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The Elbert Files: Airport history, part 2



Dave Elbert | Oct 4, 2023 | 12:45 pm | 3 min read time | 670 words | [Opinion \(https://www.businessrecord.com/category/opinion/\)](https://www.businessrecord.com/category/opinion/), [The Elbert Files \(https://www.businessrecord.com/category/elbert-files/\)](https://www.businessrecord.com/category/elbert-files/)

Jets and the middle years

In 1941, when members of the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce landed a U.S. Army National Guard base at the Des Moines Airport, they secured the airfield's future for the next seven decades.

The airport moved to its current location on Fleur Drive in 1932, following two earlier locations of the city.

The 1940 airport was spare by today's standards, with four short runways and two hangars, one for United Airlines and one for other aircraft. Nonetheless, as noted in a Part 1 of this series, the airport was ranked among the four best municipal airfields in the country.

The field's size and reputation were factors in the Army's decision to locate a National Guard base here to train pilots for World War II.

For local business leaders, having military aircraft on the field for more than 70 years (1941-2014) secured federal dollars for runway improvements and other operations.

The city's first flyover by military jets was during a 1948 airshow attended by 75,000; also featured was a landing by a single-engine Piper Cub atop a speeding auto, followed by its immediate takeoff.

An airport passenger terminal was completed in 1951 at a cost of just under \$1 million. It has been updated and expanded many times, but that original structure remains at the heart of today's operations.

By 1951, the airport was handling 62,000 passengers annually. It grew in spurts to nearly 3 million passengers today.

A popular feature of the 1951 terminal was its Cloud Room restaurant, where former managers of the Hotel Savery and Grace Ransom's Tea Room were in charge, and where stylish customers could watch takeoffs and landings by increasingly sophisticated aircraft.

Some 15,000 people attended the terminal dedication on Sunday, Sept. 23, 1951. A record 411 small airplanes landed that day. "Wheeling around the airport, they buzzed like a swarm of gnats," the Des Moines Register reported; another 100 aircraft were kept away by heavy rain and low visibility in northwest Iowa.

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During the early 1950s, a 7,000-foot runway was built to handle military and eventually commercial jets.

A terminal expansion in 1959 involved adding a 340-foot, unheated concourse to connect passengers with flights. (A second level of that concourse now contains passenger screening operations.)

Beginning in 1971, two wings were added, today's "A" and "C" concourses. Plans called for a "B" concourse extending straight out between "A" and "C." But the growing size of modern aircraft made it unfeasible.

In 1984, at the urging of local business leaders, city officials rebranded the Des Moines Municipal Airport as the Des Moines International Airport. The name change was more aspirational than factual, although a few private and charter flights did serve foreign destinations.

Air travel changed a lot in the 1970s, as passenger jets replaced propeller-driven aircraft, and airplane hijackings added security concerns for travelers.

The first X-ray machines for scanning luggage and metal detectors for passengers arrived in the mid-1970s. For many years, the rules were loosely enforced, but that changed immediately following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks involving commercial aircraft.

Des Moines air traffic stagnated after 1970s and 1980s deregulation efforts reconfigured air travel and created new issues. For several years, it cost as much to fly to Chicago – \$450 to \$500 – as it did to fly to the coasts.

In 1999, AccessAir, a Des Moines-based startup, initiated flights between Des Moines, Los Angeles and New York. The service lasted nearly two years but failed in part because it could not attract business travelers from local companies who continued to use corporate jets.

Next, business leaders focused on attracting Texas-based Southwest Airlines, which was already providing competitively priced flights from Omaha, Neb., and Kansas City, Mo.

To win over Southwest, Des Moines hired Don Smithey, the recently retired Omaha airport director who had recruited Southwest to that city.

Part 3 will look at how Smithey changed air travel culture in Des Moines and trace the history of the current airport expansion plan.

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