

The Orange County Airport



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Presented by Archivist Phil Brigandi
to the Orange County Board of Supervisors
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The Orange County Archives

- This summer of 2006 marks the 65th Anniversary of the John Wayne Airport.
- Originally known as the Orange County Airport, it opened for business on August 15, 1941.
- But before I tell you that story, let me tell you a little about the *original* Orange County Airport – it's a story most people have never heard.
- Lots of folks know about Eddie Martin's Airport, which opened in 1923. But that's not the same as the OC Airport, nor was it in the same location. Martin's was near what is now MacArthur Boulevard and the 55 Freeway, on land leased from The Irvine Ranch.

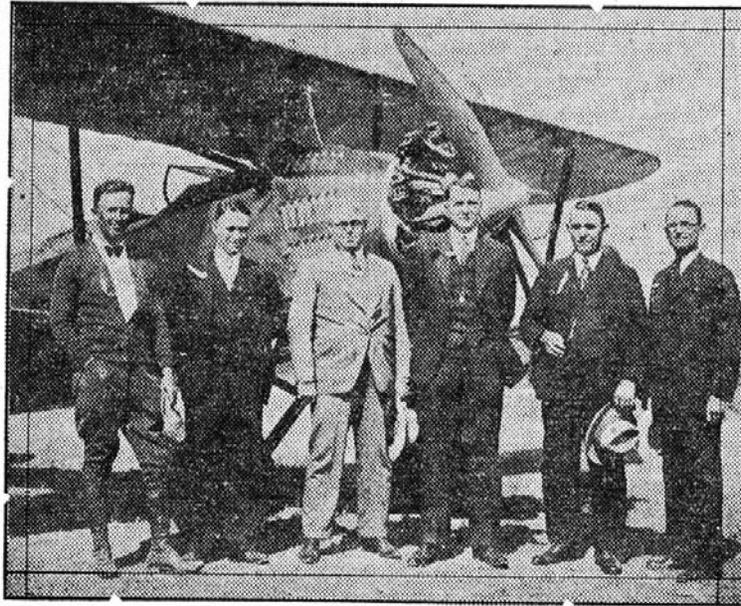
- It was in 1925 that the county began buying up land south of Martin's Airport from James Irvine.
- County officials envisioned using the land for a county sports complex, with a racetrack and baseball and football fields.
- The county bought up 40 acres a year for four years, until they had a full quarter section, or 160 acres. That cost nearly \$14,000.
- It was Supervisor S.H. Finely who first seems to have proposed also building an airport on the site. He also drew up the original plans, which was appropriate since he was a surveyor.
- This next slide shows the land that the county bought and would eventually turn into an airport.



- In 1928, when the land 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
- The Airport's formal dedication was held on April 7, 1928. On the next slide, you will see a newspaper announcement about the dedication.
- The original OC Airport was located just east of the present airport. The 405 Freeway cuts through the property today.
- The new airport was used regularly for about a year, but with Martin's so close, and so well known, there just wasn't much need for another airstrip and the project faltered.

DEDICATE COUNTY AIRPORT

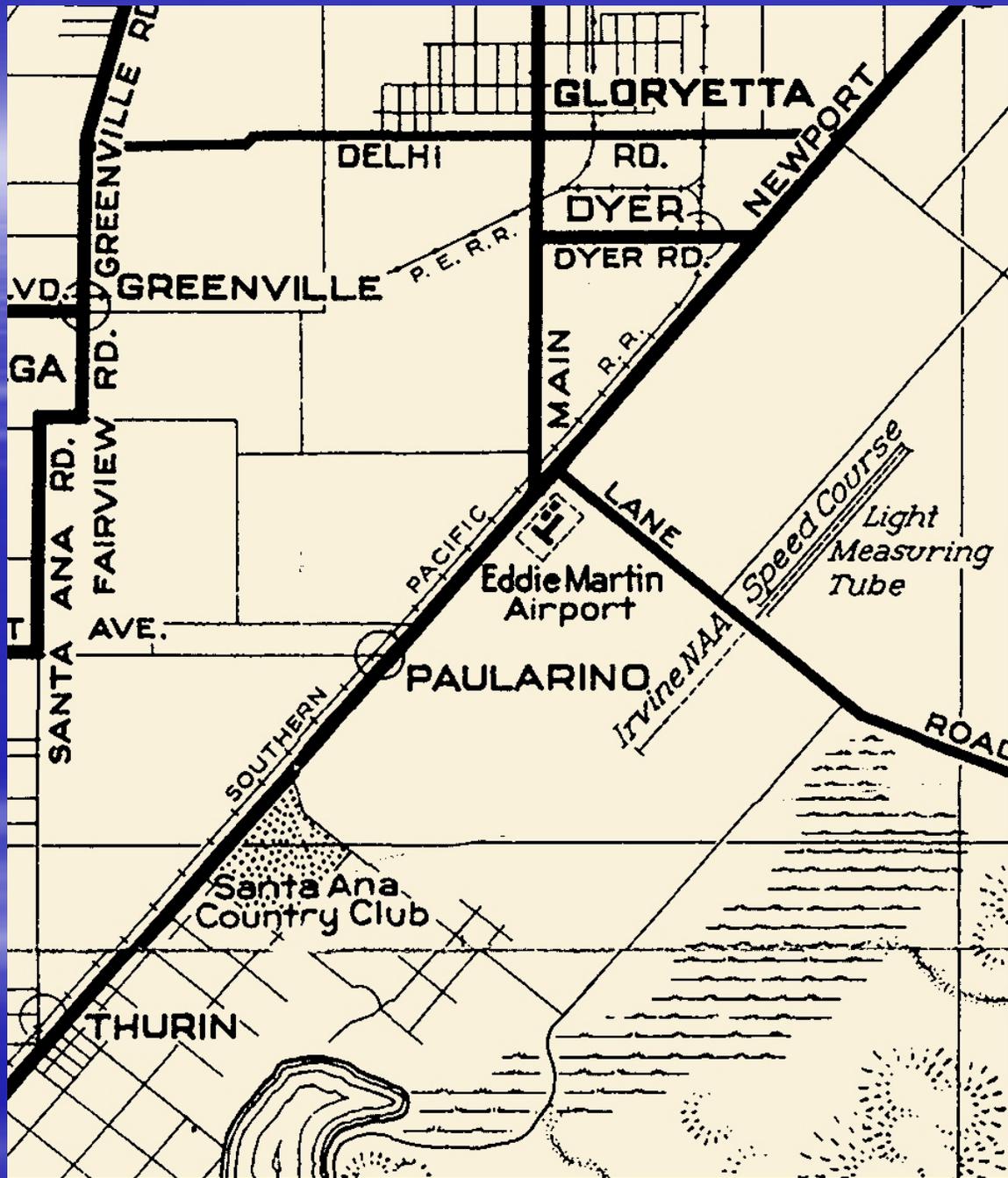
County officials took part in the dedication of the Orange County airport near the head of Newport bay Saturday. From left to right in the picture, Antar Deraga, secretary of the advisory committee on aeronautics, G. C. Macleod, secretary of the Newport Harbor Chamber of Commerce, Willard Smith, William Schumacher, John Mitchell and George Jeffrey, county supervisors.



County Supervisors Lend Hand in Launching of Landing Field Here

County officials, officials of several oil companies and officials of the Maddux air lines took part in the dedication of the new Orange County Airport near the head of Newport Bay Saturday afternoon. More than 500 persons thronged the grounds awaiting the arrival of Col. Charles Lindbergh who had reported that he might return to the field and take part in the dedication ceremony.

- As demonstrated in the next slide, there was a problem with Martin's Airport. It sat right at the end of South Main Street.
- By the mid-1930s, the county was already looking at extending South Main Street to the coast. It would eventually become what we know today as MacArthur Boulevard.
- In 1936, the Board of Supervisors considered reactivating the original OC Airport - an idea that was not popular with the Martin family.
- However, it soon became apparent that Martin's Airport would have to go since the plans to extend South Main Street continued.
- In 1939, the county arranged a land swap, exchanging the 1928 airport site for a new location to the west – on the other side of MacArthur Blvd.



- Construction on the new airport began in early 1941. An administration building, control tower, hangar and two runways (the first paved runways in the county) cost about \$50,000 and were the first structures at the new airport.
- As part of an agreement with the Martin family the county granted them a seven-year lease at the airport. The Martin family built a second hangar, which would be sold to the county at a discount when the lease expired.
- 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 barracks and buildings.



- The Orange County Airport became property of the county again in 1946.
- While the Martin family had hoped to have an exclusive lease on the property, the Army ruled that with all the money they spent and all the improvements they made, no one family or company could have complete control.
- A number of companies negotiated leases and the county hired the first Airport Manager, Bill Nichols. He had a staff of four in those early years.
- The next slide shows a Bonanza plane. Bonanza Airlines began Orange County's first regularly scheduled passenger service out of Orange County Airport in 1952.



- A new terminal (seen in the following slide) was completed in 1967. In 1979, on a motion from Supervisor Tom Riley, the airport was renamed the John Wayne Airport.
- Today, the main terminal is named for General Riley.
- Orange County has a rich aviation history ... and the Orange County airport is a big part of that story.



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