Arizona's Oldest Airports

PROJECT NOTES, CRITERIA and LIST

The author strenuously avoids historical superlatives – first, oldest, etc. – unless they come from reliable sources that can be corroborated and cited. When historians make such claims without at least evaluating and citing the source (which could, of course, be erroneous), then they must accept the burden of proving the statement and defending the research.

About 30 years ago, a well-intentioned "band of aviation buffs" found some old articles about their small, historic airport and concluded that it must be the oldest in the state: *"We think this is the oldest, in-use, continuous airport in Arizona. So far, nobody has disputed our claim."* The assertion was taken at face value by a succession of reporters and the airport was proclaimed "Arizona's oldest." It wasn't. It has a wonderful history, but it is not the oldest. Nevertheless, in this digital age, it is enshrined, perhaps forever, on the web and in AI mashups as Arizona's oldest airport.

At some point during the broader research of Arizona's aviation history, the author decided that it might be worthwhile to determine which of Arizona's extant airports *is* the oldest. It's a more involved process than one might think. First, the term "airport" must be defined, taking into account all of the likely disputes and qualifiers. Next, and perhaps most importantly, the date or period of establishment must be determined beyond any doubt for every extant airport in the state. The research began in 1990 in the old basement archives of the state capital building.

Over time, the list of contenders grew shorter, until three airports remained:

1) Yuma International Airport / Yuma Marine Corps Air Station (joint-use; originally established as Fly Field)
2) Prescott Ernest A. Love Field
3) Tucson's Davis-Monthan Air Force Base (originally dedicated as Davis-Monthan Municipal Airport)

YUMA: For a number of years this airport was considered to be the likely candidate for oldest extant airport in Arizona. It was believed that the original 1925 Fly Field runway was immediately adjacent to the 640 acres acquired from the U.S. government for the Fly Field of 1928. For purposes of this project, that was close enough to be considered the same airport. However, additional evidence was needed, and that evidence has since confirmed that the 1925 airport was actually located well west of the current airport. The two tracts are not contiguous, being separated by more than a mile.

TUCSON: Early in the research process, Davis-Monthan AFB was eliminated as Arizona's oldest extant airport. However, it did emerge as the state's second oldest. Whether it should be considered, along with Prescott, as a "pre-Lindbergh" airport is open to debate. The first airplane landed at Tucson's Davis-Monthan Municipal Airport (now D-M AFB) months after Lindbergh's transatlantic flight. Lindbergh himself dedicated the new airport on September 23, 1927. However, the land was acquired and planning begun well before Lindbergh's flight. When it came to aviation, Tucson was the most forward-thinking city in the state. The field was constructed under the direction of the U.S. Army, but progress was slow. It will be left to the reader to decide whether Davis-Monthan should qualify as a "pre-Lindbergh" airport. The author would vote "yes."

Once the WWII and postwar airfields were removed from the list of extant airports, the research could be focused on the pre-WWII fields. Over time, the lineup started to fall into place. Most of the conflicts and discrepancies were resolved and the grey areas became clearer. However, there are a few extant airports that were established in the 1930s that still have questions regarding location and/or continuity.

Summary of Project Criteria, Terms and Definitions:

"AIRPORT"

For purposes of this project, "airport" is defined as follows:

1. PUBLIC USE – it must have been open for public use for a significant portion of its existence; private airstrips (farm, ranch, etc.) are not included.
2. FACILITIES – at some point after opening, an airport must have provided facilities for pilots or aircraft. Facilities include at least one of the following:
   - aviation-grade fuel and oil readily available
   - repair service (minor or major)
   - restaurant and/or accommodations on or adjacent to the field
   - public-use hangar
   - manned airway / air traffic control facility on the field

CONTINUOUS OPERATION

"Continuously operated" means that, other than brief periods of closure for construction, national emergency (i.e., WWII), floods, disasters, etc., the airport has been operated and maintained without interruption since the date of establishment.

Supporting evidence to establish continuity of operation will include:

- Dept. of Commerce or early Army aeronautical chart depictions
- listings in airport directories produced by the U.S. Department of Commerce or reputable publishers
- other reliable references

ESTABLISHMENT

Date of establishment is the date of the first recorded airplane landing on a field that has been improved for the express and publicized purpose of serving as an airport, verifiable by reliable primary sources. That first landing must be closely followed by subsequent flights. If commencement of flight operations is not documented, the date of the formal dedication is the date of establishment. For instance, Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport was formally dedicated on September 2, 1929, but regular, well-documented flight operations began on November 18, 1928.

In the absence of early recorded flights or a formal dedication, listings in Department of Commerce publications or reliable airport directories may be used.

For this project, the clock starts when documented flight operations begin. It stops if the airport is closed (with the exceptions noted above) or dormant for a significant period of time.

LOCATION

The original site must be part of or contiguous to the current airport. Initially, the criteria was for the original site to be part of the current site. To be more inclusive, specifically with regard to Yuma, it was decided that if the original airport shared a border with the current airport, it should be considered the same facility. Opinions were unanimous about that. Unfortunately, after more research, it was determined that Yuma's original 1925 Fly Field was well west of the 1928 Fly Field (today's Yuma International / MCAS).

Arizona's Oldest Extant Airports

CONTINUOUSLY OPERATED

CITY	AIRPORT	ESTABLISHED	
Prescott	PRESCOTT ERNEST A. LOVE FIELD (PRC) (Prescott Regional Airport)	**7/4/1926** 8/26/1928	Dedication Rededication
Tucson	DAVIS-MONTHAN AIR FORCE BASE (DMA) formerly ● Davis-Monthan Army Air Field ● Davis-Monthan Municipal Airport	**9/23/1927** [1]	Dedication (Lindbergh)
Nogales	NOGALES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (OLS)	**1/8/1928** 1/21/1928	First landing [2] Dedication
Yuma	YUMA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT / YUMA MARINE CORPS AIR STATION (NYL) formerly ● Yuma County Airport ● Vincent Air Force Base ● Yuma Army Air Field ● Fly Field	**1928**	Flight operations by **May**
Phoenix	SKY HARBOR INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (PHX)	**11/18/1928** 9/2/1929	Flight operations began Dedication
Douglas	DOUGLAS MUNICIPAL AIRPORT (DGL) formerly Douglas International Airport	**11/*25*/1928** 8/20/1929	First landing [3] Dedication [3]
Winslow	WINSLOW-LINDBERGH REGIONAL AIRPORT (INW) formerly Winslow Municipal Airport	**6/20/1929** 6/26/1929	TAT trial flights began Dedication (TAT)
Bisbee	BISBEE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT (P04)	**1929** 8/1/1931	Flight operations by **Sept.** Dedication
St. Johns	ST. JOHNS INDUSTRIAL AIR PARK (SJN) aka Harry Saunders Airport	**5/15/1931** (prior to)	Standard Oil directory
Cottonwood	COTTONWOOD MUNICIPAL AIRPORT (P52) formerly ● Cottonwood-Clemenceau Airport ● Clemenceau Airport	6/21/1929 [4] **3/19/1932** [4]	Flight operations and informal dedication Dedication
Parker	AVI SUQUILLA AIRPORT (P20) formerly Parker Municipal Airport	**4/1/32** (prior to)	Air Commerce Bulletin

1. Tucson Davis-Monthan Field (2nd): the process of acquiring land from the U.S. was begun in the Fall of 1925; acquisition was completed April 1926; construction began in November 1926 and was completed in September 1927 (in time for the Lindbergh dedication ceremonies).
2. The first landing was made by a Scenic Airways Stinson flown by J. Parker Van Zandt.
3. The first landing was made by Burrell Smith, pilot for Aero Corporation of California, on or about 11/25/29; he was flying an Alexander Eaglerock, X7981. An informal dedication is believed to have occurred Dec. 1-2; formal dedication was scheduled twice and canceled due to revolution in Mexico; finally took place on 8/20/29.
4. Flight operations at this airport probably go back to 1929, or even 1928. However, there are some discrepancies regarding location and continuity that need to be resolved. Until then, 3/19/32 is being used as the date of establishment.

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