



**NOW AND THEN** — Old Star Airport as it appears now (left) and as it was in years gone by. The airport will be replaced soon by an apartment complex and shopping center. Today's photo shows

Levittown homes in background. Roosevelt Drive-in Theater in center and the Country Manor Apartments at right. About a dozen planes are parked at the airport, near the hangar.

## Old Star Airport just a twinkle of colorful past

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — The author, John Connolly, a Levittown Realtor, writes of his subject with some authority. His father, the late Thomas Connolly Sr., was an aviation pioneer. Much of the author's early life was spent at Silver Star Airport while his father flew passengers and repaired aircraft. (Tom Connolly was considered a top mechanic as well as an expert pilot. He was associated with Clarence Chamberlain when the latter made the second transatlantic flight. Tom Connolly's doctor reads like a history of early aviation. He was chief instructor for the Chamberlain School of Aeronautics in Philadelphia in the early 1940s and for a brief time after World War II taught aeronautics at the Wood Street School in Bristol for the State of Pennsylvania.)

By JOHN J. CONNOLLY

Bucks County, Pennsylvania, is an area rich in historical significance. It is criss-crossed by highways of early American history and its landscape is dotted with famous landmarks. The lower end of the county—once a quiet, predominantly farm area—has, in the last 20 years, been overwhelmed by progress—a progress which has not been unanimously welcomed, and a progress which has not come without pain.

The landmarks of colonial times have, for the most part, been carefully preserved or restored, and even the least of these are noted by a roadside marker. Landmarks of

more recent history, however, tend to melt into oblivion—practically unnoticed.

One such landmark of just a few years ago, the Old Star Airport, (originally known as Silver Star) will soon disappear—to be replaced by the concrete and steel, the asphalt and brick, of a maze of apartment buildings, a shopping mall, and assorted jet age necessities.

This 87-acre remnant of the early days of American aviation is part of the vast area of rolling farm and assembled for the proposed "Mini-City" soon to be constructed on the edge of Levittown, in Middletown Township.

With the passing of Old Star goes the last echo of an era in Bucks County that was part of a world-wide love affair with the danger, thrills, and adventure that symbolized pioneer aviation. This little field in Langhorne and the men and women who were part of it (duplicated in a hundred little towns of the world), caught the imagination of the populace for a brief, but unforgettable, period of time.

The pioneers in aviation rarely lived up to the stereotype depicted in the motion pictures of the day. They were, nonetheless, a special breed of men and women.

Until the uniforms of World War II there was probably no better known synonym of courage and adventure, no more awe-inspiring trademark, than the helmet and goggles and leather jacket of the American barnstormers. And once you were caught up in the propwash, once you had a taste of the smell of airplane dope, you could be hooked for life.

Thousands of people pass by Old Star each day, but probably only a few ever notice the long, silent rows of small private planes anchored down against the wind. Fewer still ever see a plane take off or land at this airport.

The year-round snow fence, a truck graveyard, a Go-Go Bar and Grill, a defunct gasoline station, and other assorted honky-tonk effectively obscure from view what is left of the main hangars.

In a way, these eyesores

are a blessing—they shield the once proud buildings from the stares and scorn of passersby.

And once upon a time the "Star" was rightfully proud. It was a flourishing, exciting enterprise and a part of history being made. The hangars were gleaming white, the windsock was full-blown, and everywhere the freshly painted Silver Star trademark indicated that the sky was the limit.

Colorful bi-planes of every description belched smoke and fire as they warmed up on the hangar aprons. Pilots and mechanics spoke a language all their own—and there were people—eager, excited people. The atmosphere was one not found anywhere else.

Silver Star was founded in 1928 by William H. (Bill) Engle.

It was a typical small airfield of the day, established without the bother of the zoning or building restrictions of today, catering to local, privately owned aircraft, offering hangar or mooring space, fuel and repair service. It

also served as a stop-off for cross-country flights from nearby airfields and more than a few times was used for emergency landings.

Major sources of revenue were fees from flight instruction, charter flights, and, of course, passenger flights. Many a passing motorist was attracted by the sign that read: "Five Minutes for Five Dollars."

There were frequent stunt flying shows and parachute jumps. Silver Star often attracted hundreds of spectators on Sunday afternoons in the summer for the "Five o'clock jump."

This never-failing thrill was the cause of many a traffic jam on the Lincoln Highway in the '20s and '30s. These and other promotions, such as burying a man alive—a curious fad of the '30s—kept the airport relatively solvent even during the depression years.

A very important part of the scene—the original concession stand—where many a "close call" was exaggerated over a cup of coffee, is now a part of the bar and grill in front of the hangars.

Mishaps were frequent but, for the most part, were minor. Repairmen were busy patching torn fabric and tuning or rebuilding engines. The over-all safety record of the Star was, however, quite remarkable for that era—an era of "dead reckoning" and "flying-by-the-seat-of-your-pants."

Many prominent persons visited the Star over the years, among them Col. Clarence Chamberlain, the second successful transatlantic flyer.

Colonel Chamberlain also piloted the largest plane ever to land at the field—a huge "Curtis Condor." A news item in a local paper in 1931 notes that the W. Paul Du Pont's of Wilmington landed at the field to attend the auto races at Langhorne at the invitation of Bill Engle.

Bill Engle cherishes a souvenir of the one and only air mail flight from the field in May 1938—a flight from Silver Star to S. D. Wilson Airport in Philadelphia.

Aside from normal charter flights, the field often was the scene of the small dramas that go unnoticed but make up our everyday lives—transporting a seriously ill person, emergency wildlife feeding expeditions, and the unlikely but factual experience of airport personnel assisting in the capture of several desperadoes from a Trenton prison break.

During World War II scores of residents volunteered to man an around-the-clock air-



**FIRST STUDENT** — Engle (right) is shown in front on one of the early airplanes with William Keim, his first student pilot.

craft warning service from a tower at the highest point of the field.

The log-book will show that the enthusiasm that gripped the public The youngest passenger was an infant of under six months of age and the oldest recorded was a 93-year old grandmother.

The prosperity and sophistication that stemmed from World War II signalled the end of aviation's appeal to the masses. To people who had become accustomed to seeing scores or hundreds of planes flying overhead at one time, there was no longer any feeling of awe. The death and destruction of the war dulled the urge to seek thrills and excitement.

Besides, there were other preoccupations—housing, automobiles, and a new

phenomenon—television. Bill Engle, back from wartime duties as a test pilot, reasoned, however, that even though the spectator days were over, the private aircraft industry was just beginning. He envisioned a vastly expanded Silver Star airport and made far-reaching plans.

Unfortunately the bankers who were needed to finance such expansion did not share his optimism and confidence. After several unsuccessful attempts to obtain backing for his plans Bill reluctantly decided, in 1948, to give up his interest in Silver Star. At his insistence, the name went with him, and the field has since been known as Old Star.

From 1948 to present day the airport has had a rather humdrum existence. A few new hangars were built and more planes came in to roost. The GI Bill kept flight in-

struction profitable for a while and an occasional air show was promoted. For the most part, however, this period has been one of disinterest and decline. The present site is one of neglect and hopelessness.

Engle, who lives at 303 W. Fairview Ave., Langhorne Manor, owns a lumber firm in Oakford.

There are still a few of the original aviators and mechanics living in the immediate area, and there are hundreds more who shared the adventure and excitement as spectators during the heyday of Silver Star.

There will be a few sighs when the inevitable wrecker's ball goes into action, but the weary, old hangars seem to be resigned. They had a glorious past and, when the end finally comes, just maybe someone will put up a roadside marker.



**FOUNDER** — William Engle, (right) founded the Old Star Airport, originally called Silver Star, in 1928. He is shown here with one of the foremost parachutists of the day, Brownie Brown.