

Mirabelle History

Mirabelle is located in the area of north Pensacola known as "Ferry Pass". That name evolved from the lack of easy transport to downtown Pensacola.

Because there was no bridge to connect Pensacola with Milton, twice daily a ferry ran from Milton to Pensacola. Farmers in north Pensacola would take produce and animals down today's Johnson Avenue to the shore of Pensacola Bay.

They would wait there for the Milton ferry to pass, and shout for the ferry to stop and pick them up. Although the distance was only about 12 miles, the lack of automobiles and the poor condition of the dirt roads making walking to town with farm products an impossible job.

By the 1940s things had improved, with public bus service due to the newly constructed military base. In the 1940s north Davis Hwy. was a largely rural vacant area, as there was very little residential development past Brent Lane.

In that period, today's Ellyson Industrial Park was a US Navy facility air field. Then known as Ellyson Field, it was primarily a "touch and go" airfield associated with the Navy's flight training program at the main facility, Pensacola Naval Air Station. Student pilots would make the short trip from NAS to outlying fields, touch their wheels to the runway and then take-off again without stopping.

At the end of WW II Ellyson Field became a helicopter training center, and Davis Hwy. was a two lane asphalt roadway that connected Pensacola to Milton via a narrow wooden bridge across the Escambia River.

In the 1940s the Mirabelle property was owned by the Smith family and had two uses. The land along Ellyson Field (pretty much all of the current Mirabelle subdivision) was used for farming by a tenant farmer. The land along Davis Hwy. was unimproved except for a fish market owned by the Smiths, who also raised turkeys.

The fish market was eventually acquired by the Golden family from Milton, who in the 1960s converted the site into an early convenience store with gasoline.

The Smiths lived just off Davis Hwy., east off the turn in the road of present day Lester Street. Lester meandered through the wooded area of present day Belle Meadow, and connected to Johnson Avenue.

The Smiths lived in a frame "shotgun" house with a corrugated steel roof. Although the exact construction date is uncertain, it's believed the home was constructed around 1900.

A shotgun house had a straight hallway from the front door to the back for air circulation. The house had three bedrooms and one bath immediately with bedrooms, kitchen and living room along the sides of the central hallway.

The name shotgun house came from the observation that a shotgun could be fired from the footdoor and the pellets would go out the backdoor without causing any damage to the house.

The house itself was upscale for its time. At the front the house had an open porch which ran the width of the house. On the rear was a similar porch, but it was screened against insects. To combat hot summers, the house also had high ceilings.

The most distinctive feature of the house were the numerous and large windows, providing ventilation during hot summers. The home was also unique in that it had a gas heater in the living room, with a brick chimney for the fumes. Most homes of the period had kerosene heaters which were dangerous. That was due both to spillage accidents when refilling but also because the carbon dioxide fumes stayed in the house.

Lester at that time was a dirt road that served as a short cut to present day Johnson Avenue to get to the ferry "landing".

In 1949 William Henry Brown and his wife Cleo owned several hundred acres of land on the south bank of the Escambia River, including the land on both sides of the "Milton Bridge". Mr. Brown was retired from the US Merchant Marine, and was also the owner/operator of "Brown's Fish Camp". He built and rented to fishermen small rowboats he made from cedar wood, obtained from the forests and sawmills around Milton.

Mr. Brown had spent his working life around the water, including transporting tobacco in his own small sailboat from Tampa to Key West as part of the cigar business in the early 1900s, but also operating a fishcamp along the Intracoastal Waterway in the Perdido area of Pensacola, and operating a deep sea fishing boat out of Riviera Beach, Florida.

In 1949 a land swap was negotiated, whereby Brown exchanged most of his land to Smith for the Mirabelle property and Smith became the owner/operator of "Smith's Fish Camp".

The tenant farmer had ended the rental agreement, so Mr. Brown planted several hundred pecan trees in the area along Ellyson Field. Unfortunately the first year after the planting had unusually heavy rains and all the trees died from root rot.

The Browns did some remodeling to the home, including installing a storage half-partition between living room and dining room, and installing a large dining room table that sat 14 persons.

The major change Mr. Brown made was to build a fully enclosed garage for the last car he would buy, a new 1950 Buick Special with Dynaflo transmission and "straight eight" motor.

The garage also featured a workshop area on two sides and a lumber storage area on the south side. Mr. Brown developed a fairly large vegetable garden, and used the workshop area to store his small garden tractor, gardening tools, etc.

The Browns frequently had guests for lunch, and the large table allowed Mr. and Mrs. Brown to sit side by side at the head of the table, with their most honored guests similarly situated at the other end.

While Mr. Brown had been born in Bagdad, Florida just east of Milton, Mrs. Cleo Brown was one of five Pensacola girls from the Johnson family, for which Johnson Avenue was named.

Cleo's sister Bessie was a widow. Bessie's husband was one of the first Navy men who died during WW II. During the war she acted as the manager of a boarding house on Belmont Street which was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Brown.

Concurrent with the move to "the farm", Bessie came to live with the Browns. A few years later, a complete "apartment" was added to the main house to accommodate another of Cleo's widowed sisters, Mabel.

The addition was accessed from the north wall of the dining room, and contained a kitchen, living room, bedroom and bath, as widow Mabel Johnson Rawson had to be somewhat bribed into leaving her home on Rawson Lane, alongside today's Pensacola Christian College.

Partly to finance the renovation, over a period of time the Browns sold lots along Lester Street, primarily to retired couples relocating to Florida from the north. As Mr. Brown expressed it "I have the privilege of choosing my neighbors".

The small white frame house on the south side of Lester Street was one of the first "Jim Walter Homes" in Pensacola. It was constructed about 1955. In later years the Brown's also sold the land for the Moose Lodge and the beauty parlor on Davis Hwy.

During the 1950s and 1960s problems arose related to integration. Since about 1905 a black family had lived just east of the Moose Lodge site. For decades to travel to work they had walked past the homes of some white families who lived just off Davis Hwy.

During the heated emotions of the 1960s those families started harassment on a regular basis. When Mr. Brown learned of the problem, he dedicated the land for present day Lewis Street to connect to Davis. In that way the black family could access the bus line without problems.

The granddaughter of the original black resident still resides on the same property today. She is retired from the Florida State Correctional Department and her husband from the US Air Force.

Mrs. Cleo Brown died in 1965 and Mr. "Henry" Brown in 1971. After the death of Mr. and Mrs. Brown, Bessie and Mabel continued living in the home until they moved to nursing homes.

The Brown's only grandson, Robert Hood, and his Mother Mildred Hood inherited the property after Mr. Brown's death. Mr. Brown's will had provided for the continuing support of his widowed sisters-in-law, and so over a period of time pieces of the property were sold off to support Bessie and Mabel.

Along Davis Hwy., a Brown relative purchased some land and operated "Harold's Used Cars". Harold and his wife installed a mobile home and lived on the property as well. Their residence was about where the current apartment complex is located.

About 1993 a realty development firm from Orlando purchased all of the Brown property, from Ellyson Industrial Park all the way to Davis, including Harold's Used Cars.

Details from the internet, some are repeats

With the World War II expansion of flight training in 1940, the Navy purchased open farmland, designated Base Field 01913 (Site 3), 16 miles northeast of NAS Pensacola to serve as an auxiliary field for Chevalier Field. The new ALF was to be equipped with a hangar and repair unit.

As the war intensified, it was decided to make Site 3 into a larger field similar to Saufley and Corry Fields to assist in the planned increased flight training. Construction on the expanded facility, officially named Ellyson Field in honor of CDR Theodore G. "Spuds" Ellyson, the Navy's first aviator, began on 26 February 1941.

As World War II intensified, the airfield was quickly expanded. At a cost of \$1.7 million, six taxiways and runways were constructed, along with three hangars, administrative and operations buildings, barracks, and a mess hall. Operations commenced on October 1, 1941 when five divisions of aircraft transferred from NAS Pensacola. Dedication ceremonies were held that morning and training flights began that afternoon. Ellyson Field was designated as a Naval Auxiliary Air Station on January 1, 1943.[2] In 1945, NAS Pensacola's Intermediate Instructor School moved to Ellyson Field.[1]

First closure

At the end of World War II, however, use of Ellyson Field quickly diminished. In November 1945, primary and basic training operations were moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, and Ellyson was used for storage until it was deactivated in 1947. Over the next few years, portions of Ellyson Field were opened up for civilian use, including a school for handicapped children and a training center for the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball club.[1]

Helicopter training

Ellyson Field was reactivated before long, though, as the Korean War necessitated an expansion of the Navy's helicopter training program. Helicopter Training Unit One was established at Ellyson in 1950. Ellyson Field was designated as an auxiliary landing field until 1967, when it was reestablished as a Naval Auxiliary Air Station. It was elevated to full Naval Air Station status in 1968. During the 1960s, Ellyson Field also hosted helicopter training for NASA astronauts.

In the early 1970s, the Navy decided to close Ellyson due to conflicts with civilian air traffic from nearby Pensacola Regional Airport. Ellyson Field was closed on December 28, 1973, and helicopter training was relocated to NAS Whiting Field in Santa Rosa County. The Naval Education & Training Program Development Center used Ellyson until it relocated to Saufley

Field in 1979, at which time Ellyson Field was declared surplus.[1] In 1983, the University of West Florida leased the former bachelor officers' quarters (BOQ) and converted the building to student housing.[3]

Reuse

Although Ellyson Field has been redeveloped as an industrial park, many of its original buildings, including three hangars and the control tower and operations building, remain and have been reused by various companies.