



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Sisters Airport goes way back...

There's been a lot of talk about the Sisters Airport over the last few months, which got me to thinking that perhaps a lot of people don't know much about the history of the operation.

I doubt very much there's anyone in Sisters Country who remembers the 1950s, when the airport was a key location for reporting Russian bombers that Congress and the War Department knew would be coming over the North Pole some day to bomb us.

However, the airport had its beginning way back before that — as my old buckaroo pal from Ft. Rock, Reub Long would say, "When the Sun was a tiny thing, there weren't no Moon and the Big Dipper was a little tin drinkin' cup." Well, that's pushing it, but as far as some people can recollect, it was in 1935 that George Wakefield bought land from Vine Stidham and started the present airport.

But even before that, in the early '30s an airplane landed on the fairgrounds,

just south of the present Sisters Eagle Airport of today. Children out on school recess watched it land. No one in Sisters had seen an airplane up until that auspicious event.

On the same day, they also watched the first airplane crash in Sisters. Density altitude (a factor affecting how long it takes for an airplane to become airborne) was an unknown factor in those days, and apparently that's what got in the way of a safe takeoff from the fairgrounds. The aircraft couldn't climb fast enough to clear the pines at the end of the fairgrounds, and it crashed in the tops of the trees. Pilot and passengers were not hurt — and there were no FAA officials breathing down the pilot's neck after the crash, either.

In 1933, Ted Barber, a veteran of World War I, operated from the fairgrounds, barnstorming and hopping rides for a buck a flight.

In the meantime, Sisters resident George Wakefield was serious about building an airport on the old Stidham holdings — which before that were part of the even-older Davis Ranch. With the help of U.S. Forest Service employees and Civilian Conservation Corps boys, Wakefield got his runway(s) put in, planted grass and called it good.

That's when people flying out of Sisters discovered the infamous crosswinds. To compensate, Wakefield cut two more runways out of the sagebrush, trying to aim them at the winds, and it worked

... sort of, once in a while.

After World War II, the big scare was Russia flying bombers over the Arctic Circle and bombing us. The Department of Defense asked for volunteers to man the Ground Observer Corps (GOC) watching our skies for Russian bombers from 1956 to 1958.

Sisters Airport became one of the hundreds of Oregon GOC observation sites. Bend had two such areas, one on the summit of Pilot Butte and another on the summit of Newberry Volcano.

Virginia Campbell, who lived on her Black Butte Ranch, was a member of the GOC team in those years, watching for and reporting any unknown aircraft she observed. That faithful woman was on duty 24/7, and as a result was issued an Honorary Life Membership of the United States Air Force Air Defense Team for her services.

In 1958, I was taking lessons from Pat Gibson, Fixed Base Operator (FBO) of the Bend Airport, working on my FAA private license rating. As part of the lessons, Pat would start out by having me shoot a few touch-and-gos in Bend and then he asked me to take us to Sisters airport to work on cross-wind landings.

"There's no airport in Oregon," he'd often say, "that'll teach you how to survive cross-wind landings like Sisters."

Gibson also came to Sisters to pick up Leonard Lundgren, who lived in



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Vern Goodsell's replica Spitfire at Sisters Eagle Airport.

Camp Sherman, with saw-mills in Bend and Sisters. He also flew Lundgren out to the GI Ranch he owned, located on the Great Sandy Desert east of Hampton Station.

George Wakefield eventually got Harold Barclay and Maurice Hitchcock involved in his Sisters airport scheme. Together they purchased a four-place Fairchild. Barclay sold his half to Wakefield, then in 1951 Barclay bought the airport from Wakefield

and Hitchcock's ranch. At that time the Indian Ford Land and Cattle Company (IFLC) was also involved.

In 1967 Barclay, along with the IFLC's agreement, gave the whole shebang to the State of Oregon Board of Aeronautics. At that time the main runway was extended to 3,700 feet, and the other two runways — put in as an attempt to counter the

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