 1965, the Spirit of St. Louis Airport was officially dedicated with all of the fanfare due the most innovative executive airpark of the times. Mayor Alfonso J. Cervantes officially opened the airport in a most memorable way. Instead of using giant ceremonial scissors to cut the opening ribbon, Cervantes and a pilot approached the ribbon held aloft by hundreds of helium balloons in a helicopter and gracefully snipped the ribbon with the rotors! Soon after, Cervantes climbed atop a podium and presented Haglin and Honey with a commemorative plaque. The day and weekend were marked with this special dedication as well as other air show-type events.

And so Spirit ushered in a new appreciation for aviation in the St. Louis Area and with it, the hopes of attracting corporate flight departments and other aviation businesses.



Ralston-Purina was the first such corporate flight department to make a commitment at the new airfield in 1965. Their flight department consisted of seven aircraft ranging in size from a Gulfstream I down to a Twin Beechcraft. The company was also positioning itself to take delivery of the first business jet based at Spirit, a Falcon 20 in 1966.

The company's move was contingent on Spirit acquiring an instrument approach suitable for a jet of that size. Spirit's own Richard Hrabko quickly designed a VOR DME approach that fit the bill. But, the approach was not available to just anyone. Only those companies who had a need for it and agreed to abide by special operating rules were allowed to use it.

Around the same time in 1965 that Ralston-Purina became the first corporate flight department to be based at Spirit, Thunderbird Aviation was poised to become the first Fixed Base Operator. Owned by Dr. Durand Benjamin, Thunderbird Aviation arranged to build an 8,000 sq. ft. hangar facility at the east end of the field to house his Mooney Dealership, maintenance operations and flight school. Soon, other aviation businesses followed suit. Malcolm-Jacobs, a well-respected aircraft dealer, also moved to Spirit and started a maintenance facility at the field.



Shortly thereafter, more and more business aircraft including jets, were utilizing Spirit. Lobmaster Sky Ranch was still operating simultaneously. That is until 1968, when plans for the construction of modern highway 40-61 took the new development straight through the middle of Lobmaster's runway. The airport ceased operation before the end of 1968. That left Spirit of St. Louis, the lone shining example of executive aviation in the Midwest.

The 70's marked a new era for Spirit of St. Louis Airport, one of success and growth. It had already become a Prime Reliever Airport for the St. Louis Metro area as designated by the FAA and had become home to many aviation-oriented businesses. In 1971, the FAA released a study of the top four most important privately owned airports in the country. On that list were Palwaukee, Addison, Burbank and Spirit of St. Louis. The study recommended that these airports become publicly owned. Then in 1975, County Supervisor Gene McNary recognized the importance of this recommendation and started down the road to making this a reality.

Around this same time, Spirit was upgrading its base facilities by constructing a new terminal building, including 11,000 sq. ft. for the FAA Regional Flight Service Station that was being relocated from Lambert. The original terminal building was then leased to Blayney's as a restaurant. Another step towards this goal was for the FAA to assume responsibility for all air traffic control operations at the field.

A new tower-cab was purchased (tower at current Airport Administration Building) from Air Canada and assembled in the Ralston Purina hangar. To save money, the tower site was elevated with dirt before the column was constructed. This allowed for the needed height of the tower without building an expensive column. (This tower was used from 1970 to 1984).



With all of these improvements and after five years of planning, St. Louis acquired a grant to purchase Spirit of St. Louis Airport. The County took over operation of the airport on January 1, 1980.

Spirit of St. Louis Airport had become a publicly owned, self-supporting enterprise. This meant that the revenues generated at the field covered the cost of its existence and that any remaining funds could stay at the airport to fund improvements. In addition to these self-generated revenues, more than \$60 million in federal grant money was invested in the airport infrastructure in 24 years. 1984 brought further improvements. A federal grant was secured in order to build the north runway and accompanying ramp and taxiway system. That same year, the FAA built an entirely new 118 ft. tower in order to accommodate the new two-runway system. (this is the current tower in use at Spirit.) These new improvements effectively doubled the capacity at Spirit. Prior to these developments, the airport was running at 90% capacity.

In the early years of Spirit's development, the industrial park became an idea that many people thought was ahead of its time. The airport had a hard time finding businesses that were non-aviation oriented, willing to locate in Chesterfield, primarily because there was no industry there at the time. Slowly, the idea caught up with the current business situation in St. Louis and more and more companies began to look toward Chesterfield Valley. After nearly two decades of sustained growth and improvement at Spirit Airport, this trend expanded into the industrial park with the airport leasing over 50 acres of property in the early 1990's.



The flood of 1993 was a defining moment for Spirit of St. Louis Airport. With rains increasing and the chances of flooding becoming real, everyone's eyes were on the water level on the Monarch levee. Spirit Airport Administration decided that when the water reached 3 feet below the edge of the levee, that the airport would be evacuated.

On July 30th, it reached that mark and was rising at a rate of three inches per hour.



There were 720 aircraft on the field when the decision was made to evacuate. The levee broke at 10:30 that night, unleashing a wall of water moving towards the airport. Evacuation and repositioning of aircraft continued until 11:30 pm that night. The last of the aircraft took off as water enveloped the end of the runway. In all, 705 aircraft were evacuated. Lambert Field closed down one runway so that most of Spirit's jets could be parked there. Of the 15 aircraft left on the field, only one was flyable and the owner couldn't make arrangements to get it out. The rest were without engines or were in non-flyable condition because of maintenance.

At the height of the flood, the airport was 10-12 feet underwater and the water level stayed that high for 2-3 weeks. In all, 15 airports in the Midwest region were flooded. When the water finally did begin to recede, the daunting task of beginning to clean up was still at hand. More than 150 people from various recovery agencies set up shop on the terminal ramp. Tents housed a mess hall, sleeping quarters and portable restrooms, as the recovery became a 24-hour a day effort.

Thanks to the remarkable recovery effort, the airport was reopened with limited capacity 80 days after the levee broke. 13 months later the airport was back to 100%. In the weeks and months to come after the flood, Chesterfield Valley saw an influx of new businesses and companies relocating to the valley. The result of this massive expansion has led to the very different, very developed Chesterfield Valley you see today.

In 2000 The Landings at Spirit opened. A gorgeous 200 acre, FAA approved 18-hole golf course now sits to the south of the main runway at Spirit. Underneath it lays a state of the art storm water detention system, complete with adjustable 250,000 gallon irrigation storage tank.



The year 2014 marked Spirit of St. Louis Airport's 50th Anniversary and it was celebrated with the new Spirit of St. Louis Air Show & STEM Expo. This now brings us to present day. Please take the time to peruse our website as we welcome your comments.