

MONTROSE AIRPORT TAKES OFF

As early as 1913, airplanes were landing atop Sunset Mesa (Hogback), but the first official airport in Montrose opened on Sept. 11, 1928, with the first airmail flight from western Colorado. Letters were postmarked here at 12 noon, sent to Pueblo where they were postmarked at 3 p.m., and returned to Montrose by train. The airport on Sunset Mesa had severe problems with up and down drafts, sometimes making landings and takeoffs difficult or even impossible. Talk for acquiring a new site began in the early 1940s, but World War II put those plans on hold. After the war, several people made the suggestion to acquire the Jack Bethel-Bill Naff Airport near the north edge of the city close to the present airport.

In March 1946, Ray Wilson Inc., (later changed to Monarch Air Lines) was authorized to serve the area between Denver, Salt Lake City and Albuquerque with passenger air service, with a stop to be made in either Montrose or Delta. A joint meeting of the Montrose City Council, Montrose County Commissioners and the Airport Committee of the Chamber was held in City Hall on June 13, 1946. It was agreed that an attempt be made to secure the Bethel-Naff land as soon as possible. The land was adjacent to the Civil Conservation Corps (CCC) camp which was given to the city that July by the Bureau of Reclamation. The 20 by 120 foot CCC building could be used as the administration building. It would include an airport office, ticket office, baggage space and rest rooms. A part of the building could be remodeled for an apartment for the airport manager. The Sunset Mesa airport would be abandoned and all the equipment moved to the new site.

On Oct. 17, 1946, Montrose informed Monarch Airlines that the airport was finished and a United Air Lines DC-3 had already used the field. In addition to the administration building, the airport now contained a 36- by 120-foot hangar, two warmup mats at each end of the 6,000-foot dirt runway, marker lights, a taxiway and apron.

Aug. 15, 1947, dawned clear and warm. The limp air sock dangled from the airport hanger, welcoming the DC-3-C that was approaching from the east, letting down from its cruising altitude high above the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. It crossed the outer boundaries of the Montrose Municipal Airport to land at 8 a.m., greeted by the cheers of an excited reception committee. Onlookers could distinguish the name "Monarch Air Lines" in rich green along the silver fuselage.

That first westbound plane, Flight 121, was piloted by Captain William O'Meara, assisted by First Officer Dick Hoffman. On board were G.S. Kitchen, Monarch Air Lines Traffic and Sales Manager, Dick Vigil and Don Dickey of the Denver Post and one passenger, a man named Reed.

On April 17, 1950, Monarch Air Lines merged with Arizona Airways and Challenge Airlines to form the new company, Frontier Airlines, which continued to serve Montrose.

-Excerpted from an article in the Montrose Press on July 7, 2008 by Marilyn Cox