

Downey Studios - History

From- <http://www.thestudiotour.com/downey/chronology.php>

1929: Wealthy industrialist E.M. Smith purchased a 73 acre parcel from James Hughan, who farmed oranges and castor beans on the site. Smith's EMSCO Company had a division called Albatross, which manufactured small aircraft. In addition to manufacturing aircraft, Smith saw the former farm land in Downey as a perfect landing field. The oldest buildings on the Downey Site were built in 1929 to support the aircraft manufacturing effort.

1932: With the Great Depression lagging and poor sales, EMSCO leased the site to Champion Aircraft Corporation who manufactured small, inexpensive 2 seaters meant to fly at low altitudes and low (as little as 10 mph) speeds. Seven months later, Champion also left the site due to poor sales, and the site was leased to Security National Aircraft Corporation. Security was owned by Walter Kinner, who designed and built 2 planes for Amelia Earhart.

1936: Ownership continued to change hands and in 1936, Aviation Manufacturing Corporation moved their Vultee Aircraft Division into the Downey Site at the suggestion of Gerard Vultee, who once worked for EMSCO as their chief design engineer. Vultee primarily manufactured large military aircraft and sold planes to the governments of China, the Soviet Union, Turkey and Brazil.

1938: Vultee was working on a contract with the United States government and was flying back from Washington DC when he and his wife were killed in a plane crash.

1940s: The company forged on without him, and in the 1940s, the Army Air Corp awarded Vultee Aircraft a contract to make their training planes, the Vultee Valiant Basic Trainer. The contract was the largest order ever placed by the Army Air Corp. In need of additional space, LA Architect Gordon B. Kaufman designed space which would double Downey's size.

1941: Then came World War II and security at the plant was increased. In addition to the anti-aircraft gun which was mounted on the roof, the entire plant was camouflaged to blend in with the surrounding farmland. By 1941, the plant's output represented 15% of all the military aircraft produced in the U.S. and boasted the first powered assembly line in the aircraft industry. Among many different types of aircraft, Vultee produced the

largest number of heavy bombers (B-24 Liberators) in the country.

1950s / 60s: After the conclusion of the War, Vultee was awarded a contract to study long-range missile weapons systems. In the 1950's and 60's the site was officially known as AFP16 (Air Force Plant 16) and was working on developing the Navaho Missile, whose technology would give birth to our first space vehicles. In addition to all the innovation in technology, there were also many mergers and consolidations in the industry. Vultee gave way to Convair which became North American Aviation, which merged with Rockwell Standard and finally North American Rockwell Corporation.

Late 1950s: The plant became the location for developing the Hound Dog AGM Missile, which was the prototype for cruise missile technology. The company also won the contract to make the Little Joe Launch Vehicle to test the Mercury capsules.

1960: The company was working on the development of the X-15 aircraft, truly a pioneer in aviation history. The X-15 aircraft was the first winged craft to reach 4, 5 and 6 times the speed of sound, and fly at altitudes greater than 100,000 feet.

1961: The company was awarded 2 contracts from NASA: the Saturn SII launch vehicle and the Project Apollo Spacecraft Development program. With that, Downey became the hub of America's lunar mission.

1964: The AFP16 facility was transferred to NASA, and was now known as NASA Industrial Plant, Downey.

1972: In July 1972, at the end of the Apollo program, Downey was given the job of assembly and component manufacture of the Space Shuttle Orbiters. Over the course of the next 13 years, 4 Space Shuttle Orbiters (Columbia, Challenger, Discovery and Atlantis) were constructed at Downey. The Endeavor, which replaced the Challenger, was also manufactured at Downey. Downey would also be involved in the Skylab project.

1990s: During the 1990's, the workforce at Downey was decreased.

1996: Rockwell was bought out by Boeing North America. Boeing began consolidating its operations and announced that it would close the Downey plant permanently by the end of 1999.

1999: The city of Downey drafts plans for a shopping center, hospital and movie studio on the 160 acre site, and buys an initial 66 acres from the federal government.

Environmental surveys documented extensive contamination.

Trichloroethylene was found in high concentrations in soil and groundwater.

Exposure to elevated levels of the industrial solvent can cause nerve and organ damage, respiratory problems and impaired immunity.

Hexavalent chromium, used to plate metal and rust-proof aircraft engine parts, was also found in high concentrations in the soil in places. Exposure to hexavalent chromium can cause cold-like symptoms and damage to the nose, throat and lungs. Direct contact with the skin can cause rashes and sores.

2003: Industrial Realty Group takes over management of the site and in November buys around 60 acres and leases an additional 20 from the City of Downey. IRG still operates the studios today.

August 2003: A city inspector came upon a pile of dirt excavated from beneath the main studio building, called Building 1, to create an artificial lake for Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events. (The reservoir served as Lake Lachrymose in the film.) The inspector noticed patches of yellow-green soil in the pile, a possible sign of chromium contamination, according to records of the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board. The city halted all work at the site and had the soil tested. In some samples, measurements of total chromium -- a combination of hexavalent chromium and trivalent chromium -- were far above the federal safety standard, water board records show. The records say the chromium may have been discharged during the 1950s when a section of the building was used as a plating room.

November 2003 - January 2004: Cleanup crews separated the contaminated soil from clean soil and deposited it in a pile to be disposed of later off-site. During this process, an industrial hygienist monitored chromium levels in the air and found that they were safe, according to water board records. The pile of contaminated soil eventually grew to nearly 7,000 tons.

Feb 2 - Feb 10 2004: The contaminated soil is moved to a landfill site in Lancaster.

2004: Construction was underway in Building 1 of futuristic sets for The Island. The hangar was still being renovated and the roof was not water-tight, leading to mold growing on the walls. Some crew members developed respiratory problems.

2005: Unions and regulatory authorities become aware of health issues at Downey Studios.

2008: Stories appear in the press about a strange respiratory sickness, dubbed the 'Downey Flu' which is affecting crew members working at the studio. Despite a thorough cleanup following the years of aerospace work on the site (working with many toxic materials) many crew members have reported strange symptoms.

To date, no compensation claim has been successful against the studio and the film-workers union IATSE has reassessed the buildings at Downey Studios and found them to be a safe and healthy environment.

See LA Times article for more details

November 7 2008: A fire damaged the studio. The fire appeared to have been caused by an exploding propane tank on the backlot. Two Apollo space capsules were threatened by the fire (which were waiting to be installed at the nearby space museum). Fire fighters from Downey, Santa Fe Springs and LA County responded.

Video of the 2008 fire

August 2009: Press conference in LA about the Downey toxic dump health issues.

October 2012: The studio complex is demolished to make way for a new retail, office and entertainment complex.

2013: The site is now completely cleared of studio buildings, apart from the admin offices nearest Lakewood Blvd (remaining from the NASA days)

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