

The author of this article lives and works on unceded territory of the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, bands of Chinook, Tualatin Kalapuya, Molalla and many other Tribes who made their homes along the Columbia River.

Structures: Rankin Airport

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Wikipedia tells us that

John Gilbert "Tex" Rankin (January 20, 1894, Texas – February 23, 1947 Klamath Falls) was an aerobatic pilot, barnstormer, air racer, and flight instructor from the 1920s to the 1940s. Born in Texas on January 20, 1894, Rankin began flying in 1913, when airplanes were still considered a new oddity

If you search for “Tex Rankin” on Google you will find a lot of biographical and aeronautical information, and a long list of accomplishments, including national championships and world records. The man is a legend. Here is a picture of him, next to a plane with identification number 13 and with a black cat that accompanied him on his flights, tempting fate.



His career and accomplishments, however, are not what concerns us here. We are mostly interested in what Tex Rankin had to do with Piedmont. Or, more precisely, with North Portland, close to the Piedmont boundary. Much of the information in this blog entry comes from "Black Cats and Outside Loops. Tex Rankin: Aerobatic Ace" by Walt Bohrer (Piere Publishers Inc, 1989).

In 1920 Rankin started his first flying school in Walla Walla, Washington. In 1923 he moved his school to Portland, bought two planes from the Oregon, Washington & Idaho Airplane Company, initially operating from Guilds Lake Flying Field. When Guilds Lake was closed down in 1924, Rankin moved to Pearson Army Airfield in Vancouver, across the river, and then in 1925 to the sands of Mock's Bottom, in current Overlook.



Rankin's first Portland airfield at Mock's Bottom, no more than an elongated sand lot. Over 2,000 people were taught to fly here. Wooded Swan Island, which later became Portland's municipal airport, can be seen across the channel.

After outgrowing Mock's Bottom, Rankin moved temporarily in 1928 to Swan Island Municipal Airport, which had opened in 1927. Here is a picture of that airport, the short-lived predecessor of Portland International.



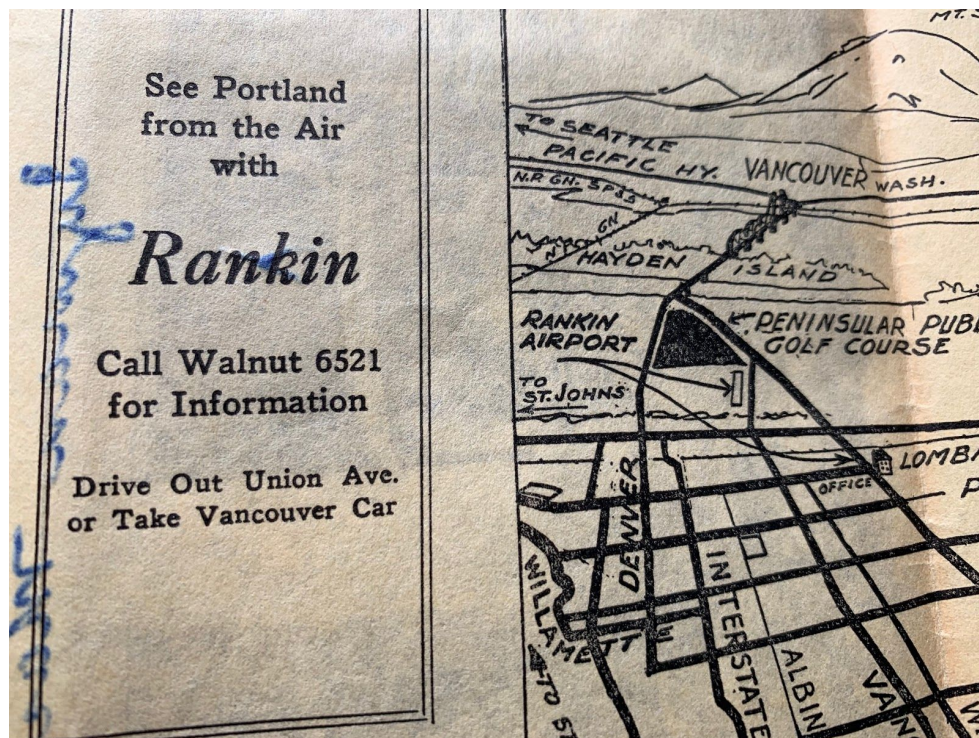
In the Sunday Oregonian of October 26, 1930, we read

On the stretch of land west of Union avenue and beyond Lombard Street, once an expanse of marsh and lake bottom where thousands of ducks settled down with a great whirring of wings even in comparatively recent years, is located the Tex Rankin airport, Portland's second first-class flying field -- ranking next to the magnificent airport built by the Port of Portland on the sand spit known to pioneers as Swan Island.

The article goes on to describe Rankin Airport in glowing terms. One hundred acres, runways in three directions in the form of a triangle, respectively 3800, 3200, and 2500 feet long. Also seven hangars, and a planned administration building, shop, and lecture rooms. Here is a nice picture, presumably with Union Avenue on the right. The grading was a lot of work.

Rankin had leased the land, I am not sure who owned it at the time. Here is a clip from a 1930 map with an Rankin advertisement. It shows clearly where the airport was, west of the

Vancouver Extension, north of the Slough. It also shows where the office of the flying school was located.



The crew of 20 men with a dozen machines has taken out many of the hillocks on the field in the past week -- moving 35,000 cubic yards to the extension of Vancouver Avenue on the south end of the field.



The office of the flying school in 1929-1930 was at 1576 Union Avenue N, on the southeast corner of Union Avenue and Lombard, the corner that now features the renal clinic. Rankin leased and converted a large garage.



Ground school, offices, and shop facilities of the Rankin School of Flying, located on the corner of Union Avenue and Lombard Street, Portland, Oregon, during 1929 and early '30s.

Flying was extremely popular at the time, and for a while the Rankin Flying Service of Portland was the largest school of its type in the country, with over 600 registered pupils, and quite a few of them were women. One of his pupils was the famous Portland stunt flyer Dorothy Hester, who also became an instructor in Rankin's flight school.

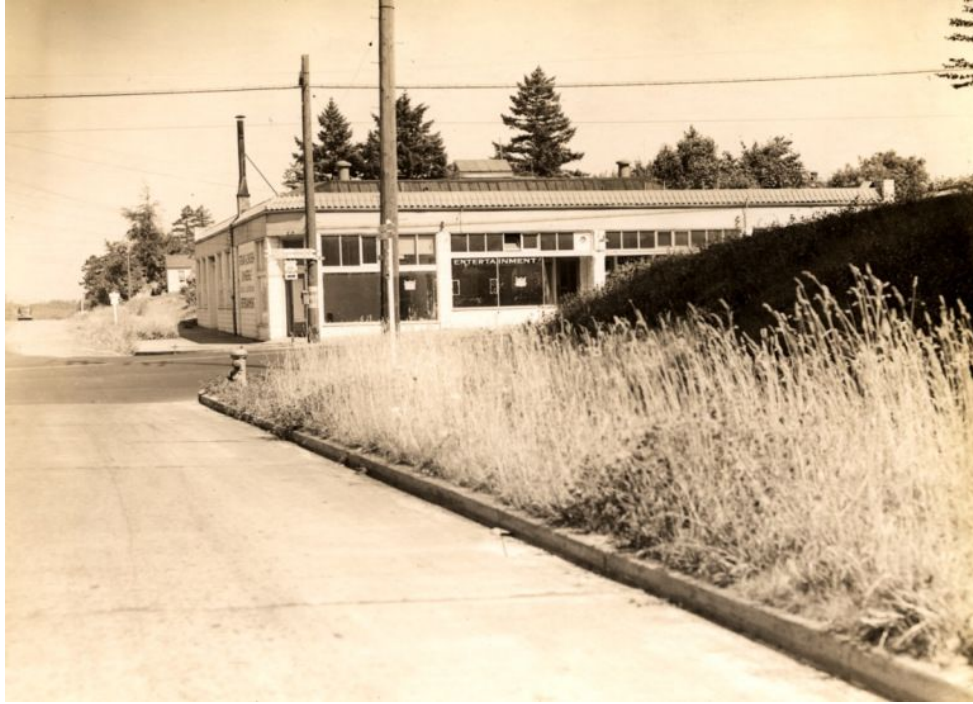
But after the initial success the business did not do particularly well. The depression hit the flying business really hard. Tex reported said that the business was in a tailspin. Brother Dick Rankin shows up in the news, and seems to take over the leading role. The Sunday Oregonian of September 25, 1932, says

Formation of the Union Avenue Flying Service, which will operate a flying school and air taxi service on the Rankin Airport on Union Avenue, near Columbia Boulevard, was announced yesterday by Dick Rankin, head of the concern.

And on August 6, 1933, we read

Establishment of his own aviation school, air taxi service, and airplane sales agency on Swan Island Airport was announced yesterday by Tex Rankin, who has operated aviation companies in the Pacific northwest for the last 15 years.

After than, Rankin Airport is only rarely in the news, and only for two more years. Things rapidly went downhill. In 1934 Emery Dental took off without a pilot's license in a plane that was not airworthy. He crashed, and seriously wounded himself and a female passenger. No more mention of the Rankin brothers. Later references in the same year even described the site as "Old Rankin Airport". No more airplanes. A beer garden dance hall was proposed in 1934, turkey and pigeon shoots were organized by Bob Miller's Gun Club, and in 1935 Rankin Airport is mentioned only in small advertisements of people trying to sell livestock. Sic transit gloria mundi. Here is a photo of the corner of Union and Lombard in 1937, with the proud flying school building still standing, but transformed into some kind of entertainment center.



In 1936 Tex Rankin moved to California, first to Hollywood and Van Nuys, and then, under contract with the Air Force, to Tulare, where he started a new Rankin Airfield and a new flying school. He was killed at Klamath Falls in a plane crash at age 53 on Sunday February 23, 1947.