

An idea for an airport

■ Rock Hill was first approached in 1921, but center wasn't built until 1930.

YORK OBSERVER Saturday, May 14, 1994

Rock Hill's Chamber of Commerce was contacted by Columbia's chamber in early 1921 about the possibility of backing a plan for an airport to be built in Rock Hill.

Columbia hoped to become the center of aviation for the southeast and initiate regular airmail flights that would connect to other major cities. One projected route would connect Columbia, Charlotte and Winston-Salem. Rock Hill, Lancaster or Chester would serve as a possible stopover on this route, and similar invitations went to Lancaster and Chester.

Two pilots, Roscoe Turner of Corinth, Miss., and Harry J. Runser of Fort Wayne, Ind., who had for several years worked county fairs and expositions all over the Carolinas, worked with the Columbia Chamber of Commerce and its assistant director, Virginia Reynolds, a graduate of Winthrop College.

It was planned for the three to fly to Rock Hill from Columbia on April 29, 1921. Turner and Runser were to be guests of John Gary Anderson, the owner of Anderson Motor Co. They had to rent a car in Columbia because proper spark plugs couldn't be found for the plane.

On May 27, the plan was to bring Reynolds to Winthrop for commencement week while the pilots made speeches and exhibited their new three-seat Avro airplane. They barely got into the air when the engine burned out.

A Columbia druggist had furnished them with sweet oil instead of the necessary castor oil. Luckily, they were able to safely crash-land the plane.

Finally, on June 7, the trio arrived in Rock Hill. They flew the distance in 55 minutes at an altitude of 1 mile. The next day, Turner and Runser pronounced Rock Hill's landing field the safest in this part of the country.



Nearby history

LOUISE PETTUS

"This field is on the concrete road, just beyond the Cherry gin house. . . . It should be secured before it is cut up."

They said it would only take a small sum to get rid of the few uneven places.

Turner said that if Rock Hill would build a field, the government would donate a steel hangar that would house a dozen planes in exchange for Rock Hill's erecting the hangar.

Only 1,500 square feet of land in the shape of an L was needed. The hangar would be built in one corner, and the long side of the L would be runway.

J.M. Cherry owned a 1,500-acre farm between Winthrop College and the Catawba River. His huge alfalfa field was pronounced a perfect location for an airport.

The entire field could be seeded with alfalfa and only a 30- to 40-foot-wide strip would need to be mowed. The hay would go a long way toward paying the annual rental.

Turner said they would need a marker and suggested a circle of stones that would be sunk in the ground and kept whitewashed. The stones could be seen for miles and would be visible on all but a dark night.

In the afternoon following Turner's speech, the airplane was parked on Cherry Road for the public to inspect.

The next day two reporters, one from the Evening Herald in Rock Hill and one from the Yorkville Enquirer, were taken up for 10 minutes.

Obviously very impressed, the Rock Hill reporter said that the Catawba River appeared to be the size of a spring branch, and the Southern railway trestle and the county bridge over the Catawba looked like they were only yards apart. In fact, one could see the county bridge and the Carhartt Mill (at Red River) at the same time.

The pilots carried back to Columbia a letter from the Rock Hill Chamber of Commerce to the Columbia chamber. It was the first "air mail" recorded as leaving Rock Hill by plane.

In Columbia, the pilots published The Columbia Air Messenger (at least two issues) and delivered their paper by dropping it from the air. No known copies exist.

Rock Hill didn't follow Turner's advice in 1921. It was not until 1930 that it got its first airport — built by John T. Roddey on his farm on the Chester highway.

That same year, Turner broke the East-West transcontinental flight record in 18 hours and 43 minutes. In 1933 he established another record by flying from Los Angeles to New York in 10 hours and 4 minutes. The "speed king" was on the cover of Time Oct. 29, 1934.

Turner was awarded the Air Force's Distinguished Flying Cross by Congress in 1952. After he died in 1970, Turner was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame.

□ □ □

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.