**Downey marks acquisition of former aerospace site**

By Kristopher Hanson  
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DOWNEY -- It's been 74 years since E.M. Smith purchased a modest orange grove along Imperial Highway and constructed a tiny aircraft plant and flight training school at the site. Though Smith’s airplane facility folded shortly after the stock market crash of 1929, the converted orange grove’s contribution to the nation’s legacy in air and later space travel had only just begun.

The 160-acre facility, where many of the world's most innovative airplanes, rockets, missiles and spacecraft were designed, engineered and built between 1929 and 1999, was officially opened to the public for the first time in more than 50 years on Thursday. To mark the city's acquisition of the former aerospace plant and celebrate its future as a film studio, retail center, hospital and business complex, city officials held a celebration on the grounds where scientists successfully planned man's first trip to the moon. "This is what you might consider to be sacred ground," said Jerry Blackburn, who worked at the site for Rockwell International and Boeing between 1964 and the plant's closing in 1999. "There's a real spirit of creativity and innovation here that I hope will carry on with the film studios and other new tenants. I don't know what it is about this site, but it's very special."

Thursday's event marked the end of five years of negotiations among Downey and state and federal officials in the city's desire to take over the property, which in its heyday employed more than 30,000 aerospace workers. The city plans to convert the site into five quadrants that will house a 55-acre film and television production facility, 34-acre retail center, 30-acre Kaiser Permanente hospital complex, and 28-acre business and office center, with 13 acres set aside for a space museum, public park and school. Commercial developers were on hand with displays and models to give the public an idea of what the new site will look like after many of the old buildings are demolished and new ones built in the coming months.

Eclipse Development Group President Douglas Gray, whose group is planning the retail center on the site's northern end, said several new tenants have signed on to lease space at the site in recent weeks. In addition to Kohl's, Ross, Best Buy and Bally Total Fitness, such retailers as Petsmart, Michael's Arts and Crafts, Linens N' Things, Marshall's and Red Robin have signed leases, Gray said. The ceremony included a few words from former Congressman Steve Horn, who helped the city acquire the property from NASA during his time in Washington. In return, city officials named a new street being constructed through the center of the property after Horn. City leaders have said the site, once completely developed, is expected to net city coffers up to $1 million annually through lease agreements, taxes and other fees from retailers and film productions. "This is the beginning of something new and exciting for residents in Downey," said Downey City Councilman Kirk Cartozian. "Today is just a chance for them to get a little feel of what they can expect in the future."
One of my favorite historians concerning the Downey NASA site is Russ Murray, who began his career at North American Aviation in 1961. Here are some excerpts from "Cradle Of The Cosmic Age", a comprehensive history of Downey's NASA property. Larry Latimer

“When it comes time to memorialize the origins of spaceflight, there is an industrial plant in Downey, Calif., that would certainly qualify as a shrine.

This Downey plant was the birthplace, homestead and laboratory for much of America’s wondrous space technology—the space age equivalent of Orville and Wilbur’s bicycle shop. It is here in Downey that space structure, guidance, and power were prominently pioneered. And it’s here that the celebrated Apollo command spacecraft was created and manufactured.

An odd configuration of buildings set amid the urban trackdom of the southeast Los Angeles metro mass, the Downey facility is impressive only in the size of its sprawl, and fascinates only in the contemplation of its architectural strata. It is now a National Aeronautics and Space Administration property and occupied by Rockwell International Corporation, but its legend pre-dates present labeling. The cursive brickwork of its front offices along busy Lakewood Blvd. gives clue to the plant’s beginning: streamline modern, early 1930’s.

The Downey plant was begun in 1929 by the E.M. Smith Company, which built airplanes under the Emsco name until it failed in the 1932 depression. The next resident was the Security Aircraft Corporation, headed by Walter Kinner, a noted producer of sport planes. It was a short stay. In 1936 the Vultee Aircraft Corporation moved in.

Behind the front offices is the saw tooth roofline of the vast factory bay where Vultee assembled over 11,000 military planes during World War II. The most famous of these was the BT-13, a low wing trainer that was inspiringly christened “Valiant”. The present occupant, Rockwell International (see North American Aviation Inc.), entered in 1947.

Not so really long ago, in 1969, U.S. astronauts Neil Armstrong and Mike Collins, shortly out of quarantine after their world stirring Apollo 11 lunar landing mission, spoke to an assembly of Downey plant workers. Said Collins: “...the trip to the moons started right here.”

In a material sense, that was so. They laid the keel and constructed the crew ship (command and service module) of the Apollo space vehicle at Downey, whereupon it was transported to Cape Kennedy and rocketed to lunar orbit. It took the Apollo astronauts less than two and one-half days to go from earth to moon, but it was a tedious quarter-century of travel along the advanced technology trail before the U.S. arrive flight ready for the venture.

American space capabilities traces to German missile projects of World War II, but nowhere was this elementary missile science more significantly applied and advanced than at Downey… (Continued in “Cradle Of The Cosmic Age”)

“Where should the U.S. space shrines be? At a field near Auburn, Mass., where Robert H. Goddard fired the first liquid propulsion rocket in 1926; at White Sands, N.M., where most of the early postwar missile testing was conducted and near space first brushed; at Cape Kennedy, Fla., where the first space missions were gloriously launched? Or maybe the Langley Research Center in Virginia where the Apollo plan was conceived or possibly Houston, Texas. Where the first message from men on the moon was received? There are so many, so many significant landmarks along the way to U.S. space capability. Downey?

Perhaps Downey is the most consequential of all. The plant has been integral in the U.S. missile and space effort from the beginning. It has been a creative source of space vehicle concepts. It has been the crucible for dramatically advanced space hardware. It has performed down at the whip crack end of responsibility for engineering and manufacturing to give substance to the space dream. From Downey, America went into space and to the moon and soon to commerce and habitation in the cosmos".
And in the beginning….was Emsco
Aerospace Legacy Foundation - Membership

The Aerospace Legacy Foundation has been an active participant with the City of Downey in creating the Columbia Memorial Space Science Learning and History Center.

$10.00 Basic yearly membership     $50.00 Sustaining or supporting membership
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More info:  562-291-1399 Larry Latimer  562-941-7735 Jerry Blackburn

www.aerospacelegacyfoundation.org

About us:
The Aerospace Legacy Foundation was founded in 1995 by a group of scientists, engineers, business people, educators, retirees, and the public at large. Incorporated as a nonprofit foundation in 1997, the foundation seeks historical integrity and educational use of a reasonable portion of the NASA/Boeing site in Downey, which has been acquired by the City of Downey.

Our meetings for 2003:
October 19th
November 16th
No meeting in December.

Our meetings for 2004:
Start with January 18th, 2004. Be there or be square!

Updates and important events (volunteers needed)

AIAA Space 2003 Conference— September 23,24,25 at the Long Beach Convention Center. AIAA is the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Contact Jerry Blackburn at 562-941-7735 to help with our booth for this prestigious conference.

The next event is The Society of Experimental Test Pilots 47th annual Symposium and Banquet. This will be held at The Westin Bonaventure Hotel and Suites on September 24-27th. For directions and info call 1-213-624-1000. To volunteer, contact Andy Monson at 562-929-3441. The address of the symposium is 404 South Figueroa St in Los Angeles in the Pasadena Room Exhibit Hall.

Our activities at the NASA site since April have been exciting. We have been very successful in organizing historical materials and archives in Building 14. What we did not expect, was to recover so many interesting and important items from within the site. We have secured an area in Building 290 facing Clark Ave. to eventually set up shop to disseminate, clean, and archive a massive amount of historical items that will eventually be used for the future Learning and History Center.

We wish to thank the City of Downey and Industrial Real Estate Group for all of their help and cooperation.