

Airports in the San Gorgonio Pass

In 1911, the Hearst Transcontinental Flight Derby sponsored a \$50,000 prize to the first pilot who completed a transcontinental flight across the United States. The two most noted pilots who attempted this crossing were Calbraith (Cal) P. Rodgers, who took off in his biplane from Sheepshead, New York on September 17, 1911, and Robert C. Fowler, who attempted his flight from the opposite direction, taking off from San Francisco on August 12, 1911, with the hope of reaching Jacksonville, Florida.

Both pilots flew through the San Gorgonio Pass on their quests but the first to do so was Fowler, who landed his biplane on the Stewart Ranch in south Beaumont on October 22, 1911, to repair one of the cylinders in his engine. He used the Stewart Ranch barn to do his repairs and two days later took to the skies again, hoping to meet Rodgers (who was flying west) in El Paso, Texas. The two actually did get to meet in Tucson, Arizona instead. Fowler eventually reached Jacksonville on January 10, 1912, long after Rodgers completed his flight in California.

On November 4, 1911, Rodgers entered the San Gorgonio Pass from the east and was first spotted flying low over the horizon above Cabazon at a speed of about 20 mph. Because of engine trouble he was forced to land in a field described as "Jost Green Fields" south of Banning. After taking off he shortly had to land again, this time at the Stewart Ranch, as Folwer had done so a few weeks earlier. Rodgers continued on to Pasadena on Sunday, November 5th and later that day finished his flight in Venice, California. His transcontinental flight had taken him 49 days to complete. Rodgers was killed in an airplane crash in the surf off of Long Beach a few months later on April 3, 1912.

In 1927, members of the Banning Kiwanis Club obtained options on 70 acres of Southern Pacific land east of downtown Banning with the idea of developing an airport. 53 lots were plotted and sold for \$100.00 each. The tract was named Rodgers Airport subdivision, in commemoration of Pilot Cal Rodger's landing in Banning in the first transcontinental flight of 1911. Leaflets advertising the selling of the lots were dropped by airplane over Banning. The Banning Public Library has several of these original leaflets that were scattered above the town. A Fourth of July celebration was held in Banning in 1928 to raise money for the development of the airport. The festivities included a non-stop race from Los Angeles to Banning, a 50-mile race around the airport, balloon fighting, parachute spot landing and various auto races. After the sale of the lots ownership of the airport was transferred to the City of Banning.

Now we get to the question of whether or not there was ever an established Beaumont Airport. While investigating the subject of Pass area airports our research turned up stories of multiple

“airstrips.” These were used only for landings and takeoffs and did not include hangers or fueling stations.

Long time resident Lewis Robertson remembers a dirt airstrip that was at one time located north of Ramsey and just east of Highland Springs. It was located on land that was owned by a rancher named Stewart, not to be confused with the Stewart Ranch in south Beaumont. Lewis remembers seeing this airstrip when he was a boy in the 1920s. It is a privilege to have someone like Mr. Robertson in our community who remembers Banning in its earlier days and is always willing to share those memories.

Historian Bernie Howlett provided the library with an article on the “March Field Aviators,” who used to land their planes on the Stewart Ranch, beginning in 1918. The flights would originate from March Air Field with the exact airstrip location on the Stewart Ranch being determined by which fields were planted and which ones were plowed at the time. Bernie also provided information on a small airstrip that in the 1920s or 1930s was located just north of 6th Street in Beaumont, approximately across from the present day swap meet location. This may have been used for postal deliveries in the Pass.

I asked Pass resident and historian Homer Shockey about the location of an airport in Beaumont, thinking there may have been one associated with the U.S. Naval Hospital in Cherry Valley in the late 1940s. Mr. Shockey was stationed at the hospital there and remembers the flights they used primarily utilizing the Norton and March Air Force bases. He recalls hearing of some oil exploration during the 1930s or 1940s in Beaumont, near the intersection of California Avenue and Lambs Canyon Road. There was reportedly an airstrip associated with this oil operation.

Acknowledging the location of these early airstrips they would not have been mistaken for actual airports. However, Banning resident Bob Crouch remembers an established airport in Beaumont, just south of the old highway. He remembers seeing the lights from the airport while driving with his parents through Beaumont in the early 1940s and has talked with others who remember the airport but not its exact location. Some just state that it was in the “badlands” area.

The strongest piece of evidence we discovered in this research was provided by Bernie Howlett, who brought in a 1959 map of Beaumont published by Renie Maps. An airport is labeled in the southern portion of the Three Rings Ranch, just north of the present day I-10 Freeway. The exact location of the airport is not detailed but there evidently was an airport at this location in 1959. Is it possible that the airport listed on the 1959 Renie map was misidentified as being slightly north of the highway instead of being slightly south of the highway? If so, this would correspond with the memories of several residents who remember it being just south of the

freeway and near the present day junction of the I-10 and 60 freeways. Often on maps of this scale locations were labeled to fit the size of the map and positioned around more important details like highway markings, making the accuracy questionable.

I'm hoping there is someone still residing in Beaumont who may have worked for the city during this time and can help us clarify the exact location of the airport and whether or not it had any official status with the city. If so, please contact the Banning Public Library! Thanks to Bernie Howlett, Lewis Robertson, Homer Shockey, the Barker Family, and Bob Crouch for their contributions to this article. (Banning Record Gazette article by Bill Bell)

Photograph Caption for Article

“Original airport advertising leaflet distributed by air over Banning in 1927.”