

BHA Banner Newsletter

Brownsville Historical Association

Volume 4, Issue 1

January 2018

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Brownsville Airport History

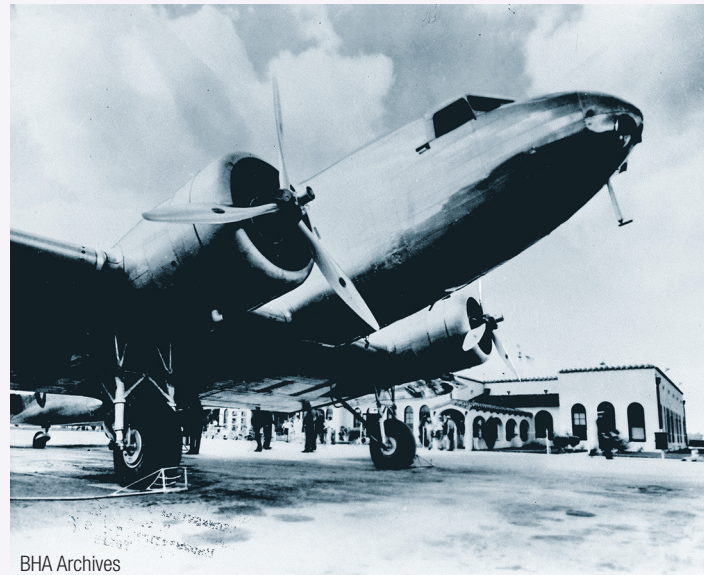
By Carl Chilton

While writing this article, Chilton visited many places at the airport, interviewed airport officials and interviewed people working at the different businesses there. He reviewed airport records, Brownsville Herald stories and city commission minutes, and also interviewed a number of local people.

He learned that in the 1920's and 1930's Brownsville's unique location gave us the potential to play an important role in aviation. During those years the small airplanes landed frequently to refuel.

In 1927 Charles Lindbergh made the first non-stop flight from New York to Paris. This flight, in a small, single engine airplane, took 33 hours, and made Lindbergh famous.

After he returned to the United States, the government asked him to help promote aviation. So he made a non-stop flight from Washington D.C. to Mexico City. The purpose was to look at the idea of establishing air mail service between the two countries.



BHA Archives

Brownsville had potential to be a key location along the new air mail route. But Brownsville had no airport, so the Chamber of Commerce and city officials began making plans. An election was called to authorize a bond issue of \$100,000 to provide funds to build an airport. Voters approved the bond issue, land was acquired and construction began in 1928.

The land acquired was 488 acres, and cost \$44,000, about \$91.00 per acre. Additional land has been acquired over the years, and the airport area is now several times as large

as it was in 1929.

When completed, the new airport had a small hangar, a garage for an ambulance and a fire truck, a residence for the airport manager, a revolving beacon light and a 2,500 foot runway. In those days most runways were dirt, but this one had a gravel surface and was considered to be first class. It could be used in all kinds of weather and could be lighted at night. The government gave the Brownsville Airport the highest rating.

The grand opening of the airport came in March, 1929, and was the biggest event in Brownsville history, with an estimated attendance of 20,000. More than 175 airplanes arrived, both private and military, bringing a number of people well known in the aviation world. One of these was the famed woman aviator, Amelia Earhart.

The celebration was a two day event, featuring parachute jumps, aerial acrobatics, wing walking, receptions, band concerts. The highlight was the arrival of the first flight carrying airmail from

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From the Executive Director...

The new year brings significant projects and opportunities for the Brownsville Historical Association. The renovation and restoration of the Market Square building is under way. We were recently awarded \$180,000 from the Brownsville Community Improvement



Corporation for the refurbishment of the second floor of the Market Square building and we are eager to finally complete the final phase of the Market Square Research Center project.

This funding will help to complete the area for better BHA Collections storage, temporary and permanent exhibit galleries, meeting space, and research work stations.

We are also busy planning our events. Join us for our Winter Walking Tours and Historical Happy Hours and enjoy discounted rates with your membership. In February, we have several exhibits on display celebrating Charro Days. In March, we partner with UTRGV for the exhibit, Vaqueros. Be sure and save the date for our 8th Annual Taste of Texas fundraiser on March 24, 2018. This event invites a variety of food and drink vendors to showcase their Texas style culinary delights and hosts live music in celebration of Texas History Month. Please see our calendar insert for details on all of our events and programs.

I hope to see you soon at our museums and various programs. We truly appreciate your support and dedication as a member of the Association and we are proud to continue our mission of “preserving, educating and promoting the history, heritage and cultural art of Brownsville”.

Happy New Year!

Tara Putegnat
Executive Director

Remembering the Snake King

William Abraham King was the founder of Snakeville in Brownsville in the early 1900's. As a young man W. A. King would buy snakes from local ranchers, as well as other local animals including bobcats, small deer, badgers, armadillos, javalinas, and an occasional Puma or jaguarundi, and resale them to pet stores and other businesses throughout the country. In 1914 King offered a rattlesnake catching contest during the Brownsville mid-winter fair. All snakes had previously been defanged and the event was held at Fort Brown. William King found all sorts of ways to make money off the local rattlesnakes. Not only did he sale them through mail order catalogs, but he also sold the venom and tanned skins. The skins were used to make belts, boots, and wallets. Snakeville also dealt in iguana imported from Mexico, Central and South America. Although rare, Snakeville iguanas can still be found in Brownsville today around the resacas of Rio Viejo subdivision. Monkeys were also imported animals from the south. The moneys brought to Snakeville were in turn sold to circuses, zoos and carnivals. W. A. King made money from catching local horned toads which were plentiful back in those days. He had them preserved, stuffed and varnished, then sold to novelty stores all over the country. In time, Snakeville began to acquire and sale large cats including lions, tigers and leopards. Snakeville also dealt in pythons shipped in from India, some which reached thirty-five feet in length and resold for up to \$25 a foot. At one time, Mr. King acquired a large mountain orangutan and sold tickets at 25 cents per person to see the spectacle. Snakeville also purchased parrots from Mexico in large quantities and resold them for profit. In yet another money-making endeavor, W. A. King brought in large numbers of bobwhite quail from Mexico, which he in turn sold by the tens of thousands to game preserves.



To feed the increasing lion population at Snakeville, Mr. King found food by bringing in fresh meat from “Jackass Prairie,” the area between Brownsville and Boca Chica Beach, which back in those days held large numbers of wild donkeys. King also contracted with Fort Brown to purchase cavalry horses that had to be put down or were no longer needed. In 1930 W.A. King entered negotiations with a Hollywood crew to film a movie at the old Rabb Plantation near the Sabal Palms sanctuary, with Snakeville providing the birds, animals, and handlers. The movie was entitled, “Death



Along the Delta.” Mr. King had a son named Manuel who became known as the world’s youngest wild animal trainer. Working with lions and a professional trainer, Manuel began his career and soon traveled across the nation performing at state fairs, coliseums, and theatres. He completed over four thousand shows. Young Manuel King also

stared in a movie with Clyde Beatty known as Darkest Africa. Manuel played the role of “Baru, Son of the Jungle.” On September 5, 1933, a great hurricane hit Brownsville. Snakeville was boarded up and the King family sought safety in their concrete office building located on the premises. The animals at Snakeville shrieked as the storm descended. A lion escaped and killed a mule. Several pythons also escaped during the storm and one swallowed a kid whole; a small goat that is. Snakeville continued operations into the 1950's. 🐍

James Mills, *BHA Board Member*



Brownsville High School – Homer Hanna High School

In 1963, the Brownsville Independent School District (BISD) proposed an expansion program to build a new high school and renovate other existing school buildings. The challenge was so appealing that in December 1963, a group of talented architects established an association under the name of Brownsville Associated Architects. This group of architects hoped to be awarded the bid for the new school's design. Walter Bowman, Lester Swanson, James Hiester, Robert Velten, and Gayle Wilhite were the five architects to be awarded the contract to design the new high school building. BISD hired them to design not only the new school, but a cafeteria at the Junior College located on Palm Boulevard as well.

The Brownsville Associated Architects hired Lee Winans, as consultant engineer, to draw up utility-cost estimates in an effort to create the most optimal and efficient air-conditioning system in the future high school. Like other school districts in the Valley, air-conditioned school buildings were high in priority.

In 1964, BISD received offers on seven different sites to locate the future high school and the board of trustees showed a preference

to those sites located between Boca Chica and Price Road. Other options for building sites were presented until finally the current location of Homer Hanna High School, on Price Road, was chosen. The Adams Brothers of Brownsville, was the building contractor chosen and the cornerstone dedication ceremony was held on March 13, 1966 by H. W. Fullingim.

The budget to build Brownsville High School (the original name), was \$3,472,000. The district originally proposed building a school with 200 classrooms but due to time constraints and projected lower enrollment, the building only included 120 classrooms.

In my opinion, Homer Hanna Early College High School deserves a state marker designation, considering its unique design for the modern era and the talented architects contracted for its design. 🇺🇸

Juan Vélez

Historic Preservation Officer (Spanish Architect & Building Engineer, Escuela Europea de Madrid, España) and BHA Board member

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Mexico City, piloted by Charles Lindbergh himself.

Lindbergh spent the night in Brownsville, was honored by a banquet at the el Jardin hotel, and flew back to Mexico City the next day. He said he was impressed with the new airport.

The grand opening was described as an event that played an important role in the development of Brownsville. It was predicted the entire Rio Grande valley would benefit from the new airport.

Pan American Airways made a proposal to lease and operate the entire airport. The city commission began considering this offer and couldn't decide what to do. They weren't sure if they wanted to turn the new airport over to a corporation to operate it. After extensive negotiations, an agreement was reached to lease the airport to Pan American for 10 years, with an option for an additional 10 years. Pan American would make substantial

improvements to the existing facilities, and agreed to permit other airlines to operate at the airport.

Brownsville's economy in those days was based primarily on agriculture, and Pan American provided an industrial role. Brownsville became the headquarters for Pan American's western division, which was responsible for the airline's operations in Mexico, Central America and South America. Pan American was considered an excellent place to work, and many local people obtained jobs there during the difficult days of the Great Depression.

Pan American became Brownsville's largest employer. In addition to providing airline service, Pan American established an aircraft overhaul base, performing maintenance work on Pan American airplanes. In 1936, Pan American had 220 employees in Brownsville.

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Pan American personnel performed some challenging jobs, one of which was flight testing the first American jet engine during World War II. General Electric chose Brownsville for flight testing because of good flying weather and because of Pan American's capable personnel.

The testing was top secret, with test flights over the Gulf of Mexico, where they could not be observed by others. The jet engines were tested thoroughly, using B-24 and B-29 bombers.

Also during World War II, Pan American performed maintenance work on aircraft engines for the Army Air Corps. Pan American mechanics overhauled thousands of engines during the war. At one time Pan American had 2,000 wartime employees at the Brownsville airport.

Another interesting job was in Ireland, where a Pan American plane had made an extremely hard landing and suffered structural damage. Pan American sent 15 Brownsville mechanics to Ireland to repair the airplane. It was a lengthy job, taking about six months. The mechanics were told they could not return home until the job was finished. They made the most of their time in Ireland, got acquainted, saw the country and told many stories when they returned home.

When Pan American began airline service to Mexico City in 1930, the pilots flew over mountains in Mexico. They developed some rudimentary instrument flying techniques, such as hanging a spark plug on a string in the cockpit, indicating whether the wings were level. Later in Brownsville, an instrument flight training procedure was developed. One side of the cockpit was covered

and the pilot on that side could not see out, he could only see the flight instruments. The pilot in the other seat had visual contact with the ground. This was the country's first "blind flying school", recognized by a historical plaque at the airport.

Passenger service at the airport began in 1929, with Pan American flying to Mexico City. Braniff arrived in 1934, followed by Eastern Airlines in 1936. These airlines served destinations in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Their flight schedules to Brownsville were coordinated with Pan American, and passengers heading to and from Mexico, and further south, changed planes in Brownsville.

In 1949, Brownsville was served by five airlines: Pan American, Braniff, Eastern, Trans Texas and a Mexican Airline.

The introduction of larger planes and the opening of new airports in the 1950s changed the picture. Pan American moved their northern terminal from Brownsville to Houston, and Matamoros and Harlingen both opened airports in their communities.

Braniff went out of business in 1982, after serving Brownsville for 48 years. In later years, several airlines arrived for a short time and then departed. We were without airline service for several years, until Continental arrived in 1993.

Today we have airline service from United and American, flying non-stop to Houston and Dallas. This creates jobs at the airlines, the rental car companies, the security personnel and airport personnel. The airport has played an important role in our community since 1929, and continues that role today. 🇺🇸