

A little SoCal history [83+ years ago]

Credits to Jim Holtsclaw #2738



The Fanchon & Marco chorus girls dance atop a new Fokker F-32 aircraft during dedication ceremonies of Western Air Express' new terminal at Alhambra Field on 4/17/1930.

Dedication of Western Air Express terminal

November 6, 2013

An article the next morning in *The Times* reported:

With a crowd of people estimated at 10,000 participating, the \$1,000,000 terminal of the Western Air Express on Valley Boulevard near Alhambra was dedicated yesterday w/fitting ceremonies.

The ceremonies yesterday comprised a program of music by the South Gate Boys' Municipal Band, speeches by well-known men, & the christening of one of the big Fokkers by Julia Faye (1) & Dorothy Jordan (2), MGM players. The Goodyear blimp 'Volunteer' floated overhead & dropped bouquets of flowers hung from small parachutes w/felicitations from various SoCal cities to the airport.

A troupe of Fanchon & Marco (3) dancers got out on the wing of the big Fokker & danced a few steps. The SoCal Racing Pigeon Association sent off a flock of birds to show how flying is really done.

Edward Everett Horton, as master of ceremonies, presented Governor (Clement) Young as the chief speaker of the afternoon. The Governor, in a brief talk, congratulated the men back at Western Air Express for the accomplishments & referred to the new airport as "a monument to airplane transportation," He recited how the company has grown from an organization w/5 airplanes & 20 employees covering 1,200 miles daily 4 years ago, to the present concern w/74 airplanes, 606 employees, & planes covering 14,000 miles daily.

The Fokker F-32 aircraft proved to be underpowered & costly to operate. Western Air Service only purchased 2 & retired them w/in a couple of years.

Western Air Express moved its operations to the Grand Central Air Terminal in Glendale. Western Air Express later became Western Airlines, ceasing to exist following its 1987 merger w/Delta Air Lines.

The photo above by former staff photographer George Watson was published in the 4/18/1930 *L.A. Times*. The original print is not in the *L.A. Times* archive, but a copy later was obtained from Western Airlines in the '80s.



A crowd of about 10,000 attends the dedication of Western Air Express terminal at Alhambra Field. Western Air Express later became Western Airlines on 4/17/1930.



New Western Air Express terminal at Alhambra Field. This photo was published in the 4/14/1930 edition of the L.A. Times in April, 1930.

Western Air Express

Fokker F-32 NC333N



The F-32 was truly the "Jumbo" of the 1930s era. This machine was the largest transport aircraft of its time & seated 32 passengers in (for the day) luxury accommodations. Western Air Express (WAE) purchased 2 of them but they proved to be a bad investment as mechanical difficulties coupled w/the economic conditions of the Depression era could not support this type of airliner. The historic image below shows the aircraft upon its arrival at the new Alhambra Airport in March of 1930. WAE had moved to this brand new facility w/its modern administrative offices & a unique 24,000 sq/ft hexagonal hangar the previous year from its original base at Vail Field. Strangely, having spent over a million dollars on the Alhambra field they vacated it after only a couple of years for the more strategically placed Grand Central Air Terminal in Glendale (CA). Incidentally, I managed to visit this historic field in 1956 altho it was gone shortly thereafter. Following this image is a footnote on Western's rags to riches & back to rags story up to this point in time.



Historical Footnote on Western Air Express ...

By the time Western Air Express ordered the F-32 it had grown (mainly thru acquisition) to be a very large carrier indeed. It had purchased West Coast Air Transport in 1929 (WCAT was a subsidiary of Union Airways at the time) which gave it rights for the San Francisco to Seattle route. It had already (in 1927) been granted CAM 12 from Cheyenne thru Denver to Pueblo. In 1929 WAE purchased Mid-Continent Air Express & w/a route from Denver to El Paso & a fleet of Fokker Super Universals. 1930 saw the company acquire Standard Air Lines which had a route from Los Angeles to El Paso (later extended to Dallas). Finally, it had been granted rights for service as far east as Kansas City. Its empire, then, covered 11 Western states & some 40 cities. Up to that time it was, in fact, one of the "Big 5" (the others being American, Eastern, United & TAT). A powerful diplomatic figure at that time was Walter Folger Brown, the Postmaster General. He could (in fact did) reshape the airline map pretty much the way he wanted it (due to the all important air mail subsidies he held in his hand) &, being from the so called "eastern establishment" was not endeared to upstart western companies such as WAE. Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT), which had recently purchased Maddux Air Lines providing service up & down the West Coast (L.A. to San Francisco & beyond), was losing money. Brown's plan was that the all important (central) transcontinental route should awarded to one company (in the name of economy & efficiency). Unfortunately, that plan didn't include WAE, but leaned toward TAT, despite fact that WAE was profitable & TAT was not. He insisted, therefore, that before *any* contract was awarded, the 2 lines should

amalgamate. Under pressure, therefore, WAE agreed to merge w/TAT, the resultant line being named Transcontinental & Western Air, later, of course, to become TWA ... Trans World Airlines. An autonomous WAE was left w/their original CAM 4 from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City, & the stand-alone Cheyenne to Pueblo route in the Rockies. They had been forced to sell their west coast operation due to the increased competition from Maddux & the fact that the depression was on, & few were flying. They were, in other words, right back where they started in 1926. In desperation, Western turned to GM for infusions of cash &, early in 1933, WAE became part of North American Aviation of which GM was the holding corporation. Then, in 1934, the whole air mail picture changed when the government rescinded all the existing air mail contracts & the U.S Army was charged w/flying the mails.

(1) Julia Faye



Julia Faye (9/24/1892 – 4/6/1966) was a motion picture actress.

Career Overview

Faye had lived in St. Louis (MO) prior to coming to Hollywood in 1916, to visit friends. She visited one of the film studios & was introduced to Christy Cabanne. The 2 reminisced about St. Louis & discovered that they had lived next door to one another there. Cabanne persuaded Faye's reluctant mother to allow her to be in motion pictures.

She appeared in more Cecil B. DeMille movies than any other actress. She appeared in many of his silents & in every one of his movies from 1939's *Union Pacific* on. She was DeMille's mistress off-screen for quite some time & DeMille kept her employed in bit parts long after her career (& their relationship) was over, including his most famous film, *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

Movie Actress

In 1919 Faye played the stenographer in *Stepping Out*. Cast w/Enid Bennett, Niles Welch & Gertrude Clair, Faye was complimented by a critic for playing her role w/"class". *It Pays To Advertise* (1919) is a Paramount Pictures release adapted by Elmer Harris from the play of the same name by Rol Cooper Megrue & Walter Hackett. It was directed by Donald Crisp. Faye is among the actors w/Lois Wilson depicting the leading lady. *Changing Husbands* (1924) is a Leatrice Joy comedy adapted from a magazine story entitled *Roles*. Faye joined Raymond Griffith & Zasu Pitts in the screen feature. Faye was listed as a member of the Paramount Stock Company School in July 1922. Its noteworthy personalities included Rudolph Valentino, Gloria Swanson, Betty Compson, Wallace Reid, Bebe Daniels & Pola Negri.

When DeMille resigned as director general of Famous Players-Lasky in January 1925, he became the production head of Cinema Corporation of America. He planned to direct 2 or 3 films per year & supervise the making of between 10 & 20 more. Faye came along w/him as did Joy, Rod La Roque, Florence Vidor, Mary Astor & Vera Reynolds.

The Volga Boatman (1926) is directed by DeMille & named for the noted Russian song. William Boyd, Elinor Fair & Faye have primary roles in a production DeMille called *his greatest achievement in picture making*. Faye's depiction of a *tiger woman* is esteemed as the most captivating of her career, to this point. Before this role she had been known for "*silken siren roles*". Theodore Kosloff played opposite her as a stupid blacksmith.

Faye played "Martha" in *The King of Kings* (1926). Christ, portrayed by H.B. Warner, is introduced w/great majesty in the DeMille photodrama. A blind child searches for the Lord & the producer/director turns the camera gradually down to the child's eyes. The viewer sees Christ initially like the blind child whose sight is restored. Faye traveled to NY City for personal appearances in association w/*The King of Kings* & to address a sales convention in Chicago (IL).

(2) Dorothy Jordan



Dorothy Jordan in bathing suit circa 1932

Dorothy Jordan (8/9/1906 – 12/7/1988) was an American movie actress who had a short but successful career beginning in talking pictures in 1929.

Early Career

Born in Clarksville (TN), Jordan studied at Southwestern University & the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. She performed in Broadway musicals, including *Garrick Gaieties*.

Jordan made her screen debut in the 1929 film *The Taming of the Shrew* & went on to make 22 more films in the next 4 years, including *Min & Bill* w/Wallace Beery & Marie Dressler in 1930 (below) & *The Cabin in the Cotton* w/Bette Davis in 1932. During that time, she appeared in films w/Ramon Novarro, Clark Gable, Lionel Barrymore, Walter Huston & Jimmy Durante.



Dorothy Jordan (R) w/Marie Dressler & Wallace Beery in “Min & Bill”

Film Retirement & Return

In 1933, Jordan left films & married filmmaker, screenwriter & later WW II U.S. Army Air Forces Colonel Merian C. Cooper, who co-wrote, produced & directed the 1933 film *King Kong*. The couple had 3 children, a son & 2 daughters. In 1937, she came out of her leave & tested for the role of Melanie Hamilton in *Gone With The Wind*. Cooper was a good friend & frequent collaborator w/Western director John Ford, forming Argosy Productions in 1947. It was for Argosy's *The Sun Shines Bright*, directed by Ford in 1953, that Jordan came out of retirement for a small role. She then appeared in a small role as the sister-in-law of John Wayne's character, Ethan Edwards, who seeks Jordan's daughter, played by Natalie Wood, in the epic 1956 Argosy film *The Searchers*. Jordan appeared once more, in a small role in the John Ford film *The Wings of Eagles* in 1957 before retiring.

Later Years

Jordan & Cooper lived in Coronado (CA) & remained married until his death of cancer on 4/21/1973. Jordan died of congestive heart failure on 12/7/1988 in Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles (CA). Her body was cremated & her ashes are interred at the Chapel of the Pines Crematory in L.A.

(3) Fanchon & Marco



Posterity probably knows them both best for the chain of west coast theatres they owned. But if you've ever seen the 1933 movie musical *Footlight Parade* w/James Cagney, Joan Blondell, Ruby Keeler & Dick Powell, then you know a little something about their high water mark. They created fabulous live revues as prologues to motion picture exhibitions — an odd, transitional moment in the history of both theatre & film. Before that, they were a brother & sister ballroom dancing act in the mold of the Castles. Fanchon & Marco are actually their 1st names — a fairly unusual way to bill themselves. Their full names were Fanchon & Marco Wolff (Fanchon later married & became Fanchon Wolff Simon). Their birthdays are unknown, altho it is recorded that Marco was born in April 1894 & Fanchon in May 1892. They started out in a trio w/their brother. All sang, danced & played musical instruments. The teens were Fanchon & Marco's heyday as a dancing duo; the '20s were their high point as producers. You can learn a lot more about them on their official [web site here](#). Fanchon died in 1965 & Marco in 1977.

Alhambra / Western Air College Airport

Alhambra (CA)

34.08 North / 118.11 West

(NE of Downtown Los Angeles, CA)



An undated photo of the hexagonal hangar at Alhambra while under construction.

The date of construction of Alhambra Airport has not been determined.

The earliest reference to the field which has been located was the Standard Oil Company's 1929 "Airplane Landing Fields of the Pacific West".

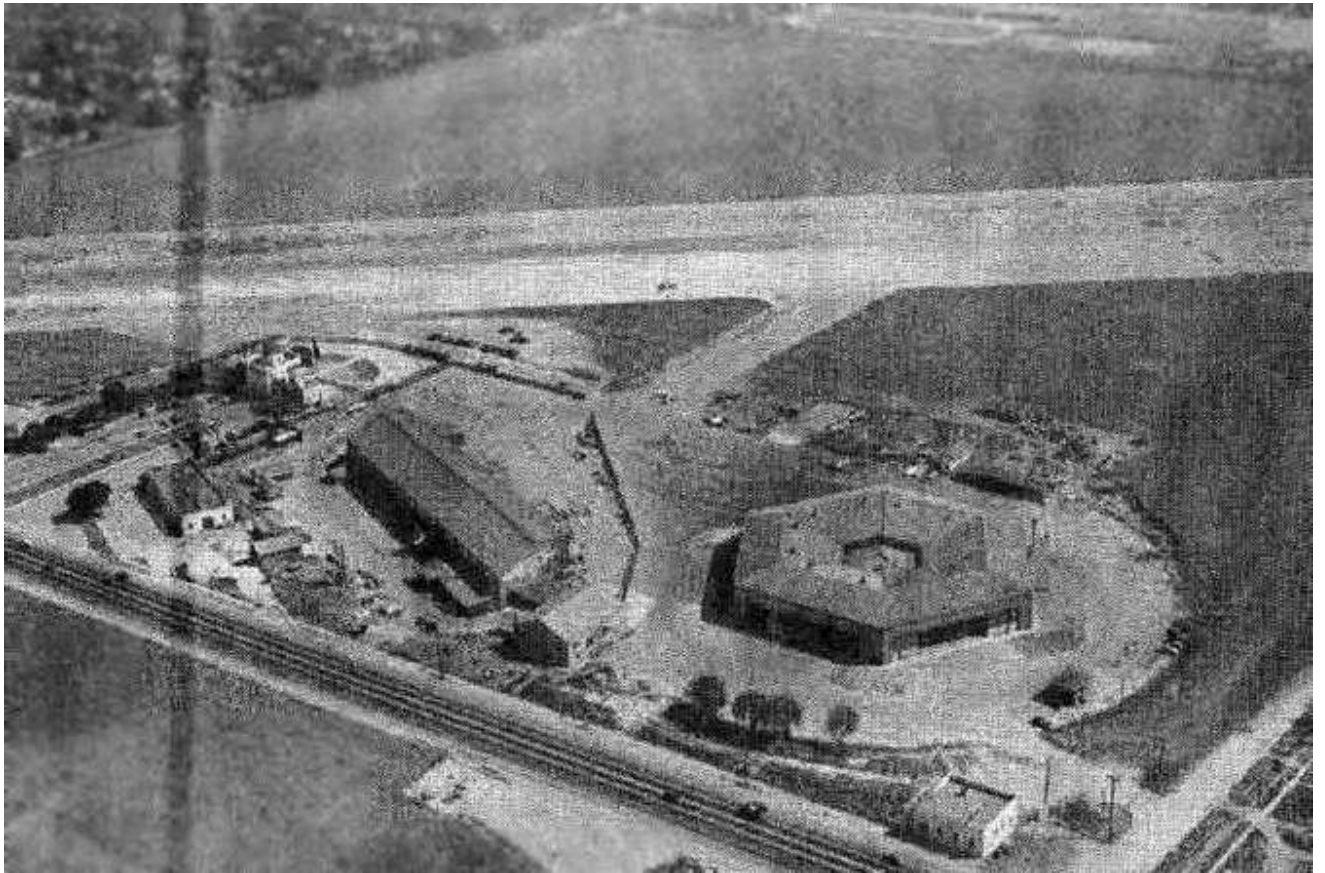
It described Alhambra Airport as being operated by Western Air Express.

The airfield configuration was said to be a 2,700' oiled NE/SW runway, w/2 hangars in the NE corner.



A remarkable aerial view looking west at Alhambra Airport w/a blimp visible overflying the field at a lower altitude.

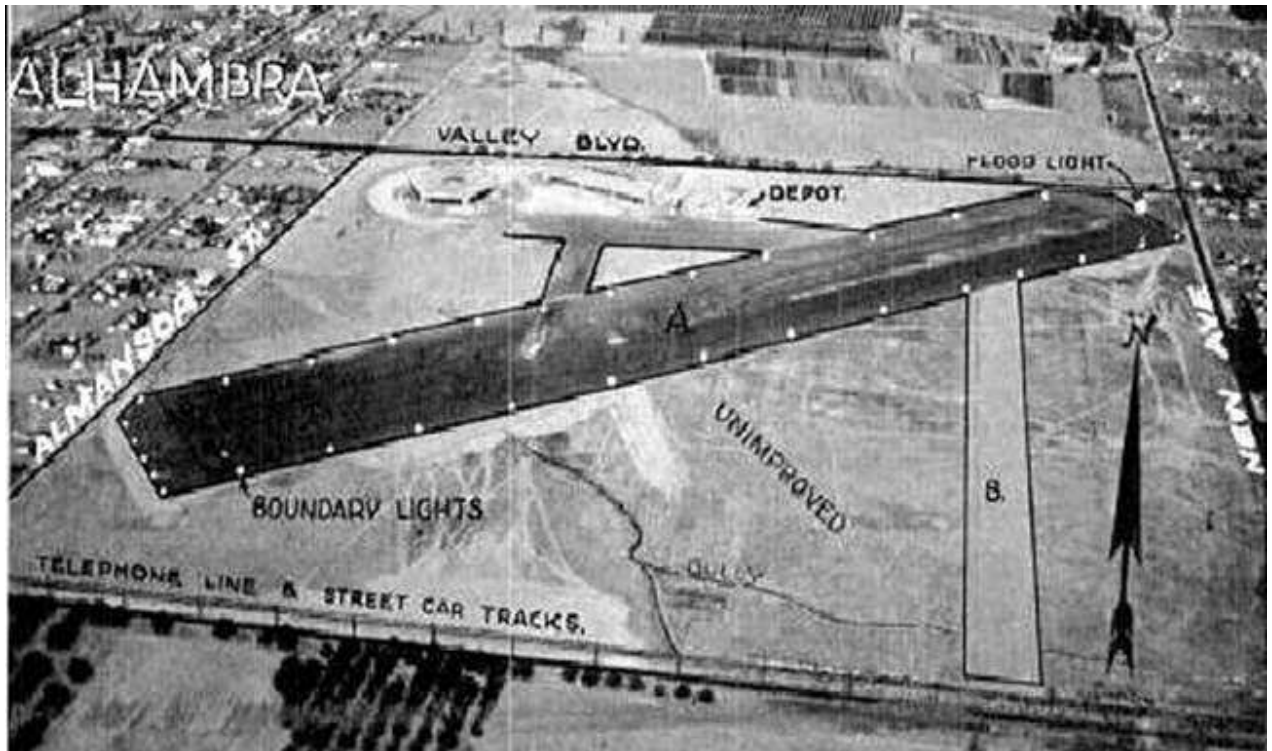
The photo is undated, but may have been taken at an airport dedication ceremony.



A 1929 aerial photo of the hexagonal hangar at Alhambra.



A 1929 photo from the FAA historical files of passengers are checking in w/customs before a flight at Alhambra Airport, in front on an unidentified aircraft.



An undated aerial view looking north at Alhambra Airport from the 1930 Richfield Directory depicted the field as having 2 runways, w/the hexagonal hangar on the NW side.



A 1930 photo of 4 Tri-Motors outside & inside Alhambra's hexagonal hangar.

Western Air Express (the forerunner of Western Airlines) relocated from Vail Field to Alhambra Airport.

Western built the passenger terminal & what was at the time the largest airplane hangar in the world.

Western operated a fleet of six (6) 12-passenger Fokker transports.

Their large maintenance hangar was shaped like a hexagon & had doors on each face so that all 6 aircraft could be worked on simultaneously, a unique feature.



A 1931 photo of Alhambra's Western Air Express terminal.

**The major airlines soon moved out to airfields in Burbank & Glendale,
leaving the Alhambra airport to the private & small commercial operations,
including the Western Air College flight school.**



A 1936 aerial view by Bob McCorkle looking NE at the hexagonal hangar & terminal building at Alhambra Airport.

The houses at the lower-left, along Almanson Avenue, are mostly all still there.



A 1936 photo of a Stearman piloted by Paul Mantz which ground-looped at Alhambra Airport.

According to Dan MacPherson, as of 2003 the rudder of this plane is still owned by John Underwood.



An undated photo of a Fokker F-10A Tri-Motor inside the hexagonal hangar at Alhambra.

**Due to the field's proximity to Hollywood,
a large # of movies were shot on location at Alhambra Airport,
including: "Thirteen Hours by Air" (1936), "Danger Flight" (1939), "Flying Blind" (1941),
"They Met in Bombay" (1941) & "Flight Lieutenant" (1942).**

**The Airport Directory Company's 1937 Airports Directory described Alhambra Airport as
having 2 runways,**

w/the longest being a 2,870' "surfaced" NE/SW runway.



A flight simulation scenery re-creation of a Boeing 40 biplane overflying the Alhambra hangar.



An undated aerial view looking north at Alhambra Airport from The Airport Directory Company's 1938 Airports Directory.

The directory described Alhambra Airport as a square field having 2 runways, w/the longest being a 2,870' "surfaced" NE/SW runway.



A Harlow PJC-2, manufactured in 1938 at the Alhambra Airport.

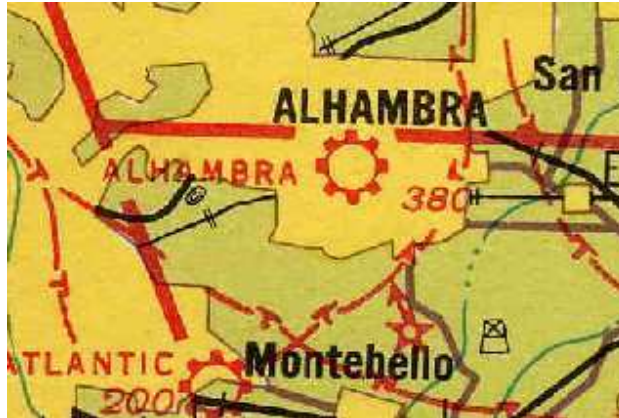
**Max Harlow was an instructor at the Pasadena Junior College,
& the students of the Aero-Tech program constructed the Harlow PJC-1 thru PJC-4
aircraft.**

**In 1938, w/war looming,
Alhambra Airport became an official shipping point for Lockheed's military airplanes,
including large #s of P-38 Lightning fighters.**

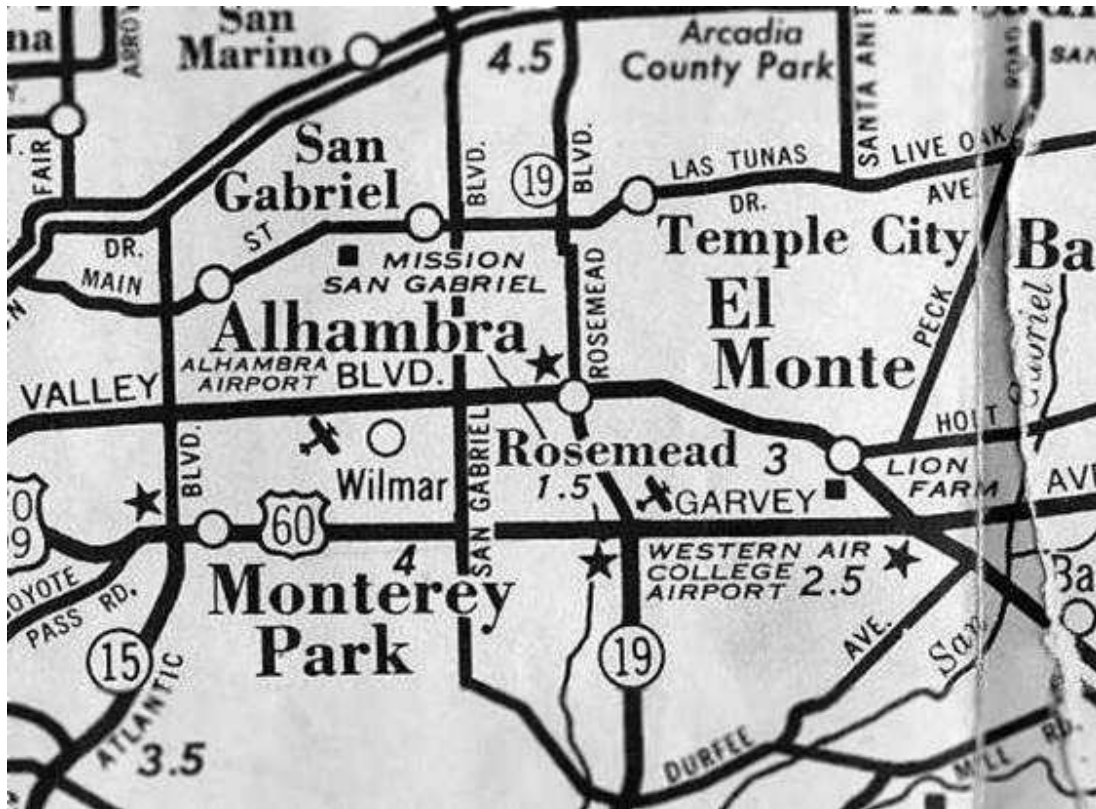


*The last photo which has been located showing Alhambra Airport in use was a 1939 photo of
Bob McCorkle's Stinson at the field.*

*In the right background, over the tail of 385 Echo, is "Crawford's Corner", a fixture in
Alhambra for many years (at Valley Blvd & New Avenue).*



Alhambra Airport, as depicted on the 1941 LA Sectional Chart.



A 1942 street map depicted the Alhambra Airport.

The last photo which has been located showing Alhambra Airport in use was a 1939 photo of Bob McCorkle's Stinson at the field.

The airport continued in operation by its private owners until 1943, when the 157 acre property was put up for sale.

The city of Alhambra took over the property the following year.



The last photo which has been located showing Alhambra Airport still open was a 7/28/1943 aerial view looking east from the 1945 AAF Airfield Directory.

The 1945 AAF Airfield Directory described Alhambra Airport

as a 150 acre rectangular field w/in which was a single 2,830' bituminous NE/SW runway.
The field was said to have 2 steel hangars, w/the largest being its signature 144' hexagonal structure.

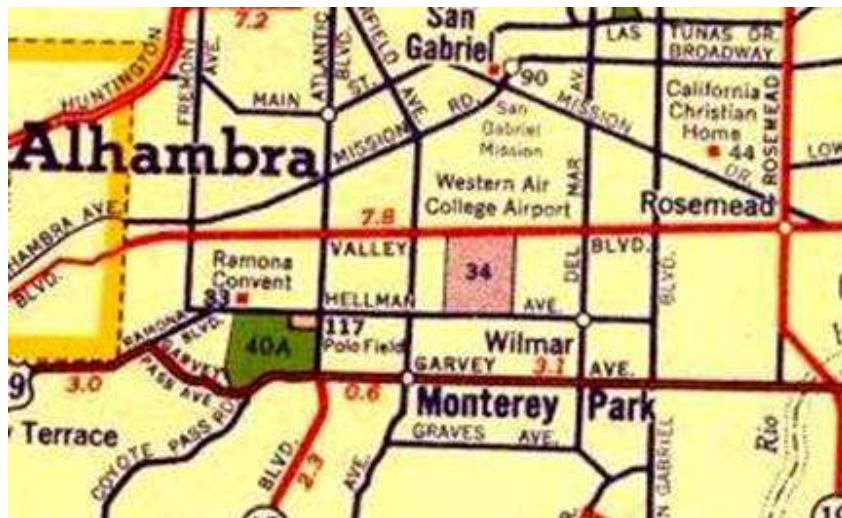
Alhambra Airport was described as being owned & operated by private interests.

Alhambra was depicted as a civil airfield on the 1945 San Diego Sectional Aeronautical Chart.

In 1945, Harlow Aircraft Company purchased the airport & used it to manufacture small aircraft.

Max Harlow was an instructor at the Pasadena Junior College.

& the students of the Aero-Tech program constructed the Harlow PJC-1 thru PJC-4 aircraft.



On a 1946 LA street map, the airport was depicted as "Western Air College Airport".

Note that the Western Air College had operated only 4 years before at another airport very close to the east, in Rosemead.

In 1946, Harlow sold off to real estate developers who subdivided the property, bringing an end to the airport.



A 1948 aerial view shows Alhambra's distinctive hexagonal hangar, long rectangular hangar & control tower building were still standing, altho housing had been built over the site of the runways.

A 1953 aerial view showed that the distinctive hexagonal hangar still remained standing.

Bob Holderness recalled of Alhambra Airport:

“In 1954 we moved into a house on Camelia Drive which ran from a dead end at the truncated main runway down to New Avenue. I was 10 years old.

At that time, the tower & the hangars were still there, & the hexagonal hangar was used for the construction & decoration of the Rose Parade floats.

We played serious sand lot (even coed) baseball on the main runway.

The tower was occupied by a skeleton office crew of some sort until about December, 1956 or so; that's when we found it vacant, broke in & played tag inside the tower (it had a neat metal staircase up to the top of the tower).

The cops were always coming out on burglary calls, but 10-year-old boys were hard to catch.

There were great echoes inside that empty building from the top of the tower.

A demolition operator named Al Walker knocked down the tower in about 1957.

After he knocked down the tower, we played in the ruins as long as we could & then we salvaged the used red brick & sold it to the neighbors (including my Dad).

I think we got 6 cents per brick."

A 1972 aerial view showed that a shopping center had covered the site of the hangars, erasing any trace of Alhambra Airport.



A post-WW II aerial view looking SE at what had become of the site of Alhambra Airport ... a shopping plaza.

Portions of the airport land were redeveloped as the Alhambra Valley Shopping Center & Mark Keppel HS,

& the former airport property has also been bisected by the 10 Freeway.



The March 2004 USGS aerial photo shows that no trace of the former airfield remains visible.

The airport property was bounded by Valley Boulevard on the north & Hellman Avenue to the south.

It was west of Del Mar Avenue & east of Garfield Avenue.