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After 50 Years, McBride Airport has Landed its Last Plane

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MARION — Church bells ring in the distance as the sun shines brightly overhead and a breeze ripples through the grass landing strip at McBride Airport. It would be a great day to fly.

But, gaze through a window of the metal-sided hangar and the only airplane inside is a skinless fuselage. No windsock flits above the nearby administration building to indicate the wind direction. Once the bells stop, the silence seems as if it will last forever.



"Shutting it down is not easy for me," says Ivan McBride, whose late father, Melvin, founded the airport half a century ago. But, with increasingly expensive liability insurance, it was time.

As Ivan plops a box full of scrapbooks onto a picnic table, he grins.



"This should only take six hours," he says, opening a scrapbook. "I have to admit it's been fun looking at the photo albums to find some old pictures and just to reflect on these memories."

There's a photo of his father propping up a sign to McBride Field. That's what it was called in 1961 when Melvin began leveling the farm field in the family since the 1920s. He would shape a 2,400-foot, 150-foot wide east-west grass runway, have the hangar built and relocate an old service station/cafe from near Marion's Highway 13 to serve as the office. Although planes would test the field the following summer, the airport didn't officially open until Oct. 14, 1962.



"I'm not going to plow up the rest of the runway until we hit Oct. 14," says Ivan, symbolically hitting the 50-year mark even though the last plane left a couple of weeks earlier and the airstrip would officially close May 10.

With churches popping up around the airport along the C Avenue Extension north of Cedar Rapids, some people speculated the 80 acres would be sold for another church or development. But no — it will be farmed by Ivan's son, Calvin, 19, (an agriculture student at Iowa State University) just as his grandfather had once farmed it.

About 1940, Ted Saxon had relocated his airport from land where Rockwell Collins

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headquarters now sit south of Blairs Ferry Road NE to a farm across C Avenue Extension from here. Even though his wife ran it for a few years after Ted died, that airport closed. Folks thought the area could still use an airport.

Melvin McBride didn't know how to fly but he liked the idea. Ivan, 57, was just old enough to be impressed.



"As a kid, I remember 30-some planes based here," Ivan says. "It was an active little strip back then."

Melvin died in 1972, but Ivan would solo on this field at age 19 (in the family's 1952 Piper Tri-pacer), study aircraft mechanics and become a corporate pilot who has been with Rockwell-Collins for 26 years.

For a time Ivan and his family — wife, Lyn, and their children, Leanna, now 25, Sarah, 22, and Calvin — operated the airport. Other managers included John Tibben, who would found Tibben Flight Lines in Cedar Rapids, and Perry Walton, who owns the Marion airport.

Through the years, McBride Airport has been home base to flying clubs like Cloud 9 and Mercury. Regular nightly flights used to leave here for Chicago for Bank of Iowa Computer Service. During a three-day period in 1983, more than 700 planes landed here as it was designated the official airport for the nearby Farm Progress Show.

"There's no question this airport defined my career and my life," Ivan says. "I met a lot of people, made a lot of friends, as a result of this little airport."

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