

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Elmhurst Airport

Many people don't know that the City of Elmhurst had its own airport for almost thirty years. The airport, originally covering 160 acres, was located on the northwest corner of Elmhurst on property between Lake Street, Grand Ave., Church Road, and Route 83.

The airport started when Chicagoan Joe James landed his biplane on a tract of land in north Elmhurst in 1923. James and Elmhurst-resident Fred Bouchard founded and operated the "Eagle Flying Field" until James left in 1929. That same year, the Elmhurst Airport was incorporated. The airport had flight schools, commercial and private planes and support services. The *Elmhurst Press* carried ads and articles about the airport. One 1929 ad encouraged readers to join the "Humming Bird" flying club, offering free flight instruction.

The airport had two grass runways. There were no runway lights until the last years of the airport's operation, so pilots making night landings had to judge their distance by two flares that marked the end of the runways. One of the major challenges to pilots flying into and out of the Elmhurst Airport was a radio tower situated just east of the airport and aligned with one of the runways.



*Aerial view of Elmhurst Airport, 1953. M89.8.2*



*Elmhurst Airport, circa 1929. M83.36.11*

With the approach of World War II, the Civil Aeronautics Administration created a program that was a cooperative effort between colleges that offered ground study and airports that offered flight instruction in order to fast-track civilians into military service. Both Elmhurst College and Wheaton College partnered with Elmhurst Airport in this program.

The Civil Air Patrol (CAP) was created shortly before the United States entered World War II 1941. CAP was used for search and rescue missions, flood relief, and disaster relief. It was a

good opportunity for men and women pilots of all ages to serve the community. A local unit of CAP used Elmhurst Airport as a recruiting station.

Tufts-Edgcombe Co. became the main business and manager of Elmhurst Airport in 1945. It operated planes, improved the runways, and built training facilities. It offered civilian classes, flying lessons, sales, and service. Tufts-Edgcombe remained managers of the airport until the airport closed in 1956 when the owners of the property failed to renew the lease in the wake of a utility line right-of-way dispute. Though local leaders tried to save the airport, it was becoming difficult to remain profitable with the expansion of O'Hare Airport. The land was sold to developers, and the property is now part of Elmhurst's industrial park.

*By Nancy Wilson, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, Updated October 2021*