

Memories Will Die With Airport

By GREG CHILSON

BETHANY— What happens when an airport dies?

"Well, I guess a lot of memories die," said Curtis Hewitt as he and a son, Curtis, Jr., pushed their now-wingless J-3 Piper Cub into their garage.

"It's too bad, that's all," said Mrs. Harry Himmel. "We never thought it would happen."

Mrs. Himmel stood by the family's 1946 Taylorcraft, already partly dismantled and parked in their cellar.

These were just two of the plane owners left without a field last week when the Bethany Airport shut down to end a section of Connecticut's aviation history.

"I guess the glider club's going up to Johnnycake,"

said Hewitt of another segment of the airfield's users. "We'll go down to Ansonia in the spring."

Johnnycake is an airport in Burlington and Ansonia is one in that town.

At the field off Route 63, the wind was moving in waves through long grass along the north-south turf runway and on the runway itself there's a big white "X" marked with chalk to tell pilots: "Closed, don't land here."

Far up the runway past the Quonset-hut type main hangar and jumble of wartime "T" hangars, a motorcyclist rode in big circles. A junk car sat in the weeds behind the hangars and on one side near the empty office was a plane carrying car trailer, broken and rusty.

The airport, opened in 1924 and regarded as the oldest in continuous operation in the state if not all New England, shut up shop Wednesday when the last plane was moved.

The owner bought up the balance of a lease held by Al Porto, airport manager. An offer was made to sell the property to the town but the price and Bethany's previous commitment to buy other property under the state "open space" program precluded such a sale.

The closing will pave the way for construction of a new commercial television transmitting tower in Hamden which the Federal Aviation Agency said couldn't go up until the airport shut down because the tower would be

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an aviation hazard for planes using the field.

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A former employe of the airport, Hewitt said most of the private owners like himself and Mrs. Himmel — some two dozen in all beside the glider club, have moved their planes to New Haven, Meriden, Mt. Tobe and other nearby airports or just took them home.

Some plan to use the new airport at Oxford when it opens, he said, but that's a long time off. Hewitt shrugged at the apparent folly of promoting aviation by building hundreds of new airfields across the country while at the same time closing small private airports like Bethany.

"They're closing Armonk, too," he said of a small field along Route 22 in New York State near the Kensico Reservoir. "They're going to build a housing development there."

Hewitt, now an engineer with Sikorsky Division of United Aircraft, said he personally prefers small, private airports but feels there's a need for them outside his own sentiments.

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Harris Whittemore of Naugatuck developed the field in the 1920s after he returned from service with the Army Air Forces in World War I. Hewitt recalled that in addition to flying service there, the field was a base for development of new planes, including one speedster built for the national air races at Cleveland.

Talking about the airport's past, he recalled the crashes over the years, a big fire which he was the first to spot on Jan. 24, 1942 when the main hangar burned to the ground with the loss of a half-dozen planes, the time two teenage boys twice tried to go for an aerial joyride and in the process wrecked two planes, the times they mounted small planes on skis and used the field in mid-winter, and what old timers said about the time the field was first developed.

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A commercial pilot, with an instructor's rating, he put it this way:

"When you learn to fly at a big, busy airport like New Haven, it's like learning to drive a car in the middle of New York City."

While its importance in aviation has dwindled with the growth of the industry, Bethany Airport had a key, early role. It was one of the first stops on an air mail route when that form of postal delivery was instituted. It was related to Colonial Airways which merged in the develop-

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