

Coming Home to Sawyer

by Larry Chabot

What bad news! The late Ellwood Mattson, Marquette banker and civic leader, was one of the gloomy spectators at the closure ceremony at K. I. Sawyer Air Force Base on November 21, 1994. The last B-52 bomber would fly away the next day. Soon, 4,600 military and civilian jobs would vanish.

Col. Regner Rider, Sawyer's 410th Bomb Wing Commander, explained why the base was no longer needed. Referring to the breakup of the Soviet Union – America's longtime Cold War enemy – he told the departure crowd that "we have won the test of endurance against our former enemies."

Sawyer was among the 350 military installations closed over a seven-year span under the Base Realignment and Closure program. Marquette Mining Journal reporter (and now managing editor) Bud Sargent caught Mattson's lament over the "tears of sadness for many of us left behind."

Although the base's ultimate fate had been known for some time, the actual pullout nevertheless left a great sorrow on the area psyche and a giant hole in the area economy. After all, those 4,600 jobs had made the Air Force the largest single employer in the Upper Peninsula. When that single employer moved out, so did every single job.

Turning it Around

But the massive departure triggered a positive reaction even before the base was deactivated. Because the closure

was irreversible, Mattson and other area leaders were already looking ahead. "The Air Force is leaving us with a \$300 million asset," he said, "and if we can all work together, we can turn this base around and...build a new and better tomorrow for all of us."

The end result of this campaign was a 'coming home' for the county's commercial airport, which had been shifted back to the shorter and more cramped Negaunee Township site while the military was occupying Sawyer.

Even before Sawyer became a military facility in 1955, scheduled air service used the same runway until the arrival of the Air Force's Strategic Air Command unit forced them out in 1957. The government paid for the relocation to, and updating of, the Negaunee Township facility, which handled commercial flights in the interim.

In September 1999, the base closure finally brought the airport home. As reminders of the air base became part of the area's storied history, Sawyer quickly began to establish itself as both an important commercial airport and economic force, and soon became the Upper Peninsula's busiest airport.

Figures for calendar year 2009 show that, for the fourth year in a row, over 50 percent of all U.P. passengers went through Sawyer. Since the year 2000, well over 1,000,000 passengers have flown in or out on Sawyer flights - four times the entire population of the Upper Peninsula.

General aviation (non-airline) operations add thousands of flights per year at Sawyer, the only Upper

Peninsula airport with an operational air traffic control tower.

No longer dependent on one single employer, Sawyer's growing economic base consists of 68 businesses with 1,200 employees. One of the first and largest firms – American Eagle's airline maintenance facility for American Airline's jet planes – was also responsible for adding American Airlines jet service to Green Bay, Milwaukee, and the main midwestern hub at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, where passengers can connect to hundreds of domestic and international destinations.

Ideal Spot

According to the writings of Charles Stakel, a former chairman of the county airport authority, Sawyer's central location and lack of flight impediments (there are no residential areas, hills, utility lines, rail lines, farms, lakes, or other obstacles) pointed the Air Force to the Sands location when they were considering a northern base early in World War II.

Although no such facility materialized at that time, the eventual Air Force legacy to its current occupant included a runway over two miles long, a modern air traffic control tower, dozens of other structures, and plenty of elbow room.

Officials point out that Sawyer's service area of a quarter of a million people residing within two hours of Sawyer comprises 75 percent of the Upper Peninsula's population.

Kelly Johnson Drive at the field's north end cuts four miles and many minutes

for passengers coming to the airport from northern towns.

Comparatively short flying times have made Sawyer a logical and attractive choice for its market area.

The American Airlines nonstop jet to the midwest's major hub at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport takes about 40 minutes flying time. Someone driving from Marquette to Chicago to catch a flight would hardly be out of the county before the American flight landed at O'Hare, and by the time the motorist finally reached the right gate in Chicago, the American passenger could be tanning on a Bahamas beach or on final approach into London or Honolulu.

Current travel time to Detroit is nearly two hours. Beginning in early April, Delta Airlines is replacing the 34-seat turboprops on the old Northwest Airlines routes with 50-seat regional jets, which will bring Detroit and newly-added Minneapolis even closer.

Airport manager Keith Kaspari called the change "a new era" for Sawyer, bringing more seats, more comfort, and faster flights to "two of the best airports in the United States." He said Delta will add a third jet flight to Detroit during July and August.

The county's long and colorful aviation history reaches back nearly 100 years to an exhibition flight at the 1912 Marquette County Fair. Although the region had several popular landing strips, the first official county airport opened in Negaunee Township in 1937. Scheduled service began in 1948, then moved to the Sawyer site the next year until the Air Force sent commercial planes back to Negaunee.

After more than a decade of positive growth, the Upper Peninsula's aviation hub has settled back into its historic home at Sawyer, now a robust, economic force with quick access to three major midwestern airports. As Jim Carter wrote in a Marquette Monthly history of Marquette aviation, "...events have come full circle to where they began over half a century ago."