

# Virginia Aviation History Project



## **75 Years of Rolling on the Grass!**

By Linda Burdette

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Darrell Morgan Kellam owned a grocery store in Weirwood, Virginia which specialized in produce and blue coal. But sometime after his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1926 he had a life-changing experience. Barnstormers were making their rounds in those days and inevitably one came to his town. The barnstormer took people on flights around the area and Kellam was one of them. He was hooked. It ended with the barnstormer teaching Kellam to fly.

Kellam bought his first plane and was delighted with it. But his first flight was more than memorable. He landed in a recently cleared corn field and one of the corn stalks tore a hole in the wing. So he decided to take another approach. He converted land he owned on the Dunston Farm near Weirwood into a grass strip; with his home right off the approach end of what became his runway. It was the first licensed airport on the Virginia Eastern Shore. Captain Darrell, as he was known, established the strip known as Kellam Field in 1933. In 1936 his company, Eastern Shore Flying Service, Inc., received a public airport use license. At that time he had a Curtiss Robin and a Pitcairn Mailwing and all the hangars and buildings were on the east side of the field. He soon had two hangars, an ops shed, and a dust shed for crop dusting. There were two runways, both grass, and a fueling station on the east side. (Later, the state installed a pump underground on the west side. The building on the west side was built in the 1940s.)

The airfield quickly became a family undertaking because, in 1937, Captain Darrell's daughter, Ann, became the first Eastern Shore woman to make a solo airplane flight. Miss Kellam received her instruction at the Field and the Northampton Times reported that although numerous men in the county were receiving flight instruction at the Field, Miss Kellam was the first woman. The newspaper also reported that the field's popularity was growing due to "favorable impressions gained by those who visit there on Saturdays and Sundays when special flights are available to those who do not wish to take instruction."

In 1939 the Eastern Shore Flying Service moved its operations to Norfolk, but harder times were to come when in 1941 all civilian flying was halted to promote the war effort. However, Kellam Field did not sit idle. It hosted the Eastern Shore Squadron of the Civil Air Patrol. Considering the fear during the war that the Axis ships or submarines would try to attack the U.S. mainland, the Civil Air Patrol was considered vital to the war effort.

After the war, the airfield received a boost when the prohibition on civilian flight ended and Harry McCann returned from the war after some harrowing experiences. He had bailed out of his airplane with his crew and spent two weeks missing in action before he was rescued. McCann entered a partnership with Kellam to again operate Eastern Shore Flying Service from Kellam Field and as part of this business agreement, McCann began running the airport. This was the start of a boom time for the airport. McCann clearly knew the value of creating new pilots and encouraged flight instruction. It is reported that between 1945 and 1948 nearly 100 people were taught to fly at Kellam Field.

One person he recruited as a flight instructor was George Colonna, a local boy who graduated school in 1946 and got his pilot's license then. Since he knew Harry McCann, he came to Kellam to work. He became a very active flight instructor, a part-time crop duster, and a monitor for the Virginia Fisheries Division.

But the airfield was the site of many of the humorous incidents for which pilots are famous the world over. One such incident involved geese hunting. Hunting was certainly a different type of sport during the 40s and 50s. Jeff Walker, a local pilot and life-long Eastern Shore resident, related that his father would hunt with Harry McCann. It seems that an elderly widow, the Widow Kellam (not related to Darrell Kellam), lived on the river and fed the wild geese. She considered them pets. Walker and McCann would fly by in a J-3 Cub with the windows dropped and shoot at the geese. H.M. Arnold would be on the beach picking up the geese as they fell. The Widow Kellam did not appreciate the efficiency of this method and called the law on the hunters, leading to some interesting defense techniques and to a lifelong enmity between the Widow and the pilots at the airport.

Even though the airfield was never lighted, there were some night operations on the field. Like many rural airports, the pilots didn't have the luxury of planning their trips solely in the daylight. However, some local farmers had mercury lights which the pilots used for navigation aids. Jeff Walker pointed out that the Snyder Farm had a couple of lights just off the runway and the pilots could line up on those lights. For that reason, they always landed to the north at night. One particular night operation can only be told now, years later, because the participants are deceased. It seems that a group of pilots came up with a unique duck hunting method. Jeff Walker's cousin was a fish spotter and he would fly to Brick Island and feed the ducks there. During duck season, they would land on the beach and come back in about 45 minutes with a gunny sack of ducks. They



Civil Air Patrol meeting at Kellam Field, ca 1947. Seated, left to right: Parks W. Ward, Harry McCann Sr., LT Dan Wilkins, Capt. Harry W. McCann, Jr., LT H.M. Terry

would do a low pass over the airfield, as though they were checking for wildlife on the runway and would kick the bag of ducks out of the baggage door off the end of the runway. If the local sheriff or game warden got wind of their activities and met them at the airport, the erstwhile hunters were “clean as a whistle” with no game to be seen. They would then return the next day to hunt down their gunny sack of ducks. (Jeff also recounted how, just before he entered the military this same cousin took him flying UNDER the North Channel Bridge. Jeff remembers looking at the roadbed of the bridge through the top of the airplane, a feat he’s never been tempted to repeat.)

Another (actually legal) activity at Kellam Field was the “Breakfast Club”. A number of airplanes, including S-10 Cubs and Super Cruisers would fly to Hog Island, with young children like Jeff Walker sitting in the baggage compartments, and land on the beach. They would cook breakfast on the beach, relax for a few hours and

head back to Kellam Field. Many warm family memories were built this way and many youngsters were inspired to take up flying.



George Colonna in Civil Air Patrol uniform beside a CAP airplane

One major event occurred on December 12, 1948 when over 500 spectators gathered to see a flying competition at Kellam Field. There were 17 aircraft in the competition and Dan P. Custis, flying his Piper L-4, won.

Unfortunately sad times were ahead for the airport when Harry McCann died in 1949 at the age of 28. An Aerocoupe dealer wanted to convince Harry to sell his airplanes and a pilot came to Kellam Field to take him on a demonstration. Harry didn’t particularly like Aerocoupes and didn’t really want to go, but

he politely accepted. The airplane went into the trees at the end of the runway and although the pilot suffered only a broken leg, Harry was killed. The airfield still belonged to Darrell Kellam and, after that Jim Charnock handled airplane repair and hangar maintenance.

In the 50s and early 60s, Dave Acree and George Colonna worked for the Virginia Fisheries Division (now Marine Resources) and they flew the Division’s Seabee out of Kellam. George joked that the Seabee barely had the power to taxi, much less fly. The Seabee was used to patrol the Bay along the border with Maryland to enforce Virginia’s fishing rights. During one part of the year, Virginia oystermen were allowed to dredge oysters on the Virginia side of the Bay, but Maryland would not allow its oystermen to dredge. Inevitably some oystermen crossed the state boundaries. Since the Seabee was an amphibious plane, Colonna and Acree could land to enforce restrictions. On one particular occasion, the pair discovered Maryland oystermen dredging in Virginia waters and landed to investigate. Acree boarded the boat and one of the crew attacked him with an iron gear shift. Acree was armed and, not wanting to kill the man, shot him in the leg. Unfortunately the bullet severed the man’s femoral artery and he died quickly. The rest of the crew immediately started toward Acree who barely escaped by breaking the window of the airplane and crawling through. They cast off and escaped, doing a high-speed taxi back to the town dock. They were so concerned about a mob from Maryland coming for Acree that he hid in the sheriff’s office for almost a week. However, no complaints or charges were ever filed. Presumably the Maryland crowd calmed down and realized that attacking someone

with an iron gear shift pretty much justified self defense. Colonna and Acree continued patrolling the Bay and Colonna, especially, continued his work for the Fisheries Division for many years.

George Colonna and Jim Charnock also began a crop dusting business on the side. They had two Stearman bi-planes with 220 Continental engines and dust hoppers. They had a unique and probably dangerous method of dusting. Jim would load the initial load of poisonous dust into the hopper and George would take off to spread the dust. When the dusting run was over, George would return to the field and wouldn't even shut off the engine. Jim would plop the bags of dust on the wing and George would fill the hopper, with the dust going everywhere. George eventually lost his medical certificate although no one remembers whether the cause could be traced back to his exposure to some fairly potent insecticides. He lived until 1970 and is fondly remembered by all the pilots in Weirwood.

During the 60s fish spotting was one of the big occupations at many airfields along the ocean and since Kellam had a fuel pit, it was popular among the spotters. A large number of the planes at Kellam Field were used for fish spotting; the spotters flew planes such as Super Cruisers and later 172s.



**Captain Darrell Kellam preparing for a flight, ca 1976**

On Sundays, those same planes would be used at the airfield for a little fun. One pilot (often Jeff Walker's father) would fly up and drop a roll of toilet tissue. The Super Cruisers and J-3s would put on quite a show flying around and trying to cut the unrolling tissue. The winner was the one who cut the roll the most times before it hit the ground.

Captain Darrell Kellam took his last airplane ride in 1976, piloted by a local man, Scott Page. He died in 1979 and the field was sold to C.J. Prettyman. Prettyman did not personally run the airport. Richard Baggett and his family had a crop dusting business there, using Stearman airplanes with 450 Pratt & Whitney engines. Baggett kept the airport running and maintained, and although it was not always as busy as it had been in the past, there were at least four or five Stearman crop dusters based there. (Jeff Walker also relates that upon his return from his Navy tour, he purchased both Stearmans, by then badly damaged, for \$6,000 with the idea that he would open his own crop dusting business. His wife quickly nixed that idea and Jeff still has at least one propeller from those old Stearman.) In addition to the Stearman bi-planes, the Baggetts also had a Tri-Pacer, a Cherokee 180, and a Cessna 182 which was kept at Kellam for years before they moved it elsewhere. The Baggetts stayed at the airport for decades and are largely credited with keeping it viable during this time. Even the state airplane used for monitoring the fishing grounds remained there until the 1980s.

In 2003, the airport was purchased by Gordon Campbell and renamed Campbell Field. Campbell is one of those wonderful pilots who want to preserve the past. He is keeping the rural, home-grown character of the airport. He understands that in times past these small airports were lifelines for remote communities as well as the source of fun and dreams for children of all ages. He suffered a setback of sorts in February 2008 when the oldest, and probably the first, hangar collapsed in high winds. He believes this wooden hangar was built in the

1930s by Captain Darrell to house his English-made two-place Bi-plane, an Avro Avian. At 70 years of age, the hangar was in sad shape, but remained productive and was used as an aircraft hangar right up until the end, housing a Fisher ultralight airplane. When the winds hit, the hangar seemed to understand its duty and although one side began to buckle, the hangar remained upright just long enough for the owner to remove the aircraft. Captain Darrell would have been proud!



The scene at a recent Soup on Sunday Fly-In at Campbell Field, Weirwood, VA

Gordon Campbell is keeping the grass runway and has no plans to ever pave it. His motto is “Come Roll on the Grass!” Well, folks have been doing that for 75 years now at the field and how wonderful that they can keep doing it!

Sources:

Campbell Field Website, <http://www.campbellfieldairport.com/>

Interview with Jeffrey Walker, May 4, 2008

Interview with Page Scott, May 4, 2008

Interview with T.A. Holland, September 7, 2008



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