

75 years of Aviation History in Saskatoon

Saskatoon Airport boasts a special brand of Prairie hospitality that will instantly make you feel at home. Saskatoon is on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River and the City was, most appropriately, named after a sweet berry that grew on these banks.

Saskatoon's first contact with aviation goes back to May, 1911, when a Curtiss-designed pusher aeroplane arrived by the Grand Trunk Railway. The owner, Bob St. Henry, carried out some test flights from a prairie grass strip west of the City limits. On his final test flight, while only 60 feet above the ground, the Curtiss was struck by a strong wind and St. Henry was unable to control the aircraft. He struck the earth with a considerable impact, but luckily, was only bruised. He assured Saskatonians that he would give them a display of flying as soon as the damaged aeroplane could be repaired. Bob St. Henry held true to his word. On June 2, 1911, with his aeroplane supporting a new, more powerful engine, he circled the field three times before landing.

A quarter section of land west of the exhibition grounds was set aside in 1913 as an aerodrome. An aviation school was set up there with a Farman biplane and operated for several months. Then came the war, and with it local aviation ceased.

1919 saw the establishment of two commercial flying ventures within the City. Both were developed by Lt. Stan McClelland, Ex-RAF. At the 22nd Street and Dundonald Avenue field, McClelland built a hangar to house his Curtiss IN-4 biplane, commonly referred to as a Jenny. His second development was a field two and a half miles north, near Hudson Bay Slough. Here, from 1919 -1922, he operated a flying school to train young Chinese from Canada, United States, and China itself. Saskatoon is shown in the List of Air Harbors for 1922 as having two public-commercial air harbors. One was 600 by 800 yards and the other, 300 by 400 yards in area.

Saskatoon's Air Harbor (as it was referred to in those days) was first developed in 1928 as the home of the Saskatoon Aero Club (later the Saskatoon Flying Club). The site was licensed for day use on June 1, 1929 and was the second licensed airfield in Saskatchewan, covering a 65 hectare area. The Aero Club operated the air harbor with financial grants from the city. The old airport site is now a small part of the present complex on the northwest edge of the city. It was then situated in the rural municipality of Cory and became part of the City on January 1, 1971.

Prior to World War II, the Saskatoon Flying Club entered into an agreement with the Department of National Defence to give primary flight training to provisional pilot officers of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). This contract continued until the beginning of the war when the club became part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) as No.6 Elementary Flight Training School (EFTS) at Prince Albert. No.6 EFTS was operated by the Northern Saskatchewan Flying Training School Ltd., a subsidiary of the Saskatoon Flying Club.

In 1940, the City agreed to lease the airport to the federal government for the duration of the war. It was taken over and operated by the RCAF until November 1945. Saskatoon Airport became the home of No.4 Service Flight Training School (SFTS). BCATP operations at Saskatoon came to an end March 31, 1945.

While the war was drawing to a close, Saskatoon Airport continued to gain in stature, with an aeradio station being installed and commissioned in 1945. In November 1945, the Department of Transport took over maintenance of the airport from the RCAF and, the following year, the airport was transferred to Transport.

During 1950 to 1964, the RCAF operated a training station on the airport. No.1 Advanced Flying Training School (AFTS) trained RCAF, RAF, and Atlantic Treaty air crews. RCAF Station Saskatoon supported other RCAF units in the Saskatoon area up until 1964, when the auxiliary units were disbanded. The entire station closed during that summer, with four hangars being handed over to the Department of Transport.

With the first direct, daily, scheduled commercial passenger and mail service to Saskatoon in 1947, the Hub City (Saskatoon) was linked with transcontinental flights between Toronto and Vancouver. As air travel increased and the airport became a Customs port of entry for tourists. Saskatoon discovered the need for major improvements to the airport. A new air terminal building was constructed and the official opening took place in September 1955. As well, improvements to the maintenance garage, taxi strips and parking areas were carried out. The primary runway 09/27 was lengthened in 1954 and again in 1960 and is now 8,300 feet long and 200 feet wide. Runway 15/33 was rebuilt and lengthened in 1963 and is now 6,200 feet long.

During the 1960's and 1970's, traffic continued on the incline and, once again, it became evident that more changes to the Saskatoon Airport were necessary. In 1972, plans were unveiled for a brand new airport facility (doubling the size of the existing terminal) with aircraft parking areas (to accommodate larger aircraft with numerous flights). The grand opening of the airport took place on November 29, 1975. The former terminal was renovated in 1977.

In the late 1970's, Saskatchewan Air Ambulance began service at the airport and 2 flight schools were operating. Harold Mitchinson, the founder of Mitchinson Flying Service, began his flight training at the Saskatoon Aero Club in 1936. Mr. Mitchinson served with the Royal Air Force during World War II. After serving with the RAF, Harold Mitchinson returned to Saskatoon and established his own flying school in 1946. The company still continues operating under the Mitchinson name today.

The early 1980's saw a general economic recession which caused air traffic activity to falloff; however, an improved economy combined with aviation deregulation spurred air traffic to new heights by the end of the decade. The airport traffic peaked when it handled 625,000 passengers in 1988, and 113,148 aircraft movements.

Improvements to the airport during the 80's and early 90's were of a restorative nature and included rehabilitation of runway 15/33, taxiways A and B, aprons II, III & V, and new check-in and holdroom/customs areas. The airport also had a new tower in the design stages.

On June 23, 1993, the Saskatoon Airport was renamed the John G. Diefenbaker Airport to commemorate Canada's 13th Prime Minister and the first Prime Minister from the West. Passenger traffic saw an upward trend from 1994 to 2000 through the Saskatoon John G. Diefenbaker International Airport.

In 1995 The Canada-U.S. "Open Skies" air travel agreement introduced increased air transportation to and from Saskatoon with the introduction of two daily roundtrip Transborder flights between Saskatoon and Minneapolis St. Paul by Northwest Airlines. Northwest joins Air Canada, Air BC, Canadian Regional, Athabasca Airways, Air Sask Aviation, Royal Airlines and a number of charter operations offering regular passenger air service. 1995 also marks the first inaugural Canada Remembers International Air Show held in Saskatoon.

In the years to follow the airport underwent major renovations to the terminal building, expanding to meet the growing needs of airport carriers and users. A new airline emerges when four Calgary entrepreneurs establish WestJet, a low-fair airline based out of Calgary to serve Western Canada. In 1998 the Saskatoon John G. Diefenbaker International Airport reaches peak levels with passenger traffic exceeding 822,000.

Saskatoon Airport Authority took over operations of the Saskatoon John G. Diefenbaker International Airport from Transport Canada in 1999. Service, financial viability, expansion and accountability were the foundation of the Authority's objectives during the first year of operation.



The year 2000 was another great year for the Saskatoon Airport for the third year in a row passenger traffic exceeded 800,000, with a building designed to handle 500,000 passengers annually. The Airport

Authority hit its stride in 2000, approving an expansion and renovation of the Air Terminal Building (ATB) to facilitate continued growth of both airline travel and the economy of central and northern Saskatchewan. The project was a significant step toward the vision of making the Saskatoon John. G. Diefenbaker International Airport Saskatchewan's premier airport. The year 2000 also marked the opening of the New Nav Canada Air Traffic Control Tower. The 30-metre high concrete and glass tower is the first of its kind to be built at one of Canada's smaller airports. On the airline scene Transwest Air is formed with the merger of Athabasca Airways and Air Sask and Air Canada acquires Canadian Airlines International and merges that company into its own operations.

On September 11th, 2001 Terrorists attack the World Trade Centre in New York City hitting the Airline industry hard but despite challenges in the aviation industry, the Saskatoon Airport reaches over 809,000 passengers. A new airline Norcanair forms and begins service at the Saskatoon Airport in November of 2001 operating primarily in Northern Saskatchewan.

In December of 2001 the first phase of the airport redevelopment project opened, with Phase two completed in 2002. The completion of the first two phases of terminal redevelopment was the most significant news of 2002. The redeveloped and expanded 110,000 square foot terminal facility was officially opened October of 2002 with the capacity to welcome 1.4 million passengers annually.

In 2003 Saskatoon ranked among the top airports in Canada in a national survey of customer satisfaction with passengers rating the Saskatoon John G. Diefenbaker International Airport a 4.3 out of a possible top grade of five.

June 1, 2004, Saskatoon's John G. Diefenbaker International Airport celebrates 75 years since it became the province's second licensed airfield, back in 1929. As the next 75 years begin here, we look forward to serving Saskatoon and area as it continues to grow and change. In this anniversary year, scheduled and charter air service are provided by Air Canada, Zip, Jazz, WestJet, Transwest Air, Norcanair, Northwest Airlines, Skyservice, Air Transat and Westwind aviation.

During the first five years the Saskatoon Airport Authority has faced many challenges from turmoil in the airline industry to national terrorism. Yet, as the fifth anniversary of the Authority and the 75th Anniversary of the Saskatoon Airport are marked in 2004, it is clear that the Authority has emerged with a financially sound, modern and successful airport, totally committed to the growth of Saskatoon as a vibrant center for industry, commerce and tourism.

The Saskatoon John G. Diefenbaker International Airport welcomes all travelers to the City of Saskatoon. We hope that visitors will take advantage of the many attractions and festivities that Saskatoon has to offer. There's something for everyone; so come for the good times, come with your friends, and enjoy Prairie hospitality at its finest.

The following have served as airport managers:

Phil Nicholas	1946 to 1964
Michael Krysowaty	1964 to 1979
Ernest Michaluk	1980 to 1985
William A. (Bill) Restall	1985 to Present