

CHAPTER IX

AVIATION IN JAFFREY

It was a thrilling spectacle for the people of Jaffrey when the first airplane flew over the town more than fifty years ago. As the plane became a mere speck over the horizon, a Jaffrey father, who was impressed by the progress of his day, turned to his son and asked, "Why aren't you up there flying, too, Son?" Since then scores of Jaffrey sons have learned to fly planes and are as much at home up in the skyways as in an automobile on the highways of the town. Airplane ownership, too, has become matter-of-fact in Jaffrey. And why not? Jaffrey has one of the best managed airparks for a town of its size anywhere, and its location is only a mile from the main business section of the town. The story of Silver Ranch Airpark will be told later.

Some ten years after the first plane flew over Jaffrey, the clearing of what was eventually to become the first airplane landing field in Jaffrey was begun. This was a private project but the interest in it was town-wide. In the spring of 1928, Mr. and Mrs. Pope Yeatman of Chislehurst Farm decided to have drainage work done on a low swampy area to provide more pasture and mowing. As the work progressed, it became evident that the parcel of land would make a good airplane landing field for their daughter, Georgina P. Yeatman, noted architect of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After learning to fly in Philadelphia, she purchased in 1931 a Waco Biplane to use for weekend trips to Jaffrey. Until the completion of the landing field at Chislehurst Farm, she landed at the Keene airport, whence the trips to and from Jaffrey were made by automobile.

The story of the first landing field in Jaffrey is an epic in ingenuity and execution and is told here in some detail. Nothing of its scope had ever before been attempted in the region. To clear the area of brush, stones, and stumps, and to provide drainage ditches, was a tremendous undertaking. Alfred S. Despres, manager of Chislehurst Farm, secured the services of C. P. Martin of Gilsum, New Hampshire, who was experienced in blasting ditches, to help with the project. A main ditch and four lateral ditches, 2,100 feet long, were blasted in one shot by the propagation method. Where the ground was rocky and where there were large stumps, a whole stick of Dupont dyna-

mite was placed twelve to fifteen inches apart and two feet deep. Where the ground was free of stones and stumps, the charges were placed sixteen to eighteen inches apart. A thousand pounds of dynamite was used. The entire blast was fired by a single blasting cap placed in charge in the main ditch near the point of intersection with the first lateral ditch. The entire 2,100 feet of ditch was blown instantly with the first to the last charges going off simultaneously. This resulted in a huge curtain of mud, rock, water, and stumps rising into the air as the blast went off. The event was well publicized and about a hundred persons from miles around gathered at the scene to witness the spectacle. Later an additional two thousand feet of ditches were blasted to complete the drainage of the forty acres.

Following the purchase of her airplane, the newly developed field was designated for a landing field. For this, work was started early in the spring of 1932 and the main runway was ready by summer. In June an airplane hangar was erected in the north west corner of the field. Miss Yeatman made her first landing on the field on Sunday, June 12, 1932, but flew her plane back to Keene that day, probably because the hangar was not yet finished. On Friday, June 24th, she flew from Philadelphia direct to Jaffrey and thereafter always landed and kept her plane there.

The following year work was continued on extending the main runway and building a cross run. To do this, it was necessary to fill a low point with three thousand yards of gravel. This was covered with loam. Underground drainage was provided, using a thousand feet of one- and two-foot tile. These were Great Depression years. Instead of hiring power equipment to do the work, Pope Yeatman hired unemployed men. Thus, with twenty-five to thirty otherwise unemployed men on his payroll, the local unemployment situation was considerably alleviated.

Airplanes in Jaffrey were still somewhat of a novelty and many local persons developed a habit of watching the sky for the weekend arrivals and departures of the Yeatman plane. Many persons enjoyed their first flight at the Chislehurst field. In July, 1932, Miss Yeatman purchased a four-place Waco cabin biplane, which was exchanged in October, 1936, for a somewhat roomier and faster one. In 1938 she purchased a Beechcraft four-place cabin biplane. Her last plane was a Cessna 165 four-place

cabin monoplane, acquired in 1940. This was sold in 1942 when wartime regulations required all private planes to be based on airports protected by armed guards. To Miss Yeatman belongs the distinction of being the first airplane owner and pilot in Jaffrey. When the previous volumes of *The History of Jaffrey* were being written, several airplane views were needed for illustrations. These were taken by Duncan Urquhart in a plane piloted by Miss Yeatman.

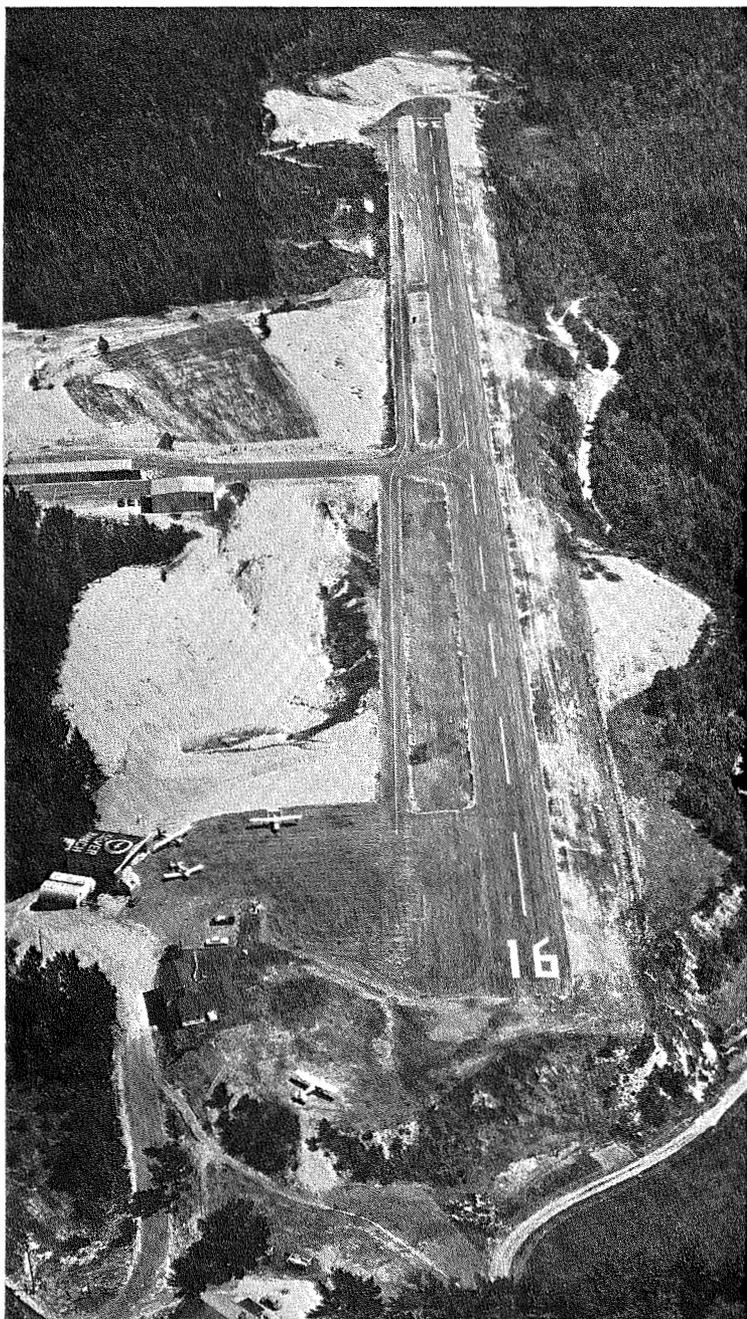
Today, with the Chislehurst farm having been sold in 1954, the hill-surrounded landing field on the shoulder of Mt. Monadnock has reverted to mowing land.

SILVER RANCH AIRPARK

Sometimes even in disaster there is something good. Thus it was with the 1938 hurricane which left destruction in its wake, out of which developed the nucleus of Jaffrey's airpark. It seems that Roscoe A. Sawyer had a devastated timber lot to clear of stumps. His brother, Jason C. Sawyer, had just recently purchased a six ton bulldozer. Upon the suggestion of Roscoe he put it into test use clearing the area where the airpark is now located. While at that time the idea of an airpark had not yet germinated, it became evident later that such a use of the land would be desirable. Roscoe's youngest son, David R. Sawyer, developed an interest in airplanes which led to his purchase of a three passenger 100 horse power *Piper Super Cruiser* airplane in 1947.

Local interest in airplanes had mounted through the 1930's. J. Oren Belletete bought a "do-it-yourself" *Heath Parasol* airplane kit about 1936, but never flew the plane. Lt. Kauko Walkonen was another early airplane enthusiast and owned a 40 horse power *Piper Cub* in the early 1940's.

Meanwhile, by private initiative, enterprise, and finance, Roscoe Sawyer's area was developed into an airplane landing field at Silver Ranch. The work on the original field was done in 1946 and 1947 by Arthur Whitcomb Company of Keene, New Hampshire. At first it was not conceived as a commercial venture, but during its construction it became evident that it could serve as a public facility. With this end in view, the original plans of the field were enlarged upon to meet State requirements. The State provided field markers, an air marking on the hangar roof,



AERIAL VIEW OF AIRPORT

and an Aeronautical Advisory "Unicom" radio station. By 1949 local interest in flying had increased to the point that some six locally owned aircraft were based there. Flight instruction was being offered and pleasure flying was becoming commonplace.

The field, as it was developed, had a length of 1700 feet, with a light turf surface, and was adequate for most single engine aircraft. Its elevation was twenty to thirty feet above the surrounding terrain.

By 1959, after thirteen years of continued use, the inadequacy of the field for larger and faster aircraft became apparent. This was due to the development of small twin-engine executive aircraft now using the field and the increased number of all aircraft, including transient planes, that were making use of the existing facilities. All these factors demanded improvements. Chief among these was the need for additional runway length, runway paving, and runway and obstruction lighting. These much needed improvements were beyond the capabilities of local private capital, and, because the field was privately owned, it could not qualify for public funds to aid in its improvement. To overcome these obstacles, the Silver Ranch Airpark Corporation was formed in 1959 with the following officers and directors: President, Roscoe A. Sawyer; Vice President, Alfred P. Sawyer; Treasurer and Clerk, David R. Sawyer; Directors, Vernon J. Bean, J. Oren Belletete, Roscoe A. Sawyer, Alfred P. Sawyer, David R. Sawyer, and George Hampson of Peterborough.

Since it was not likely that the Town of Jaffrey would expend upwards of \$80,000 for the purchase and improvements of the field, an acceptance of a minimum responsibility by the Town was sought. Furthermore, since the State of New Hampshire would pay one half of the cost of improvement, the private individuals and companies interested in the project undertook to acquire the necessary property, raise one half the money needed for improvements, and, "give, with certain reservations, the property and the money to the Town in order that the project could qualify for the State grant." Accordingly, authorized by unanimous vote at the 1960 Town Meeting, the Corporation entered into a twenty-year agreement with the Town. The main terms of the agreement were:

1. The Corporation would deed the real estate to the Town, subject to a "reversionary" clause effective in 1981 under which the Town would be entitled to retain ownership by repaying the Corporation its actual invested costs or allow ownership to revert to the Corporation.
2. Upon taking title, the Town would apply for and expend State aid in improving the field; the Corporation agreeing to provide, dollar for dollar, the necessary matching funds.
3. The Corporation agreed to be responsible for all field maintenance costs exceeding \$1,000.00 per year over the twenty year period.
4. The Corporation was granted commercial operating rights at the field.

In April, 1960, the engineering firm of Wright and Peirce of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, was engaged to prepare plans and specifications for the proposed improvements, and the following month the Town approved an airplane zoning ordinance for Jaffrey. State funds were committed late in the summer. This action cleared the way for final signing of the agreements, which was accomplished on October 18, 1960. Construction began immediately, with the Ingalls Construction Company of Berwick, Maine, as the contractor and Ken Briggs as the construction foreman. The improved field was completed by June 1, 1961, and was now 2,500 feet long and 150 feet wide. It was asphalt paved fifty feet by 2,400 feet, and lighted at night. From this time on it has been plowed full length and width in the winter. This gave Jaffrey an all-season day and night airport. The total cost of the field at this time approximated \$85,000.00. Of this amount \$38,000.00 had been granted direct to the Town by the State and by private contributors. The remaining \$47,000.00 represented the actual invested costs of the Corporation.

In 1967, again after receiving a go-ahead from Town Meeting, the original agreement was modified to allow a 500 foot runway addition to the field. All funds (\$23,200.00) for this project were raised by the Corporation or corporate members. No State or Town funds were involved. Of the \$23,200.00, the amount of \$12,500.00 was granted direct to the Town to use on the project. After the completion of the 1967 project, the final paved length of the runway was 2,970 feet.

Including both the 1960 and the 1967 projects, the Corporation raised and expended \$57,700.00, constituting the invested costs for the Town to repay in 1981 if it should choose to retain ownership of the field. Additionally, State funds in the amount of \$25,000.00 and private donations of \$25,500.00 have been spent in the development of the airport. Thus the acquisition and

development expenditures through January, 1970, have been \$108,200.00.

From the beginning in 1947 until 1966, David R. Sawyer operated the commercial activity at the airport, on a part-time basis. George Harmon, later captain for Northeast Airlines, managed the airport for David from 1949 through 1955. In 1966 David's nephew, Harvey Sawyer, joined him in the activity. David and Harvey ran the business jointly as a full-time operation until 1970, when Silver Ranch Airpark, Inc., was formed, with Harvey as general manager. In 1970 they own and operate five airplanes for training, charter, rental, and sightseeing trips.

From 1960 on, The New Hampshire Ball Bearings Company of Peterborough, New Hampshire, with Frank Leary as pilot, has based its six-place twin-engined *Aero Commander* 500B at the field, using the craft regularly for extensive travel throughout the United States and Canada. D. D. Bean & Sons, Company, Inc., and Annett Lumber Company of Jaffrey, Electropac of Peterborough, and other business establishments have also made regular use of the field and of aircraft for business travel.

In 1968 an official United States Weather Reporting Station was installed and reports weather observations twice daily to the Concord, New Hampshire, United States Weather Bureau office.

The airport has become the scene of special aviation events in addition to routine flying. The "First Annual Fall Foliage Fly-In for Antique and Sport Aviation" at the Jaffrey airport was held on October 13, 1968. Beautiful weather prevailed with more than 200 aircraft of all types at the airport that day and a crowd estimated at around 2,000 persons. Approximately thirty unusual antique and homebuilt aircraft from the New England States and New York were the highlight of the day. Aerobatics performed by "Bob" Ziminsky in his Champion *Citabria*, the appearance of a *Fornier RF4-D* Volkswagen powered airplane, and the new American *Yankee* were further attractions. Chicken Bar-B-Q, hot dogs, and cold drinks were consumed in large quantities. The "Second Annual Fall Foliage Fly-In for Antique and Sport Aviation" was held on Oct. 5, 1969, under similarly perfect weather, with even larger crowds. It attracted over forty rare antique and homebuilt airplanes. Aerobatics by "Doc" Norman Nathanson in his 180 h.p. Pitts Special miniature biplane, Chicken Bar-B-Q, hot dogs, and cold drinks, and the experience from 1968's event were some of the elements of another successful fly-in. Plans were underway early in

1970 for the inevitable "Third Annual Fall Foliage Fly-In." This annual event has already become a major aviation event in the Northeast.

The original Silver Ranch Airpark Corporation which, as this story indicates, had been formed to help expand and improve the original field, changed its name in January, 1970, to Jaffrey Municipal Airport Development Corporation.

The Jaffrey Municipal Airport in 1970, with a 3,000 foot paved runway, full length parallel taxiway, runway and obstruction lighting, maintained summer and winter, has become a valuable communications asset to Jaffrey and the Monadnock Region.