



# Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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July 2023

*It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Murrieta Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.*

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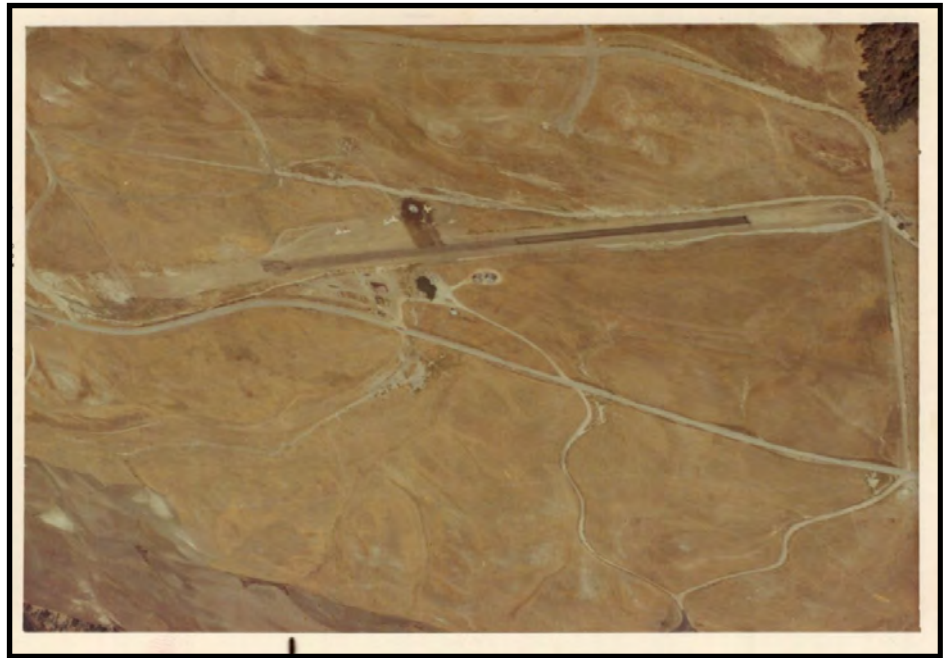
Jeffery G. Harmon

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The Yoder Airpark, ca 1970  
Source: Carol Kravagna Donation

## The Murrieta Flying Club

By Jeffery G. Harmon

The Murrieta Flying Club was a group of local residents who shared an interest and passion for aviation. Members raised funds and established two airstrips in Murrieta Valley. The airstrips were utilized for club members, out of town aviators, and commercial services. Although the club was active for only ten years, its members left a lasting legacy in Murrieta's aviation history.

In November 1936, Bill Durden began a flying school for six students at the Thompson field in Murrieta. A few months later, The Murrieta Flying Club formed on January 13, 1937. John McCool was elected president, Bill Durden, vice president, and Ed Record, the treasurer-secretary. The club announced that they were open for students and for commercial flying. The club leased the Martz property, which was one



mile north of Murrieta on Highway 395. It was twenty-acres of level land, and it was named the Murrieta Flying Field.

Bill Durden worked at the Arlington Airport near Riverside. Each weekend he would fly down and give club members flying instructions. The club met once a week on Wednesday evening at Pa and Ma Bates' Place at the corner of Ivy and Jefferson to discuss their flying school's concerns. Club members were: John McCool, Bill Durden, Ed Record, Bud Guenther, Walter Shupe, Meville Thompson, Ed Bryant, Max Thompson, Bob Brown, Ed Small, Truman Coleman, Ira Dunham, Elmo Dunham, Fred Newport, Derwood Calhoun, Martin Halloran, Victor Garrison and Mrs. Betty Brunelle.

In order to raise funds for the club, a dance was held on April 9<sup>th</sup> at the Murrieta grammar school's auditorium. Johnny Sylvester's Swingsters provided the music and admission was 25 cents per person. A club member flew over the valley and dropped handbills advertising the event. The dance was a success, but the club members realized that they needed a larger dance floor to accommodate the next event.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, the next club dance was held at the Townsend Hall on South Main Street in Elsinore, California. Admission was forty cents per person and the event was attended by many people.

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, the Murrieta Flying Club sponsored an air meet at the Murrieta Fly-

ing Field. An elaborate program of flying and aerial stunts was arranged. No admission was charged for the spectators. Passenger rides were also available for attendees.

The last recorded activity of the club was a dance on December 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Murrieta grammar school. After the dance, no further club activity was reported in the newspaper. It is unknown what happened to the club, but the members continued to fly in and out of the valley for many years.

In July 1965, interested local aviators decided to revive the Murrieta Flying Club. Buster Sheld, Marvin Curran, Lyle Gerdes, and Don Anderson met at Curran's service station to organize the club and make plans for establishing an airport. By October, the club had leased Charlie Yoder's field along Los Alamos Road. There were already four planes in Murrieta ready to use the field.

Members of the club met in October 1965 at King's Café, previously known as Pa and Ma Bates' Place. The bylaws were drawn up and the officers named: Lyle Gerdes, president, Don Anderson, vice president, and Marvin Curran, treasurer-secretary. The monthly club meetings were held on the first Friday.

The Yoder Air Park was completed in October, but members were unable to use it until insurance was acquired. Charles Yoder, Dr. Bob Freeman, and Don Johnson flew to

Sacramento a month later to meet with the state aeronautics board to file the paperwork for the new airstrip. During this time, two pilots were grateful to find the completed landing strip. One pilot from Riverside and one from Oceanside had to make an emergency landing in Murrieta due to a dangerous storm.

The Murrieta Flying Club, Inc. was approved as a non-profit corporation on November 29, 1965. The purpose of the club was "to advance the interests of civil aviation in the Murrieta area and to provide its members with means for improving their qualifications as private civil aircraft pilots." The first directors were Lyle Gerdes, Don Anderson, Marvin Curran, Charles Yoder, and Thomas Sheld.

In March 1966, club members held a house warming party at Mr. and Mrs. Lyle Gerdes' new home. "A money tree in the shape of the Yoder Air Park was designed by Mrs. Marvin Curran with airplanes shaped with dollar bills and dimes as the tires around the windsock, the windsock being a dollar bill waving in the breeze. Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Curran presented the gift to the honorees from the Flyers and Wives." (March 11, 1966, ELP)

The first annual club meeting was held at the Murrieta fire station. The officers were re-elected for a second term. Charles Yoder, who was a director, was elected financial secretary and Buster Sheld was named a director. There were



A D-C 3 airplane landing at the Thompson Airport.

Source: The Bezanson Collection

16 members in the club. Members discussed how to raise funds in order to black top the landing strip.

On Sunday, July 23, 1967, Charles Yoder was approaching the airstrip when his plane crashed. Though he and his passenger received critical injuries, they recovered. After the crash, on November 2<sup>nd</sup> the Yoder family terminated the club's lease agreement on the airstrip. The Murrieta Flying Club had to find a new location. The members decided to utilize the recently built Rancho California Airport.

The second annual club meeting took place in October 1967. Victor Garrison was elected president, Dr. Bruce Baker, vice-president, and Marvin Curran, secretary-treasurer.

Club members and their wives, thirty three in all, enjoyed a Christmas dinner at the fire station at their December meeting. They enjoyed a potluck, a colored slide show, and music from a record player. Bill Durden of Perris, and Victor Garrison, who were members of the first flying club, were reunited. Bill shared that he was an overseas pilot during World War II.

When Curtis Thompson established the Thompson airstrip in January 1969, club members began utilizing it. The airstrip was west of Jefferson Avenue at the end of Magnolia Ave. It was just north of the former Amos Sykes Ranch. The dirt airstrip was 2,700 feet long and ran along the west bank of the Murrieta Creek.

The first Fly-In Breakfast for the club was held at the





Remnant of the Yoder Airpark runway. The Silverado Apartments can be seen on the horizon. (Photo by Jeffery Harmon, March 8, 2015)

Thompson airstrip with Curtis Thompson as host. The Fly-In was held on Sunday, August 23<sup>rd</sup>. At 6:45 a.m., President Victor Garrison took to the air and circled Murrieta to arouse the other pilots to be on hand for breakfast. Curtis had tables, coffee, and pancake mix and Alvin Matteson had the barbeque grill ready.

Guests arrived from Elsinore, Temecula, Murrieta, and Fallbrook. Breakfast was enjoyed under the shade trees near the strip. Twenty two guests enjoyed the event and Curtis hoped to host future events.

New officers were

elected in December 1970. Victor Garrison was reelected as president, Curtis Thompson as vice-president and Alvin Matteson as secretary-treasurer.

The second annual Fly-In breakfast was held on September 19, 1971 at the Thompson airstrip. Seven pilots, their wives, children, and friends flew in and enjoyed pancakes, bacon, eggs, and coffee.

The third annual Fly-In breakfast was held in October 1972. "Pilots arrived from Orange and San Diego counties. Some experienced their first trip to Murrieta and were impressed with the rural atmosphere and

down-to-earth hospitality at the early breakfast served by the local flyers to some twenty-seven guests." (October 19, 1972, LEVS)

Curtis Thompson's airstrip officially passed the county and state department inspection in August 1974. It was officially named the Thompson Transportation Center Airport.

On December 26, 1974, Victor Garrison died of heart attack in the yard of his home on Washington Avenue. Six pilots from the club served as pallbearers. After the funeral, no further club activities were reported that year, and soon the club dis-



Remnant of the Thompson Airstrip looking north.  
Housing developments can be seen on both sides of the property.  
(Photo by Jeffery Harmon, March 12, 2016)

banded. However, local pilots continued to utilize the two Murrieta airstrips.

The Yoder airstrip was purchased by John McElroy. Property around the airstrip was subdivided and lots sold. Homeowners could build a new home, and have access to the airstrip. The area remained active until the Silverado apartment complex was built at the end of the runway, forcing the closure of the strip. In 2019, all structures related to the former airpark had been demolished and removed. The area had been graded over and prepped for a new housing development.

The Thompson airstrip continued to operate through the years. In 1980, a winter storm flooded the Skylark Airport in Elsinore, which was the base of local skydivers. The skydivers moved their operations to Thompson field. There were three DC-3 airplanes parked next to the airstrip during this time.

Curtis Thompson sold the airport to a group of investors for about a million dollars in 1989. It was renamed the Bear Creek Airport. In the late 1990s, the development of the Copper Canyon community brought about the need for a bridge to link it to Jefferson Avenue. The bridge was built

across the Murrieta Creek at the end of the runway forcing it to close.

Today, local pilots utilize the French Valley Airport. Commercial and private planes continue to fly over the valley on a daily basis. The legacy of the Murrieta Flying Club is that it provided airstrips for local and distant aviators. It encouraged pilots from other towns, and other counties to visit the area to see what opportunities Murrieta had to offer. Their contributions to aviation development in the area should always be remembered.



# Museum Update

Hello everyone,

In the month of May, Pat and I took a vacation. During our absence Carol Sierra and Aimee Edgeworth volunteered their services. I would like to say "Thank you" to Carol and Aimee for opening the museum while we were on vacation.

Recently The Carol Carson Estate donated a painted pony sculpture to the museum. It is currently stabled in the Resource Room.

President Jeffery Harmon's presentation on the Ground Observer Corps is now on YouTube under the Murrieta

Historical Society channel. We will soon be uploading Marvin Curran's interview on the Murrieta Flying Club, local car races and his experience during the Winter family rescue in Baja Mexico on YouTube.

Ms. April Dance Jr. instructors recently had a museum tour. They had many questions and they were very interested in the history of Murrieta.

We were at the Downtown Murrieta Market Night with MVHS booth on June 1<sup>st</sup>, which is always a great outreach program.

The upcoming event, Lace and Locomotives Tea

Party fundraiser, has been selling tickets and getting sponsors. The museum will get 20 percent of all proceeds from the event.

I want to thank the board members for all their great work and helping make the Society a success.

Thank you,

Annette Jennings,  
Museum Director



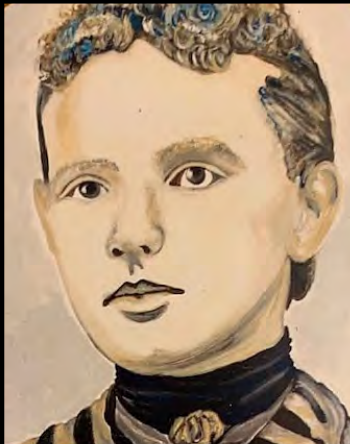
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**Next General  
Board Meeting  
on  
July 10th at 5:30 p.m.  
Please join us at  
the Murrieta Museum**



The Murrieta Museum,  
41810 Juniper Street  
at Hunt Memorial Park.

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