

Banff's Field of Dreams

by Bob Kirkby - March 2002

I turned onto a one-mile final approach for runway 18, still at circuit height. This was intentional as the terrain one mile back is about 200 feet above aerodrome elevation. The grade is so steep that the flight supplement contains a warning not to take off on runway 36. I set up for a steep approach and controlled my rate of descent with liberal application of side-slip. Once I felt comfortable that I wasn't about to prune the tops of the 40 foot fir trees under my wheels I took a moment to absorb the breathtaking beauty of my surroundings.

A quarter-mile off my right wingtip the magnificent granite face of Cascade mountain paralleled my approach. Rising over 5000 feet above the airstrip in front of me the water of the falls, from which the mountain gets its name, tumbles and churns down the mountain side scattering sunbeams in its path. From below the rich fragrance of pine needles fills my nostrils, replacing the pungent odour of engine exhaust I have learned to accept as the cost of flying an open cockpit biplane. To further heighten my aromatic ecstasy the sweet smell of burning logs wafts up from the Cadet camp off to my left.



The author landing at Banff. Photo courtesy Tina Simpson.

Four miles across the valley the 10,000 foot peak of Mount Rundle reaches for the sun, where my father once climbed as a boy. He climbed that peak at a time when the very first aeroplanes were landing on this meadow I see before me. This oasis of grass among the forest of trees and rocks that surround it is a sight to behold. The serenity is marred only by the stream of semitrailer trucks and RV's motoring along the four-lane TransCanada highway, a mere 50 feet from the edge of the field.

As I got closer I picked out a touchdown point between the two parallel rows of orange cones marking off a landing strip in this 3000 by 400 foot field, with a windsock at either end. I came back to reality just in time to make a textbook 3-point landing at CYBA, Banff, Alberta. As I turned off the runway and coasted to a stop my mind filled with visions of Tiger Moths, Stinsons and Fokker Universals refuelling here in preparation for a gruelling flight through the Kicking Horse and Rogers passes bound for Vancouver. Other than the orange cones this airfield hasn't changed one iota since it was first used. It was June 20, 1992.

Sixty-three years earlier, on Saturday afternoon, January 19, 1929, a 5-passenger Stinson Detroit SB-1, owned by Great Western Airways, circled low over the Banff town site. It was piloted by one of Canada's leading World War I fighter ace's, Captain Freddie McCall of Calgary. After surveying his options, McCall decided to attempt a landing on the frozen Bow River to the west of the bridge. This is how the Crag and Canyon newspaper described the very

first landing of an aircraft in what was then called Rocky Mountains Park of Canada.

“Shortly after 6 o’clock this feat was accomplished, although the plane nearly came to grief when it hit the pontoon bridge and took to the air again for a few feet to touch the ice with the tail to one side. Lighting in this position, the plane started to skid and it was only through skilful piloting that it was manoeuvred from hitting the boat house on the river, although the tail skid did catch the board walk around the building, but did no particular damage.” Today McCall would have been accused of numerous pilot errors and fined for landing within a built-up area, but in 1929 he was a hero.

The Kicking Horse, Rogers and Coquihalla passes were first navigated by air a decade earlier when Captain Earnest C. Hoy flew a Curtiss JN-4 from Vancouver to Calgary, arriving on August 7, 1919. Many flights had overflowed Banff in the intervening years but none had landed.

McCall’s successful Banff landing prompted Great Western Airways to advertise one-way passenger flights between Calgary and Banff for \$15.00 per passenger and ignited a desire in Banff residents to launch the town into the aviation age.

Aviation fever soon descended upon the citizens of Banff and in April 1929 three prominent business men, P. Brewster, E. Wakelyn and W.H. McCardell undertook to form an Aero Club. Together with the Banff Advisory Council and the Department of Interior, they began working to set aside a suitable area for an airport. One month later the excitement was fanned by an announcement from the Postmaster General that the western terminal of the prairie air-mail route was to be located within 20 miles of Banff, prompting the Advisory Council, on May 10, to state, “If such a landing field could be secured for Banff it would be of inestimable value to all, as the travel by airplane is becoming bigger each year, and any place of consequence which has not a landing field is laboring under a handicap.”



A Stinson Detroiter SB-1 similar to the first aircraft to land on the Bow River at Banff in 1929.

All this excitement was for not, however. On September 12, 1929 Calgary opened it’s first municipal airport and was able to attract the Prairie airmail route. The first mail run from Winnipeg to Calgary by Western Canada Airways took place on March 3, 1930.

Once again, in July of 1932 the subject of a landing field was big news in Banff as the Chinook Flying Service of Calgary proposed to construct an airfield for the purpose of establishing a commercial air service to Banff. It was seeking a long term lease on a stretch of land known as Elk Field at the base of Castle Mountain, the site of the present Banff airstrip. The Advisory Council endorsed the proposal and Banff residents again looked to the skies for opportunity. However, hopes for an airfield were again thwarted when Chinook Flying Services fell victim to the Great Depression and closed its doors in the fall of 1932.

Finally, with the depression waning, Banff got its long coveted landing field in 1937. Little more than a meadow, it played host to the very first aerial tourists when, on August 15, 1937, Harry Coffey of Portland, Oregon made the first landing at the new airstrip in his Stinson. Accompanied by his wife, his son Howard and a Mrs. Elsie Scobie he had flown from Portland via Spokane and Grand Forks, BC. They spent two days visiting Banff then departed for Calgary on August 17.

Banff's aviation hey day was short-lived, however. By late 1939 Canada was at war and most civilian aviation had been severely restricted as the country prepared for its most important contribution to the war effort - the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Seeing little use for the Banff landing field during the war, the Department of Interior converted it into the Cascade Golf Club with a promise to return it to an airfield when required.

After the war the government kept its promise and returned the airfield to service, upon the request of Foothills Aviation of Calgary which was planning a non-scheduled service between Banff and Calgary as well as sight-seeing flights. Foothills Aviation, being a Taylorcraft dealer, was also looking for sales opportunities with the members of the newly formed Banff Flying Club. The first aircraft to land at the reopened Banff airfield was a Cessna Crane piloted by the founder of Foothills Aviation, P. H. Hansen. This historic landing took place on March 8, 1946.



Banff Airstrip 1997.

Photo courtesy Ken McNeill.

After 16 years of frustrations and false starts the citizens of Banff finally had a permanent landing field to call their own. The Banff Flying Club took stewardship of the airfield and worked with the Department of Interior, and eventually Parks Canada, to maintain the airstrip for the benefit of Banff and the safety of all pilots navigating the unpredictable Rocky Mountain passes. For the next 50 years pilots and wild animals harmoniously shared this simple meadow in the valley.

It occurred to me, as I sat in my biplane dreaming of bygone days, that Parks Canada ought to declare this airstrip an historic site and place the requisite bronze plaques and story boards on the side of the highway. Little did I know Parks Canada was actually plotting the destruction of this field of dreams.