I wonder what Mr. E.M. Smith of the Emsco company would have said if he were to come back to see the wonders that transpired at the site of his original 1929 airplane factory in Downey? I'm sure he would have been blown away! The incredible air and spacecraft projects that had their birth there were nothing short of historic. While Emsco had its beginnings with the manufacture of a small two-seater commercial aircraft, changes in ownership ultimately led to the construction of airplanes to aid in the war effort (WWII).

The Downey facility was where training aircraft such as the BT-13 (above) and fighter airplanes such as the P-51 “Mustang” were designed and built that greatly contributed to the US victory in the skies over the formidable German Luftwaffe. The war years certainly gave a major boost to the Downey site and employed many thousands in support of the war effort.

In 1948, NAA took over the facilities of the Consolidated-Vultee Co. in Downey and continued manufacturing a variety of military aircraft for the Air Force and Navy under the leadership of James “Dutch” Kindleberger (see photo). Lee Atwood joined the company in 1934 and under his leadership the company ventured into unmanned aircraft in 1946 with the Navaho, which was the first cruise missile of its kind. Although Navaho looked promising, it had some launch failures that could not be overcome and it was cancelled in 1957. Later, another unmanned cruise missile program came along known as the “Hound Dog”, or AGM-28, as it was officially named. This was a very successful program and Hound Dog missiles were deployed to B-52 bombers in December of 1959, and were finally retired from service in June, 1978.

At a joint session of Congress in May 25, 1961 President Kennedy commanded a young NASA to build a spacecraft to send men to the moon within a decade. This initiated a “space race” with the Soviet Union who had a jump start in space with their launch of the Sputnik in Oct. 1957. Lee Atwood, North American Aviation’s (NAA) Chairman of the Board, was encouraged by North American’s President, Harrison “Stormy” Storms, to “take on the challenge” to answer President Kennedy’s call. Atwood did not hesitate and gave Stormy the “go” for this enterprise. Although he had strong competition from other major aerospace companies such as McDonnell, Lockheed, Grumman, Martin-Marrietta and Boeing, he persevered and North American Aviation was selected by NASA to build the Apollo Spacecraft and the 2nd stage (the S-II) of the Saturn V booster.
Demolishing the Dream

Continued from Front Page…

The Downey facility housed all the engineering, test and manufacturing facilities that supported the Apollo Program. It was typical, in those days, that when a schedule milestone had to be met dedicated employees would work 24 hours around the clock to make it happen — after all, it was a national goal announced by the President and the integrity of the country was at stake. Below: Apollo 1 astronauts Virgil I. Grissom, and Edward H. White II.

Another example of a visionary:

By mid-1969, the ambitious new NASA Administrator, Tom Paine, had proposed an extensive manned space exploration program as the logical follow-on to Apollo. A new, modular, reusable space transportation system would be required to set up bases on the Moon and Mars during the 1970s and 1980s. This system would consist of a reusable space shuttle to low earth orbit space stations and inter-orbital and interplanetary nuclear and chemical space tugs. The first major goal was a 12-man space station by 1975. NASA awarded $2.9-million study contracts to North American Rockwell and McDonnell-Douglas in July 1969. The space station was to evolve into a 50-man space base by 1980. Additional way-stations to Mars would be deployed in geostationary, lunar and Mars orbit during the 1980s.

As the Apollo Program wound down employment at the site trickled down to 6,800 in 1972 and the post-Apollo layoffs continued. On July 26, 1972 a major announcement was made that changed everything: “Rockwell Won The Contract To Build The Space Shuttle”—and the dream continued. Layoffs immediately ceased and Rockwell initiated a major hiring campaign. Employment increased to 15,000 and the Downey facility was thriving, once again.

The first Shuttle flight, STS-1, took place on April 12, 1981 and signaled the beginning of regular flights to place satellites in orbit, return a few for repairs on the ground and to construct the International Space Station. The Space Shuttle was a very ambitious undertaking which led to the construction of the most complex machine ever conceived by man. It had major setbacks with the loss of astronaut lives during launch of Challenger on STS-51L, Jan. 28, 1986 and entry of Columbia on STS-107, Feb. 1, 2003. The program continued until construction of the International Space Station was completed with mission STS-135. The Boeing Co. decided to consolidate some of its facilities in the recently acquired McDonnell-Douglas site in Huntington Beach and the Downey facility ownership was transferred to the City of Downey in 1999. The City of Downey contracted with the Industrial Realty Group (IRG) to develop the property into a commercial site. As a result, a shopping center, Downey Landing, was created on the site of the parking lot for Gate 51 and a Kaiser Hospital was erected where once stood “Mount Downey”, the “Red Star” Downey Fertilizer Co. (above). A few of the remaining buildings (Bldg. 1, 6, 9 and 290) were converted for lease by various movie studios.

The disastrous Apollo spacecraft fire at KSC on Jan. 27, 1967 that took the lives of Astronauts Grissom, Chaffee and White was a major setback to the program and re-designs were implemented that delayed the moon landing by 1.7 years. But, the first manned landing was achieved on July 20, 1969, well within the President’s goal. Although the Apollo Program authorized construction of flight hardware for Apollo missions 18, 19 and 20, the program ended with the moon landing of Apollo 17. The hardware that remained was used in the Skylab and Apollo-Soyuz Test Project Programs. There were some visionaries in the government that promoted follow-on programs that would have set new goals for the country, but they were not accepted and were set aside.

Here is one example: In early July 1969, at a meeting with space planners from outside the government, Vice President Spiro T. Agnew stated that “a manned spaceflight to Mars” could be the “overture to a new era of civilization.” He compared this mission to the early voyages of exploration: “Would we want to answer through eternity for turning back a Columbus or a Magellan? Would we be denying the people of the world the enlightenment and evolution which accompany every great age of discovery?” Agnew stated in an interview that he had the “individual feeling that we should articulate a simple, ambitious, optimistic goal of a manned flight to Mars by the end of this century.”

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Living at the plant in the early 1930’s

By Gordon Heath

“Yes, our family—my parents (both now deceased), my sister Helen, and I, lived at the plant in the early 1930’s. That is, in a building on the ground that had been a restaurant in earlier days. I’m not at all clear about the history, but the plant was identified as Emsco Aircraft when we lived there (named for its founder E.M. Smith (above), who also owned other enterprise’s including Emsco Asbestos Company, a plant that made brake lining and other asbestos products. They also made rivets and heat treated and anodized them. As I recall, the asbestos company plant was located on South Downey Avenue, next to the railroad tracks that paralleled Firestone Blvd. I don’t know when the Vultee days were in relation to the Emsco Aircraft days, nor what the scale of manufacturing or aircraft assembly ever amounted to in the plant. I doubt I ever did know such details, a 10 or 11 year old wouldn’t be interested, or even understand such things, and I certainly haven’t thought about it for many years. My father was sort of the resident overseer, guardian or caretaker of the closed plant, that is, he had the keys and was responsible for keeping an eye on the whole place and letting occasional visitors in. We kids were sometimes permitted into the plant itself where machine shop tools were still in place and where some airplanes were hangared. One of them was a yellow high-wing cabin monoplane named, I seem to recall, the “Winnie Mae”, which was owned by, or had been extensively flown by, the famed Wiley Post (below). The planes were occasionally taken out and flown, and it was in one of them that I had my first airplane flight. Who the pilot was I can’t recall. The land between the runways was farmed by a rough and gruff man called “Joe the Dutchman” who plowed, planted, irrigated and harvested corn. I don’t know whether he rented the land, or sharecropped it, or what the arrangement was, but I recall that my dad one summer arranged for me to work for Joe irrigating the corn. I didn’t grasp the principles of irrigation ditches and Joe was not about to explain it to me, so I managed to flood a large section if the field on my third or fourth day, immediately following which I was permanently retired from Joe’s employ, to my chagrin but also to my relief! We were still living in the restaurant building in 1933 when the big Long Beach Earthquake struck. It caused the building to pitch as though it were a boat or a raft riding over some giant swells, but I don’t believe it resulted in any significant damage to the structure or contents…."

Sincerely,
Gordon Heath

This letter was sent to Bob Thompson and was written June 4, 1991. We also have a letter from his sister Helen for our next Aviator issue. Thanks Bob!

Columbia Memorial Space Center

City of Downey’s
Columbia Memorial Space Center
12400 Columbia Way
Downey CA 90242 562-231-1200
Open Tuesday-Saturday 10 AM—5 PM
Incredible images from the past

Image of Security Aircraft in Downey, 1933. Source: USC Digital Photo Archive. Cerritos Road (Lakewood) and Washburn Crossing. Front still standing.

Aerojet and NAA had offices in Downey at the Ball & Tweedy Packing Plant, Dolan and Firestone. Secret missile work was done here in the late 1940’s and 50’s until the plant was demolished in the 1960’s. Also, see the old water tower on Dolan Street. Photo—Downey Historical Society.

Vultee XP-54, known as the “Swoose Goose”, was a prototype fighter built by the Vultee Aircraft Company in Downey for the United States Army Air Forces.
Presidents Message- By Jerry Blackburn

Here we are finishing the first quarter of 2013. How time does fly. If you have been anywhere near the old Downey Site you have seen that the old buildings are gone. The end of era has come. I imagine the barren dirt lot we see is as it was when farmer James Hughans Ranch first operated here. It has come full circle. Now begins the new development. The history and memories of what was once here are relegated to the stories and scrapbooks of the men and women who gave so much of their lives to this site.

ALF continues to work with the City of Downey, the owners and the developer to insure the history of the site will have a place in the new development. We are also engaged with the Columbia Memorial Space Center and their programs, including the “Inspiration” Space Shuttle Mockup.

In this newsletter edition be sure to read Stan’s Article on the site demolitions, a personal perspective. We must keep in mind that there is still much of the old facility remaining. The Building 1 Lakewood Blvd. structure (the Kaufmann Building), the buildings south of Imperial Highway, Building 305 and Building 3, have all been adaptively reused by different owners. So we still have a few memories preserved.

Spring is a time of renewal and so too ALF will be looking at its vision and mission and defining a new future. Our efforts to preserve the history of the site is still a priority as well as educating the public on what happened here and the contributions of the men and women who were part of California’s number 1 Industry – Aerospace.

Thanks for your continued support!

Bald Eagles Reunion Luncheon– Saturday, April 27, 2013

All Invited: Past/Current Employees or Fans & Friends of NAA, Rockwell & Boeing

Bald Eagles Reunion Luncheon
Saturday, April 27, 2013

Proud Bird Restaurant
11022 Aviation Blvd, Los Angeles, CA

Featuring Aviation Pioneer
R. A. “Bob” Hoover

For reservations, please make check payable to Bald Eagles, Inc. and send to:

Cathy Baker
Bald Eagles, Inc.
16372 Lakemont Lane
Huntington Beach, CA 92647
714-847-1678

cathy.baker12@gmail.com

Attendance Cost:
$35 advance reservation
$38 at door
(Meal ticket given at door)

Please include meal choice:
Beef, Chicken or Vegetarian

Register Early! Table seating will be assigned to pre-paid guests on first-come basis. Prefer to reserve a table? Organize a group of 4 to 8 and order tickets in one check.
As the need for large filming sites was waning, giving way to less expensive overseas productions and the use of computer graphics, the IRG company proposed a new development to the City of Downey – the Tierra Luna Marketplace. The Planning Commission quickly approved the concept and the Downey City Council followed with its approvals and paved the way for construction of “big box” supermarkets, hotels, commercial buildings, restaurants and movie theaters. The City expects that the site will bring in 3,000 new jobs and provide $4,000,000 of annual tax income when the construction is complete. The first phase, demolition and clearing of the existing structures, is nearly complete… the Dream is Demolished. It is expected that construction of the commercial buildings will begin by next fall. And so, the dream makes way for reality. Commercial buildings will be where once stood spaceships being built to venture to the stars. Wal-Marts and restaurants will stand in places where space pioneers made their dreams a reality, where the explorers of modern time made their plans and built their hardware to realize their goals. But no more – sadness prevails. President Obama’s cancellation of the Constellation manned Moon/Mars landing programs signaled the end of an era of exploration for the United States. We are doomed to let robots explore the stars for us. President Obama encouraged commercial companies to continue supplying the ISS with consumables and astronauts through the year 2020, and that’s OK. But what incentive or profit motive is there for these companies to return men to the moon, explore asteroids or Mars? Man’s baby steps on the surface of the moon signals the end of exploration that began thousands of years ago. It is indeed, very sad.