

This Iowa Airpark Was Saved by Some of Its Own

By [Grant Boyd](#)
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Abel Island Airpark was once a private airstrip. Now it's a bustling fly-in community thanks to a group of its early residents.

[Abel Island Airpark](#), a fly-in community in Guttenberg, Iowa, sits atop the Mississippi River. The approach end of Runway 35 at IA23 is mere feet away from the murky water of the nation's largest river.

The airport has been located at the state's easternmost water border—here separating Iowa and Wisconsin—for more than six decades. In the years since its first charting, the airport has changed hands from its original owners through an usual transition period that has allowed the community's uniquely located facilities to be enjoyed by thousands of aviators.

Gary Fisher, an optometrist and instrument-rated pilot, has been a longtime resident of the fly-in community.



Gary Fisher

“I have been there for about 25 years,” Fisher said. “Just to fill you in a little on the background and history of the airport, it was first founded in

1957. At the time, the whole island was owned by the Abel family. The airport at that time served as a private airstrip for the family, who I believe owned a Piper Cub (or similar type), and some of their friends.”

Eventually, Fisher said, the family leased acreage out for people to build homes on the island and around the grass runway. “Twenty-five or so years ago, some of us formed the Abel Island Association to buy out all of their [previous owner’s] interests.”

This new ownership group helped to provide further lift to the fly-community concept that the Abel family had introduced to the island.

“Each lot is owned by the homeowners, but the runway and the road are owned by the Abel Island Association,” Fisher said. “The Guttenberg Aviation Association leases the airport from the Abel Island Association. Essentially, the lease cost is the cost to the association to cover insurance.”

In return, the group keeps the runway mowed, and maintains the runway lights. The group also turns off the runway lights each night at midnight, to keep pilots from taking off and landing after that time, as a courtesy to island residents.

Fisher said there are currently about 95 homes in the community, and that a fair portion of the on-island homeowners are either pilots, former pilots, or those who appreciate aviation.



[Photo: Abel Island Airpark]

[Photo: Abel

“But, only about 17 of us are actually active in flying in and out of the community,” Fisher said. “I own a Cessna Turbo 210 and recently bought a Maule MXT-7. Aside from my aircraft, we have some Piper Archers—like three—here at Abel Island Airpark. We also have a Piper Cherokee Six, a Piper Saratoga...we also have an RV-7 and several other aircraft amongst those that live here, some of whom are here on the weekends or summers only.”

Many of the community’s residents do not have on-island hangar space, so instead they taxi their aircraft directly in front of their homes and tie them down right there.

“The [Abel] Island Association will not allow for new hangars to be built, because they obstruct the view of current homeowners,” Fisher said.

But a longtime feature of the community’s homes is set to serve as a pathway for individual aircraft storage space to be an option for future homeowners.

“You will note that all the houses are built with the garage under the main house. Much like being on stilts except that leaves a huge, usable garage versus an open area,” Fisher explained in a [Facebook post](#) about the community.

This arrangement is not solely unique to Abel Island Airpark but is a design feature that helps to assuage potential flood-related concerns in the Mighty Mississippi adjacent airpark community. While Fisher, a lifelong lowan, stated the necessity of this construction arrangement, its benefits to homeowners has rarely been seen.

“In the time that I have lived here, we have only had water in the garage twice,” he said. “Never even close to being in the actual house. That said, the water comes up often in the spring and gets in the yard. [This is] inconvenient but goes back down in a week or so.

“One of the hazards of living next to water.”

With the usefulness of the lower-level garage situation, the concept's potential to hangar aircraft has been brought forth to members of the community. Fisher noted that there are currently some elevated lots on flat surfaces where this idea is being floated for the homes that will eventually be built there.

Naturally, the river's rich spring overflow jumpstarts the 2,540 ft by 160 ft turf runway's annual growth—just in time for joys of summertime flying. By the time August rolls around, the grass-blade ascension has slowed down some. But the runway is ready to serve as the gateway for general aviation pilots from near and far for a very special event.



An aerial view of Abel Island Airpark at night, with runway lights. [Photo: Doug Greenfield]

“This is our 22nd year for the summer [fly-in](#). It’s a potluck barbecue and is something totally different than I’ve encountered elsewhere,” Fisher

said. “We average between 50 and 70 planes each year, which includes half a dozen or so floatplanes that dock right onshore to our beach that is on the Mississippi [River]. In total, approximately 200 people show up to the potluck party, which is hosted by my wife and me at our home.

“We invite all of those on the island to join us, and many do. But others sit on their driveways facing the runway and watch the planes coming and going; it’s like little O’Hare [International Airport] here at Abel Island Airpark during that time.”

Talking about yearly success of these annually anticipated fly-ins, Fisher concurrently noted that in recent years the community itself is seeing its residents become increasingly interested in flight.

“Abel Island Airpark is currently an informal community that is becoming more and more aviation focused. As a group [Guttenberg Aviation Association], we promote residences to pilots and recently got several more who moved to the community. I think the future here is really bright.”