

# The Historian

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April 1918. Handwriting on the back of the photo describes this as the 1<sup>st</sup> airplane to land in Fallbrook. The field is on the mesa of Rancho Santa Margarita, just SW of the center of Fallbrook. The Curtiss JN "Jenny" airplane was widely used for training pilots. The vertical tri-color on the tail rudder was in use at this time for squadrons at North Island, San Diego. (*Heath-Watkins Collection*)

## HISTORY OF AVIATION IN FALLBROOK

Unlike today, Fallbrook skies were silent in the early 1900s. The Wright brothers made the first powered flight of an aircraft in 1903 at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina 3,000 miles away. West Coast skies would remain quiet until the outbreak of World War One in Europe led to a buildup of Army and Navy aviators being trained at North Island, San Diego and also at March Field near Riverside.

The Fallbrook *Enterprise* newspaper reported weekly on aero plane adventures here and around the world.

When the USA joined the war in Europe, additional airspace was needed to train more military pilots. Space was found in a field on the outskirts of Fallbrook.

*Continued on next page*

**Aviation Road, 1918** The first airplane to land in Fallbrook was in April 1918 in a field about one mile southwest of the center of town. When townspeople heard and saw aero planes buzzing and circling nearby, they packed into their Model Ts to head in the general direction of the action for a closer view.

On Thursday April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1918, the Fallbrook *Enterprise* newspaper reported *“Fallbrook’s new aviation field is growing more interesting daily. On Tuesday, airplanes came out all day long from North Island at San Diego and practiced landing at the new Fallbrook landing field which is said to be ideal for student aviators. Many people have gone out this week and watched the aviators land and ascend.”*

Fallbrook’s Aviation Road originally got its name in 1918 because it was the direct route townspeople used to drive across O.A. Anderson’s ranch to the landing field.



May 3, 1919 on Rancho Santa Margarita just outside of town. Fallbrook constable W.S. Fleshman, wearing goggles, is getting a ride for buying a Victory bond. Army pilot, Maunsell Van Rensselaar, who grew up in Fallbrook, is resting his hand on the all-wooden propeller of this “Jenny” biplane. (*Heath-Watkins Collection*).

The 1918 temporary airfield was described as being located on the nearby mesa of Rancho Santa Margarita, just west of today's Alturas Rd. Today, this would be on the Naval Ammunition Depot, slightly north of the current military gate at Ammunition Rd. In 1918, this was not a military base. It was still private property, a cattle ranch owned by the O'Neill family. These rare pictures were preserved by Constable Fleshman's family.

It was said that Anderson was the closest neighbor to the new field. In return for his hospitality, Anderson enjoyed that friendly pilots would bring him the morning San Diego *Union* newspaper, hours before the mail arrived by train.

When the war ended with the armistice in November 1918, there was a rapid demobilization of the armed forces. By 1920, the landing field was no longer in use, or at least it is never mentioned again in local reports. Quiet skies returned to Fallbrook until the next war.



Posing by Waco airplane in 1951 are Fallbrook volunteer firemen Jack Eberline, Chief Bill Thurber, and assistant chief Francis Gillian. Two boys, young Bill Thurber and Jim Gillian are in the cockpit. Floyd Ahernd took the photo. (Gillian Collection).



**Marine Corps Air Station Camp Pendleton, 1942** At the beginning of World War Two, the historic Rancho Santa Margarita was taken over by the U.S. Marines and Navy in 1942 to be Camp Pendleton and the Naval Ammunition Depot. The Marines built an airfield with a 6,000-foot-long runway to handle a wide variety of military aircraft. Located 9 miles southwest of Fallbrook on Camp Pendleton, today it is home to several helicopter squadrons.

**Fire department Waco airplane, 1951** The Fallbrook volunteer fire department had a problem. Whenever there was a brushfire, they could not see the fire from all sides, hampering their decision-making on where to deploy firefighters.

In 1951, Fallbrook Fire Chief Bill Thurber heard of an opportunity to buy a WWII war surplus Waco biplane. Chief Thurber and assistant chief Francis Gillian (Gillie), plus firefighters Jack Eberline and Henry Taylor, along with photographer Floyd Ahrend, all put up one hundred dollars apiece to purchase the plane.



1951 Fallbrook Fire dept Waco airplane landing near North Stagecoach Ln.  
(Gillian Collection photo).

However, they needed a location to land the plane in Fallbrook. Arthur Anthony, an avocado farmer, agreed they could use his land for an airstrip. Gillie, being a heavy equipment operator by trade, obtained a bulldozer and proceeded to grade a 600-foot runway on the Anthony property along N. Stagecoach Ln. Upon completion of the runway, the airplane was flown in.

The new runway worked well, but the surrounding land owners complained the airplane noise frightened their livestock. The unapproved airfield had to be discontinued.



1951 Francis Gillian bulldozing a landing strip for the Waco plane. The 1<sup>st</sup> runway was 600 feet along N. Stagecoach Ln. The 2<sup>nd</sup> runway was only a 300 foot strip overlooking the Santa Margarita River. (Gillian Collection).

A new location was found on a ridge of the Chalmers Ranch just off Santa Margarita Dr. overlooking the Santa Margarita River. Here, Gillie could only grade a 300-foot strip. It was short, and the afternoon winds played havoc with takeoffs and landings, but they continued to use it.

Thurber and Gillie flew reconnaissance together. Because there was no radio, one would pilot the plane while the other mapped the fire and wrote directions as to what should be done. They put the map with instructions into a capsule that they dropped to someone on the ground.

Floyd Ahrend took the earliest aerial photos of Fallbrook from the Waco. Unfortunately, one day the Waco was damaged in a hard landing. Unable to make repairs, the plane was sold and the money donated to the Fallbrook Volunteer Fire Department.

Pictures and story from Francis Gillian

**Fallbrook Airpark, 1963** The Fallbrook Chamber of Commerce believed a local civilian airport would spur economic development. In January 1960, the Chamber proposed buying or leasing 270 acres of the Naval Ammunition Depot between Alturas Road to Mission Road, just north of the high school at Stagecoach Ln. However, the U.S. Navy refused to negotiate with unincorporated Fallbrook. At the Chamber's request, the San Diego County Airport Commission took over the negotiations. As the discussions progressed, the Fallbrook High School district and other neighbors of the proposed airport filed objections, citing safety and noise concerns. The Board of Supervisors insisted that there be no cost to the County. Fallbrook airport boosters addressed all of these concerns over time.

In August of 1963 a deal was finalized; the federal government granted title to the land, to be used as an airport only. Fallbrook finally had its permanent civilian airpark, where it is today.



Three Marine Corps helicopters flying in formation over the sea, from front to rear: a Bell Cobra, a Boeing Vertol Sea Knight, and a Sikorsky Sea Stallion, are examples of Marine Corps aircraft that have often been seen passing over Fallbrook at high altitudes since the 1960s. (Tom Frew photo)



*Plan to join us  
for this  
Fallbrook  
Historical  
Society  
Fundraiser on  
March 11<sup>th</sup> at  
the Historic  
Mission  
Theater.  
Tickets on sale  
now!*

She was the Goddess of the  
★ Silent Screen... ★  
She was married  
to  
John Barrymore...  
She was Drew Barrymore's  
grandmother...  
...And she lived in Fallbrook!

The Historical Society presents a fundraising event:  
**A tribute to Dolores Costello!**  
Includes a history of Dolores Costello and a screening of the 1936 Film,  
**"Little Lord Fauntleroy"**



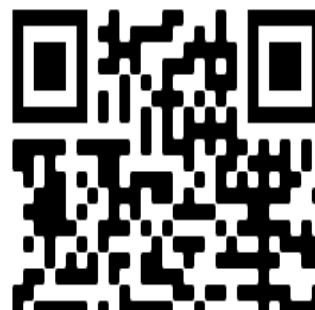
When: March 11  
Time: 6:30 pm  
Doors open at 5:15  
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**The Historic Mission Theater**

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*The Fallbrook Historical Society's mission is to bring history to life by educating the community and others about Fallbrook's rich heritage*



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