

The Orange County Airport

This summer marks the 65th anniversary of John Wayne Airport. It was on August 15, 1941 that what was then known as the Orange County Airport opened for business.

But before I tell you that story, let me take you back to the 1920s, and tell you a little about the *original* Orange County Airport – it's a story most people have never heard.

Now lots of folks know about Eddie Martin's Airport, which opened in 1923. But that's not the same as the Orange County Airport, nor was it the same location. Martin's was near what is now MacArthur and the 55 freeway, on land leased from The Irvine Ranch.

It was in 1925 that the county began buying up land south of Martin's from James Irvine. They envisioned a county sports complex, with a racetrack, and baseball and football fields. They bought 40 acres a year for four years, until they had a full quarter section – 160 acres. (That first 40 acres cost them nearly \$14,000 by the way.)

It was Supervisor S.H. Finley who first seems to have proposed also building an airport on the site, and he drew up the first plans – he was also a surveyor, I might add.

In 1928, when the purchase was complete, the county began work on building an airfield. Just a few weeks later, Bill Schumacher, who was then Chairman of the Board, became the first passenger to fly in and out of the new Orange County Airport, and the formal dedication was held on April 7, 1928.

The original Orange County Airport was located just east of the present airport – the 405 freeway cuts through the property today. It seems to get used fairly regularly for about a year, but with Martin's so close, and so well known, there just wasn't much need for another airstrip nearby, and the project faltered.

But there was a problem with Martin's – it sat right at the end of South Main Street. And by the mid-1930s, the county was already looking at extending South Main down to the coast – what we know as MacArthur Blvd. today. In fact, the Board of Supervisors even looked at reactivating the original Orange County Airport in 1936 – an idea that was *not* popular with the Martins, by the way.

But, the road plans moved ahead, and it was clear that Martin's Airport was going to have to go. So in 1939 the county arranged to swap the old 1928 airport site for a new site to the west, on the other side of MacArthur.

Construction began early in 1941 on the first two runways, an administration building and control tower, and a hangar. The whole thing only cost about \$50,000. These were the first two paved runways in the county.

As part of their agreement with the Martins, the county granted them a seven-year lease at the airport. They also built a second hangar, which would be sold to the county at a discount when the lease was up.

The new Orange County Airport opened for business on August 15, 1941. Less than four months later, America entered World War II.

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, the Army Air Corps took over the county airport, which they dubbed the Santa Ana Army Airdrome. They extended the runways and built a number of new buildings and barracks.

The Orange County Airport came back to the county in 1946. The Martins had hoped to have an exclusive lease on the property, but after all the money they had spent on improvements, the Army ruled that no one company could control the operation. So a number of firms negotiated leases, and the county hired their first Airport Manager, Bill Nichols. He had a staff of four in those early years.

Bonanza Airlines began Orange County's first regularly scheduled passenger service out of Orange County Airport in 1952.

A new terminal was completed in 1967, and in 1979, on a motion from Supervisor Tom Riley, the airport was renamed the John Wayne Airport. And as you know, the main terminal is now named for General Riley.

Orange County has a rich aviation history . . . and the Orange County Airport is a big part of that story.