

The Lewisburg Airport

by M. Lois Huffines
as told by Ruth and Fred Brouse



(Photo by M.L. Huffines)

Lewisburg once had an airport, but today's residents might be hard pressed to say where it was. The only remaining clues are three street signs: at Airport Road and Route 192 (Buffalo Road), the corner presently the site of SUN Orthopedic Center; Airport Road and Campbell Mill Road; and Airport Road and Wm. Penn Drive, the road leading into the Northeast Federal Penitentiary. These three signs are the only indications to today's Lewisburg residents that the Lewisburg Airport was once nearby.

Ruth and Fred Brouse noticed that *Lewisburg*, a pictorial history of co-authored by Marion Lois Huffines and Richard Sauers and published by Arcadia, told the story of Lewisburg but made no mention of its airport. Of the 221 photographs in that volume, none were of the airport, which the Brouse family had built and operated. To rectify this oversight, Huffines interviewed the Brouses twice in their home. During the second interview, Melvin Reed joined in the conversation. Both Brouses and Reed had photographs relating to the airport, and both described its operation and the fliers who used it. Their stories also told how the airport came to be and how it had served the community by providing services otherwise not available locally.

In 1948, George F. Brouse (born in 1880, died in 1962) was approached by a couple of friends about two farm fields next to each other that he owned. Would he be

willing to have those fields turned into a landing strip? One of the friends, Harold Derk, owned an airplane and flew it as a hobby. He had often given his friend George a ride. He also had a heavy construction equipment business in Montandon, with road graders and power shovels. George Brouse agreed, and Derk used his equipment to lay out the runway and to level and seed it. Soon the 3,245 foot runway was complete. And there it was, the Lewisburg Airport, so named by the township supervisors. It was inspected and licensed by the Civil Aeronautics Board. The Official Opening was Sunday, July 30, 1950. The event was celebrated by a jump by world champion parachutist Bill Cooper, music by the Lewisburg High School Band, rides in a “giant transport plane,” a crop-dusting and spraying exhibition, and that evening in the hangar by round and square dancing. The “giant transport plane” was a DC-3 which could carry 18 passengers.



This announcement of the formal opening of the Lewisburg Airport was published on July 28, 1950, by the Sunbury Daily Item.



This metal sign advertises the Lewisburg Airport to potential recreational fliers. It may be meant to attach on to a vehicle license plate holder.

(Courtesy of Carol and Michael Manbeck)



Eager passengers crowd at the door for a ride over Lewisburg in the DC-3 at the opening of the Lewisburg Airport. The aircraft took up 18 passengers at a time throughout Sunday afternoon, July 30, 1950.

The first hangar at the Lewisburg Airport was built also in 1948, and it was large enough to shelter five aircraft. George Brouse then made a deal with his son, Fred W. Brouse: if Fred would take care of the airport on the weekends, George would build an apartment on to the end of the hangar for him and his new bride Ruth Sauers Brouse. The young Brouses then set up housekeeping in the apartment and raised their family there from 1948 until about 1953, when they moved into a new house across the street. Fred also continued to farm, and George Brouse started a land development and construction company. Water service to the apartment and the hangar came from a neighbor across the street. Fred Brouse tapped into the water well on the property owned by Donald Murray. Later a second hangar was built to the west. It was 60' square and taller than the first hangar with its 18' ceiling. Jess Hackenberg used this particular hangar, as did Joseph Lahout. Both were mechanics. The hangar had special overhead doors. The posts which supported the doors moved on rollers, allowing an aircraft with a 40' wingspan and a higher tail section to pass in and out of the hangar.



Hangar #1, built in 1948, is shown here before the Brouse apartment was added to the far (east) side.



This Beechcraft T-34 Navy Trainer is seen here in 1964. In the background one can see the east end of hangar #1, showing the Brouse apartment upstairs with a balcony and the Airport Office on the ground floor. (Courtesy of Melvin Reed)



This Grumman G44 Widgeon with Lycoming radial engines was an unusual sight at the Lewisburg airport in the mid-1960s. It stands beside hangar #1, next to the office. The Brouse apartment is visible as the second story. (Courtesy of Melvin Reed)



This Boeing Stearman towed the HAPPY BIRTHDAY JIMMY HOFFA banner over the penitentiary in the mid-1960s. It is parked at the back of hangar #2. (Courtesy of Melvin Reed)

The airport provided services to the local community of flyers and included sales, service, air taxi service, charter flights, and instruction. Marlyn “Barney” Aikey was hired as the first Chief Instructor and Business Manager at the Lewisburg Airport. Later the job was taken over by Dallas Hanlon. The airport served the needs for both transportation and pleasure, i.e., going for rides, often to take aerial photographs or merely to look out over the countryside. Jay Mathias of JPM Industries flew products to New York and Philadelphia out of the Lewisburg Airport. Dallas Hanlon was often the pilot.



Recreational fliers used the Lewisburg Airport for flights to photograph Lewisburg and the surrounding areas from the aircraft. This aerial view of Lewisburg shows Route 15 (top to bottom in the center). To the right, stacks of wood lie at the Pennsylvania House property near the railroad line. At the upper left, one can identify a three-story apartment building that once was the West Ward School. (Courtesy of the Union County Historical Society)

Gassing up the aircraft was not without its dangers. The gas was stored in 55-gallon drums. The gas was then pumped from the drum into the aircraft, which had to be grounded to avoid any sparks. In that early time, a solo flight of one-half hour duration cost \$3.30. The instructor cost another \$5.50. That sum was then taxed at \$0.18. In 1955, a solo flight from Lewisburg to Danville and back took one hour.

Fred Brouse successfully completed his first solo flight on May 17th, 1949. He learned to fly at the Sunbury Airport. Marlyn Aikey was his instructor. Fred carefully recorded each of his flights from then on in a series of log books. By 1949, he belonged to the Aircraft Owners & Pilots Association, the State Council of Civil Defense, and the Civil Air Patrol. George Brouse and his son Fred then purchased their first plane, a Piper PA-11 Trainer, and by 1950, Fred had earned his pilot's license. Eventually Fred was certified for and received three aviation licenses: as a mechanic for airframe and power plant (1949), as a ground instructor (1949) and as a private pilot of a single

engine aircraft (1950). The Brouses eventually owned five aircraft. Several other people used the runway, including, Lester Reed, Dallas Hanlon, Warren Elze, Frank Hinish, Fred Kessler, and Dan Henry. Frank Hinish, owner of Prowant's Men's Clothing store on Market Street in Lewisburg, would often relax by flying his plane during his lunch hour. Fred Brouse reports that Lester Reed was a "corker of a pilot." Reed liked to do stunts and loops with the aircraft. Fred denies ever trying aerobatics himself, at least not voluntarily.



Fred Brouse reviews his log book from the late 1940s.
(Photo by M. L. Huffines)

On one particular winter day, the runway needed to be cleared of snow, which was then piled off to the side. After the runway had been cleared, Fred and Ruth Brouse boarded a Piper Pacer airplane to go for a ride. Unfortunately, Fred veered off the runway, into the snow, and flipped the aircraft. Fred recalls that no one was hurt except his pocketbook. He remembered yelling to Ruth, "Don't step on that gas gauge!" (The fuel tanks were located in the wings.) For Ruth, that was enough flying for that day.

Fred's grandmother, Agnes Brouse, at aged 72 took her first airplane ride from the Lewisburg Airport. Her pilot was Joseph Diblin, who flew a Piper Super Cruiser PA-12, which held 3 passengers. Fred reported that Grandma enjoyed the ride. Fred Brouse once flew to Hiawatha, Kansas, using a radio beam, and during the flight almost fell asleep. He ended up 50 miles from where he was supposed to be. His friend Harold Derk certainly never let him forget that flight. Over the years, Fred flew to Danville,

Williamsport, Reading, Scranton-Clark Summit, Ohio, Kansas, and Sioux Falls, North Dakota.



Agnes Brouse stands with her son George F. Brouse (left) and her grandson Fred W. Brouse (right) before being taken for a plane ride piloted by Joseph Diblin.



George F. Brouse, Fred W. Brouse, and Harold Derk are about to leave on their flight to Sioux City, North Dakota, in 1950. Fred Brouse and Harold Derk took turns piloting the aircraft, a Piper Pacer PA-20.

Not all flights ended happily. In November 1966, Dr. Philip W. Langford took off at 6:10 a.m. in a twin-engine airplane with his wife Lois and two Bucknell students as passengers. They were heading for a vacation trip in the Bahamas. David Mensch was also supposed to be on that flight as far as Miami, but he had to bow out at the last moment. Fred Brouse could hear the engine tell the story: on this cold morning, he

thought that Langford had tried to get into the air too fast. The plane stalled and lost lift. The plane crashed, killing all four people on board. It came down on the south side of Route 192 near Bull Run Crossing. Walt Bechtel and probably Max Gill secured the crash site for the fire company. It was later determined that the airframe of the craft had iced over, ground fog had reduced visibility to one-half mile, and that the pilot had done inadequate preflight preparation.

Joseph M. Lahout, a self-employed pilot, operated Lahout Air Services from the Lewisburg Airport through the 1960s. He owned a 1959 Piper Tri-Pacer aircraft, and he purchased and restored a World War II Aeronca Defender Observation airplane. He used these two airplanes to begin his career as a flight instructor and continued to train young pilots well into his retirement.

In the collection of the Union County Historical Society, a photograph shows a sign announcing a fly-in breakfast at the Lewisburg Airport, sponsored by the Civil Air Patrol. At airshows and similar events, flyers would gather socially and show off their aircraft to each other and spectators. Bill Piper, president of Piper Aircraft, was an occasional visitor. Dallas Hanlon flew the director of the award-winning Riley Raiders to and from Lewisburg for the annual Cavalcade of Bands at the Bucknell University stadium. It is clear that the airport was busy during the years of its existence, and it served a need in the community. The Lewisburg Airport was also used in the delivery of airmail.



A Fly-In Breakfast! One of the social events sponsored by the Civil Air Patrol at the Lewisburg Airport facility.
(Courtesy of the Union County Historical Society)



Maintenance was an important service at the Lewisburg Airport. Lester L. Reed, Sr. (right) and Fred Brouse (left) work on Reed's Aeronca 7AC in hangar #1. The photo dates from 1952. (Courtesy of Melvin Reed)



A fly-in at the Lewisburg Airport in 1952. (Courtesy of Melvin Reed)



Governor William Scranton arrived at the Lewisburg Airport in this Beechcraft H-18 in 1964. (Courtesy of Melvin Reed)

The Penn Valley Airport at Selinsgrove directly affected the operation and existence of the Lewisburg Airport. Federal funds became available for the development of airports in smaller communities. Lewisburg was not eligible for these funds because the airport was technically privately owned. The commissioners, who would have normally supported the case for the Lewisburg Airport, threw their support to Selinsgrove. The Selinsgrove Airport received the funding, which ultimately resulted in bringing the operations at the Lewisburg Airport to an end. The Lewisburg Airport did not have a cement runway, and that limited its revenue. By 1975, Brouse Enterprises, heirs to the George F. Brouse estate, made the decision to close the airport. The Lewisburg Airport had operated for about 25 years.

In 1979, Brouse Enterprises sold 1.179 acres of runway land to the Northumberland County Industrial Development Authority, which sold it to D & R Realty. SUN Orthopedic now occupies that site, which was once the beginning of the runway. In 1987, Brouse Enterprises sold 1.179 acres to the Mifflinburg Bank and Trust Company, and its Lewisburg branch now occupies that site. In 1988, Brouse Enterprises sold land to the Buffalo Valley Telephone Company, which then sold 56.439 acres to Dale and Joan Miller, owners of Playworld Systems, which now occupies the site, once the end of the runway. Dale Miller had promised not to cut down the stand of oak trees in front of the Playworld building. The oaks were called Brouse's Grove, where the Brouse family would hold picnics and family reunions. Also later in 1988, the Telephone Company sold 7 acres to St. John's United Church of Christ, and its church building now sits on that site.

Keiser's Plumbing and Heating and Keiser's Sporting Good (called Out 'N' About) rented half of the hangar #1 building when it no longer housed aircraft. The hangar was razed in 2003. Mifflinburg Bank razed hangar #2 for its Lewisburg branch, which opened in 1991.



Hangar #1 shortly before it was razed in 2003.
(Courtesy of Melvin Reed)

The Lewisburg Airport, for its time, provided needed services to individual hobbyists as well as transportation to local business concerns. The street signs now offer the only clue to this piece of Lewisburg history, and those who remember it can relive the dream to fly like birds over Lewisburg in their memories.



(Photos by M.L. Huffines)

Notes

1. The Lewisburg area experienced other notable aerial events not necessarily associated with the Lewisburg Airport. Paul Herman was reputed to have flown under the old Lewisburg steel bridge in a single engine aircraft in the 1940s. Drew Machamer and John Bernhart buzzed Lewisburg with an old World War II fighter; both were disciplined by the military for doing so. Machamer has since been responsible for having a World War II B-25 bomber fly over Lewisburg at the beginning of the annual Lewisburg Veterans Parade. The aircraft is owned by the Mid-Atlantic Air Museum of Reading, PA.
2. All photographs are courtesy of Ruth and Fred Brouse unless otherwise indicated.
3. The author thanks Melvin Reed for the use of his photographs and his research in ferreting out information to fill in gaps. The author also thanks Mr. and Mrs. Frank Hinish for their help.

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