



# The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the Novato Historical Guild and the Novato History Museum

## FEATURE SECTION

### Preserving Novato's History

## The Launching of Hamilton Army Air Field

From the Hanger to the  
Takeoff  
1929 to 1931

#1 of a series by  
John A. Trumbull

To paraphrase our most recently retired First Lady, Hillary Clinton: "It takes a community to raise an air field." The goal of this article is to provide an overview of the events of 1929 through 1932 as they relate to the creation of the Bombardment Base at Hamilton Field, Novato, and to introduce some of the persons that were involved and some of the notable events that were precipitated.

To recapture the mood of the period, one must appreciate the immense fascination that aviation exerted over the American public - or at least most of our newspapers. Almost every issue of the daily San Rafael Independent [SRI] and the weekly Marin Journal [MJ] between 1929 and 1932, has a story on aviation, one story on crime and one story about violent death; collected from around the country. The weekly Novato Advance [A] is almost devoid of this sensational

news, preferring to chronicle the social life of the Novato community. The creation of the flying field was not a Novato endeavor, however, so my primary sources have been the Independent and the Marin Journal, both published in San Rafael for a Marin county readership. (The precise issues are identified by showing the date of publication in brackets.)

### Surveying the airfield

One explanation for the strong hold aviation had on the public imagination is the excitement and glamour of aviation activities. There were the numerous air races, air shows and barnstorming performances being presented to public gatherings about the country. Then there were the multitude of distance, speed and duration flight record attempts that often succeeded in extending one of those "barriers." The sheer lack of uniformity or experience meant that each activity embodied the potential for a lethal or crippling accident. Another explanation was that the airplane was a machine in which women could compete with men for fame and glory. Amelia Earhart was almost as familiar as Charles Lindberg, and everyone who could get financial backing for a record attempt dreamed of rivaling their fame. In June 1929 the Exchange Club of

San Rafael voted to underwrite one of the forty seven entries in the Women's Air Derby, a solo flight from Santa Monica, California to Cleveland, Ohio that was undertaken in conjunction with the National Air Races to be held in Cleveland that August. As the Independent enthused: "*Should 'Miss San Rafael' win the race, the name of this city would be broadcast throughout the world. ...Great credit is due Commodore Copeland and his club for sponsoring such a noteworthy cause to the advancement of aeronautics, members of the local club declare.*" [SRI 6-13-29] Women were walking on wings, setting speed, distance and altitude records, and being killed with almost the same frequency and publicity as men. This was not the case with the automobile, which was a distinctly masculine machine.

On the international scene, the Japanese were fighting the Chinese and occasionally the Russians, Mussolini was posturing loudly and aggressively in Italy, both Hitler's brown-shirted Nazi thugs and ruinous inflation were assaulting the Germans, and in the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin was close to completing his first 5 year plan - the "resettlement" onto state collective farms or purging of about 14 million small farmers, the

aggressive exportation of communism internationally.

General Billy Mitchell prompted a significant reconsideration of the role of the military airplane when in 1921, three of his U. S. Naval Air Service flying boats sank the captured German cruiser "Frankfurt" and battleship "Ostfriesland" by aerial bombing. All of this made the US citizenry uncomfortable, prompting us to try to withdraw behind own borders and to feel threatened on our lightly garrisoned West Coast. In 1929 the federal government started a program of expansion in the field of aviation.

### Rolling out of the hanger

It was recognized from the outset that no one group alone could win a major military installation for the North Bay. First we needed a united effort. As the Journal front page editorial put it: *"Nothing is impossible if the right drive is put behind it. The first requisite of a 'right' drive is united support. Marin county, through Marvelous Marin, the supervisors and every organized group, is putting on the 'right' drive for the new army airport. . . . But these men by their words and activities cannot bring this five million dollar government project to Marin. They must have support, continuous and united."* [MJ 2-21-29]

The editorial was probably an attempt to reconcile competing interests within Marin. Apparently there was a faction that advocated locating the base in the Smith Ranch area of Santa Venetia, and another supported a site in southern Marin. Not much support was garnered for these competitors of Marin Meadows in Ignacio, and they rapidly disappeared.

Marvelous Marin, Inc., mentioned above, was an incorporated association devoted to promotion of Marin County, mostly in relation to trade and tourism. As Robert N. Carson, chairman of the Airport Committee of Marvelous Marin Inc. described the organization: *"Well, we were just a booster association. Nobody ever got paid anything. The boys all did things -- those kind of things will never happen again. We used to go out and spend all our time during the end of the year working for the Red Cross and the Boy Scouts and the Campfire Girls and all those sort of things and giving our time to it. In the end it would cost about -- about 90 percent of what we collected would go to the Campfire Girls and the Boy Scouts, and 5 percent to the cost of collecting it."* [In 1983 Carla Ehat recorded for the California room of the Marin County library, an interview with Robert Carson, formerly president of the Carson Glove Company of San Rafael. This source is cited as "Ehat 1983 interview"]

When military expansion on the west coast was proposed in 1928 there was immediate rivalry between Bay Area counties, but it soon became apparent that Southern California would steal the prize if the Bay Area dissipated its efforts in internecine bickering. The real competition came from advocates for enlarging Rockwell Field on North Island in San Diego Bay and from those promoting March Field near Riverside. (In fact, in the federal budget for fiscal 1932, the southern bases received the funding.)

The Bay Cities Airport Committee was formed to select a site for and then to promote both a Marin airfield and also an aircraft

repair and supply facility to be located in Alameda, which was also under consideration. San Francisco Mayor James Rolph Jr. was chair of the committee; the Marin representative was Harry Ridgeway, Marin county division manager for PG&E. [MJ 2-21-29]

Robert Carson recalled the following concerning the Bay Cities Airport Committee's first meeting: *" . . . all the interested parties were to send in details on suitable sites in their areas. The meeting was called at Mayor Rolph's office where the entire project was to be explained. And our committee consisted of myself, Harry Ridgeway and Herb Brainard (who was then the city manager of San Rafael). Lieutenant Colonel Brant - G. C. Brant, Commanding Officer of Crissy Field in San Francisco - who was to have been present to explain the project, but in his absence the president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Cutler, outlined the general idea. Now Oakland, Sunnyvale, San Leandro, South San Francisco, Alameda and others had all sent some pretty sharp looking groups. And our position was very much like that of the small gambler when he suddenly realizes he is trapped in a no limit game. . . ."*

*"As we started home, I said to Harry Ridgeway 'I wonder why that fellow Brant didn't show. Why don't we stop off at Crissy Field and find out?' And Harry said 'He'd throw us out.' And I said 'I've been thrown out of better places than Crissy Field.' So we went in and asked to see Colonel Brant.*

*"Now Jerry proved to be a most charming man, and he loved hunting and fishing and shooting.*

And we talked sports until he broke out the bourbon, by which time we found that we had run into a kindred spirit who was no slouch for the bottle. About this time it seemed reasonable to ask the important question, so we inquired as to why he hadn't attended the meeting. And he said he didn't want to get into the fracas until the local politics had narrowed the field. And I asked him if he had seen the plans submitted, and he said he had. And by this time we were all on first name terms, and I said 'Jerry, if you had a simple choice as a flying man, which site would you pick?' And he told us if the money and the politics had nothing to do with it, he'd pick the Marin County site. So we thanked him and said 'That's all we wanted to know.' And it took us 4 years to make the grade, but right then and there we stole the air base project right out from under them.

"We held back the idea until after a number of abortive meetings when it seemed as though March Field was going to get the call while we were arguing amongst ourselves. And then we suggested that, as this was of vital importance to the whole bay area, why not put up all the sites for free choice by the Air Corps and agree that we would all throw our concerted weight behind whoever they selected. And the idea was adopted. . . . And that's how you get it for nothing.

"Meanwhile, Jerry Brant became so well known over here that we were thinking of running him for supervisor. The Air Force got its free choice and Marin County was selected as the best location." [Ehat 1983 interview]

In February 1929 the Journal announced: "MARIN IN TO

#### WIN ARMY AIRPORT IN DRIVE BACKED BY WHOLE NORTH BAY"

"Complete backing of the board of supervisors, as well as the municipal authorities in the various cities, has been obtained. Service clubs are taking a hand, and the project is bringing together all the constructive forces in the county."

The Board of Supervisors established their own committee: A. A. Devoto, chairman, with R. N. Carson (Marvelous Marin Inc.), H. G. Ridgeway (San Rafael), R. G. Dougherty (Larkspur), B. H. Schmidt (San Anselmo), George V. Kaenel (San Rafael), George H. Harian (Kentfield) and the Rev. Leo Tayerte (Olema). [MJ 2-21-29]

#### Taxiing down the flight line

Marin Meadows was known officially as "Site No. 4" among the sites under consideration by the Army. Robert Carson and Fred W. Sweetser, (Novato's supervisor who is dealt with at greater length in article #4 of this series) started negotiations to obtain 500 acres of land from the California Packing Co. Robert Carson recalled the following incident in the negotiations: "And I had to eventually go down and talk to old man Armsby, who was the head of the California Packing Corporation. Jeff Armsby and I were school kids together. We went to grammar school in Ross. And I had to ask him if by any chance they could see their way clear if the army is going to consider this to turn this property over to them. And he looked at me and he said 'Damn you kids!' He said 'I came over here from San Francisco to get away from all of this so-called progress.' And he said 'I wouldn't care if they never

paved the road in Ross. If you had to walk right from the station with a lantern like you used to have to do 50 years ago.' And he said 'Now you damn kids want to bring it all back in here.' And he said 'I will say this, off the record, because if you dare say anything about this I will chew you up publicly.' But he said 'As a matter of public -- from a public standpoint we will support it.' 'But,' he said, 'if I thought for one minute you were going to get away with this, I would stop it right now.' And that was the way he left it hanging." [Ehat 1983 interview]

On November 12, 1928, the full Board of Supervisors had passed a resolution offering to purchase and gift 640 acres plus a road right of way to Highway 101 to the federal government if the Marin site was chosen. [Supervisor's minutes book P at page 42-43] This offer was rejected as inadequate a year later by F. Trubee Davison, who telegraphed back that 640 acres was not enough land. The Supervisors then raised their offer on Dec. 16, 1929, to 917 acres: 767 from the packing company and 150 that belonged to Julia and Thomas P. Bodkin. [Marin Supervisors minutes book P page 88]

Colonel G. C. Brant, commander of the Chrissy Field at the Presidio of San Francisco, flew some of his planes over to test the "crust" of the hayfield. The test proved successful, and this was critical because airstrips weren't paved in those days. Robert Carson explains how this reclaimed bay land developed its "crust". "And they had a system which was a Dutch system, which was called the Cannonball system, in which to drain it. They used to run thin

pipes through underneath the ground, then they actually dragged the cannonballs on the end of a wire through it to open up these trenches, and then that would drain underneath and that's how they worked that land." [Ehat 1983 interview] The aviators were met by a car caravan of notables led from San Rafael by Captain Al O'Connor, of the Marin Traffic Squad, and they were treated to a fine picnic. [MJ 2-28-29]

### Engine runup:

July 2, 1929, the Independent's 7 column headline read: "MARIN WINS AIR BASE". Indeed the entire front page and most of page 2 are devoted to the details behind this headline. It was somewhat misleading, however, since all that had really happened was that Assistant Secretary of War, F. Trubee Davison announced his selection of Alameda and Marin as the military's preferred sites for the new airfields. "Col. G. D. Brant, chief of the air forces at San Francisco, was much impressed with the site on his official visit some time ago, and has been a consistent advocate of the acceptance of Marin county's offer. Assistant Secretary of War F. Trubee Davison, on his recent official visit concurred with Col. Brant, and thus merit won." [Advance 7-6-29]

That was only the first step toward getting the matter before Congress. We had friends, however. C. B. Dodds, San Francisco Chamber of Commerce's Washington lobbyist, was monitoring progress and reporting back. Representatives Clarence H. Lea (D) and Florence P. Kahn (R) were active supporters in the corridors of Congress. And as the

Independent noted: "Support came from practically every town all the way to Crescent City. A round robin addressed to the War Department was signed by seven representatives in Congress, urging recognition of the claims of the San Francisco bay district, . . . Letters endorsing the project and urging the acceptance of the Marin County site were forwarded to the War Department by the Crescent City Chamber of Commerce, Sausalito Chamber of Commerce, Eureka Chamber of Commerce, Marin County Realty Board, Geyserville Chamber of Commerce, Redwood Empire Association and by scores of organizations, businessmen and individuals throughout Northern California. . . . Every service club in the county did its part with enthusiasm." [SRI 7-2-29]

### A bit of crosswind

Unfortunately, right at the height of Marin's euphoria: "Mill Valley Fire Loss Near Million; 110 Homes Burned". A cigarette-caused fire spread by high winds swept into Mill Valley through Blythedale canyon the evening of July 2, destroying about 2000 acres, including 110 houses, and causing a loss estimated at more than \$1,000,000. All Marin Cities and towns sent fire fighting equipment, as did San Francisco. The American Legion and 200 Army troops from Forts Baker and Barry manned shovels and gunny sacks. They worked 55 hours to gain control. [SRI 7-2&3-29 & MJ 7-4-29] Then on July 5th a second fire broke out on Corte Madera ridge, but it was controlled without major loss. [SRI 7-5-29]

In the midst of the fire story, an item appears illustrating

the dashing character so consistent in aviation news at the time:

"FLYER OUT OF GAS OVER FIRE"  
"Running out of gas as he was flying about 2,000 over Mt. Tamalpais this morning at nine o'clock, Phillip Murray, Kentfield aviator, glided down and landed in the marsh near the Carson Glove Company. Murray made a perfect landing. As he was rising over the mountain he saw the outbreak of the flames which destroyed the West Point Inn." [SRI 7-3-29].

### A distraction

The bomber base in Marin and the Naval aircraft repair facility at Alameda were not the Navy's only proposed new facilities, it also felt 2,000 acres were needed for a new \$5,000,000 dirigible base. Marvelous Marin suggested locating this facility on land adjacent to Marin Meadows (where St. Vincent's is now), and for a time in late July 1929, Admiral William A. Moffitt, who visited the site in the company of R. N. Carson, Robert H. Trumbull and George V. Kaemel of the Supervisor's Airport Committee and Rear-Admiral J. M. Reeves (a resident of San Rafael), found the site "Ideal." [SRI 7-18, 19 & 23-29] [MJ 7-25-29] This assessment was made early in the search process however, and we faced competition from Southern California and even from Sonoma County, which proposed a site south of Santa Rosa owned by the Cotati Land Co. [SRI 7-9 & 18-29] This base was eventually located in Sunnyvale, California and named for Admiral Moffitt.

The potential for a dirigible field in Marin was revived about a year later. The famed Graf Zeppelin made a transpacific flight to San Francisco, arriving August 26,

1929, which suggested the possibility of viable civilian service. The Japanese envoy in San Francisco approached Marvelous Marin Inc. about establishing a terminal in Marin for a Tokyo to San Francisco dirigible service. He said he represented investors with \$15,000,000 available to establish a fleet of lighter than air craft capable of carrying 40 passengers on the 68 hour flight for a fee of \$900 each. Although Marvelous Marin Inc. was able to respond with specificity and alacrity due to the efforts that had previously gone into presentations to the Navy, this proposal soon faded away.

[SRI 7-25-30]

### **A bump in the runway**

In August 1929, with the military endorsing the Marin site, the junkets of the Congressmen began. First was W. Frank James, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. He made it plain that while he had no say in choosing a site, no site would be funded without his approval; and he didn't think the Marin site was large enough to allow for expansion. Congressman Lea pointed out that there were 3,000 additional acres of farm land that could be acquired as needed. [SRI 8-27-29]

Melvin J. Maas, representing the House Military Affairs Subcommittee on Aviation, was more enthusiastic about the site. He toured Marin as part of his "15,000 mile tour by airplane of the army posts of the Nation for the purpose of making appropriate recommendation on the development of the air service of the army." [SRI 10-26-29]

### **We taxi on**

The Novato community was optimistic, and proceeded to hold a Marin Airbase Jubilee. This event was held September 15th at the Community House, in the presence of royalty. The Advance describes the scene as follows: "*Queen Jubilee, Miss Carin DeBorba, was the admiration of the throng, and looked every inch the character she represented. The throne upon which she sat was in keeping with the occasion, and the queen's two attendants, Miss Ramona Lane and Miss Margaret Keena, one on either side of the throne, with little Jane Simmons sitting in front completed a scene of beauty that will linger long in the memories of those who saw it.*" [A 9-21-29]

The full report is good reading, but I shall be content to summarize that the barbecue feed, which was followed by a magic show and a musical program featuring local talent and capped off by dancing until 1 A.M. to Jewett's orchestra, raised about \$500.

### **A downdraft over the runway**

As previously stated, the federal government held the 640 acres the county initially offered to be insufficient. Just what would be required was for some time a mystery. On December 12, 1929, the Independent reported that the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce special committee appointed by assistant manager, William F. Benedict, was investigating adding 194 acres to "the 723 acres offered by the Marin County Board of Supervisors".

[SRI 12-12-29] Just four days later the same paper reported: "*Possibility that the Government will assist in condemnation proceedings to complete the acreage for the army bombing base in Marin county,*

*was seen in a conference yesterday between United States Attorney Hatfield and District Attorney Henry E. Greer of Marin.*

"Following the conference, Greer said the War Department requires 1000 acres for the base, that the county has acquired 700 acres and can acquire 140 more of level ground, but that a 'prohibitive price' is asked for 160 acres belonging to Julia Bodkin, wealthy Marin county woman and member of the famous Valencia family. The desired land, Greer said, is on high ground and will be used for barracks at the new base."

[SRI 12-16-29] Robert Carson, in his 1983 oral interview, explained that the Army wanted Bodkins' hills overlooking the base for the officer's quarters (and water tank).

This 160 acres was part of a larger property that was originally part of the Pacheco Spanish land grant. Julia Bodkin, who was originally Julia Tanforan, married John Pacheco and inherited the property upon his death. She subsequently married T. P. Bodkin, a San Francisco dentist, who did most of the negotiating with the county as her representative.

[SRI 10-7-31]

### **Lift lightens the wings**

The County felt secure in its relations with the California Packing Co. for the 640 acres that would transfer for \$175 per acre. In addition there were about 75 acres of land that had been gained by accretion (siltation). This purchase was funded by a bond passed by the Marin voters. The Bodkin property was another matter!

In May 1930 Mrs. Florence P. Kahn, our Republican congresswoman, introduced a bill to transfer to Marin Meadows \$1,350,000 in

funds allocated to improvements at Rockwell and March Fields (and also \$734,000 for the initial work at Alameda). [SRI 5-28-30]

Robert Carson gives us some insight as to why Mrs. Kahn carried the bill when Congressman Clarence Lea had been so prominent in the meetings and news reports: *"Well, Clarence Lea was one of the most wonderful men that this county ever had. He was a Democrat, and I'm a black Republican, but he -- he was absolutely marvelous. And when it came time after 4 years of effort to try to get this bill put through, he phoned me up and said, 'Look, Bob, this is a Republican administration.' And he said, 'I know that I've worked on this and I'm entitled to have my name on this bill, but really,' he said, 'if the bill is going to go through, if Marin County is going to get it, the best chance for Marin County to get it would be to have Mrs. Kahn put the bill through.' And so the bill went through as the Kahn bill. And if there was anything more selfless than that in a politician, I'd like to know what it is."* [Ehat 1983 interview]

### More power

The Army was cooperating. Capt. Howard B. Nurse, with his wife and two sons, arrived on April 28, 1931, and started looking for lodging and for 3,000 feet of office space. [MJ 4-30-31] He proceeded to create his staff and set them to work planning, designing, drafting and surveying in full confidence that the title problems with all the land would be timely resolved. *"Pending approval of building plans, which contemplate building mostly on the Bodkin property, Captain Nurse says that work can proceed at once on roads, railroad*

*connection can be made and materials brought in for construction purposes."*

[MJ 9-10-31]

Captain Nurse also organized publicity for the project. He brought out Major General John L. DeWitt, Quartermaster General of the army, and Colonel John R. Hannay, Ninth Corps Area quartermaster, both of whom toured the site and pronounced themselves *"well pleased with the location"*.

[MJ 6-4-31]

After touring the site with Captain Nurse *"General B. B. Faulois, newly appointed chief of the air corps of the war department, declared today that he believes Hamilton Field, the government air base at Marin Meadows, Ignacio, will be 'the most attractive field in the army'."*

[SRI 7-23-31]

### Tail lifts, but not the wheels

Introduction of a bill to fund the first stages of construction at Hamilton is the political equivalent to dropping the handkerchief for capture the flag -- now the serious mayhem started. The Southern California interests saw their appropriation being reduced, and Northern California saw a great economic potential on the horizon. We had J. Patrick Hurley, the Secretary of War, in support of Marin as well as most of the other expert witnesses expected to testify to Congress. *"... the Marin committee swung into action tending to force immediate disposition of the matter at the hands of the Military Affairs Committee. Headed by Harry Ridgeway, president of Marvelous Marin, a flood of telegrams were dispatched to Washington addressed to Congressman Lea and urging that*

*no time be wasted in approving the site and recommending the transfer of the necessary funds for the start of work on the \$5,000,000 project"* [SRI 6-6-30] F. Trubee Davison returned to our support, as did Major General J. E. Fechet, Chief of the Air Corps. Early on June 14, 1930, the Kahn bill cleared the House Military Affairs Committee. Our representatives even persuaded committee Chairman Ransley to request that Speaker Longworth consider the bill as emergency legislation so the 30 day delay rule could be suspended, thereby allowing a vote during the current session. [SRI 6-17-30] On June 30 the Kahn bill passed the House without a record vote and was sent to the Senate. [SRI 6-30-30] With Congressman Lea hovering over its shoulder, the Senate passed the Kahn bill on July 1, 1930, authorizing the transfer of \$2,000,000 from Southern California airfields to the two new Bay Area fields.

The mantra of the campaign was once again seen in the press: *"Besides relieving the unemployment situation in this district by the hiring of many civilians on the project, establishment of the army base at Marin Meadows will assure the county of a payroll of approximately \$30,000 a month. The personnel of the field will include 2000 officers and men immediately upon completion of construction. This number will be increased from time to time with the attendant increase in payroll."* [SRI 7-1-30] (The effect of the Hamilton project upon the economic scene of Marin county is the subject of article #3 in this series.)

At the San Rafael Rotary Club, Robert Carson *"... traced the early history of the airport*

project and told of the wonderful cooperation that had been received from all concerned. He lauded the supervisors, especially in standing back of the project and giving support throughout. He spoke of Wm. Deysher's trip to Washington in behalf of the bill and the great sacrifice he made of his own time. Supervisors Deysher, Martinelli, Samuels and Gardner were guests of the club at the meeting and they were given three cheers for their efforts." [SRI 7-14-30] (The fallout of this period as it affects the careers of Samuels and Deysher are the subjects of articles #4 & #5 in this series.) John Burt of the Marin Water District told of the plans to build a water line from Alpine Dam in Fairfax, through the Sleepy Hollow Dairy at a projected cost of \$70,000 to supply the field up to 1 million gallons a day. [SRI 7-14-30]

### Down draft

All this back patting would lead one to believe Marin Meadows was a "done deal," not so! There was still the matter of obtaining the Bodkin property. On Feb. 26, 1931, Marin's District Attorney, Henry Greer, requested the Board of Supervisors to make a formal offer of \$100 per acre to the Bodkins, anticipating their refusal and the subsequent commencement of formal condemnation proceedings. [SRI 2-26-31] That was done and soon the papers were announcing. "Some unusual circumstances have arisen to hamper the taking over of the field, such as the title for the lands gained by accretion or the action of the tides, the Bodkin suit, the form of the California Packing Company's original deed and the necessity of securing quit claims

from heirs to an old estate. All these things took much time, but they have finally all been 'ironed' out with Attorney Henry Greer's painstaking help." [MJ 4-23-31] Well, almost, anyway.

PG&E offered to move their existing transmission lines to a new easement, but it was on the Bodkin property, so that was still hang fire, as was the condemnation lawsuit itself which was merely inching along in the courts. On August 10, 1931, a federal judge, Harold Louderbach, heard United States Attorney, I. N. Peckham, present the opposition to Bodkin's demurrer to the condemnation complaint. [SRI 8-10-31] He ruled against Bodkin on Sept. 3, thereby allowing the federal government to use the legal device of condemnation to acquire the Bodkin property for air field uses. [SRI 9-4-31 & MJ 9-10-31]

In the meantime, Henry Greer had been angling to get the U. S. Attorney to use a new law that permitted the government to begin the utilization of property pending conclusion of a condemnation action. However Attorney General Mitchell refused to permit construction on land to which the government lacked clear title. [SRI 10-29-31]

As the case dragged on frustration began to appear in Marin. The Independent fumed: "Marin county offered T. P. Bodkin and the California Packing Corporation the same price per acre for the land needed for the Air Base. The California Packing Corporation accepted the price. T. P. Bodkin refused. The packing corporation considered that it was making a fair profit on its productive land. But T. P. Bodkin demanded a much higher price for

his unproductive land. He knew that Marin needed that land, so he raised the price in the hopes that necessity would force the county to pay thousands of dollars of the people's money into his pockets. T. P. Bodkin still has the upper hand. . . . He still is holding up a five million dollar project in a stubborn attempt to exact an exorbitant price for his comparatively worthless land. Attempts to arbitrate with him have proven futile because of his stubborn, persistent and greedy demands for more guarantee than the county has been able to afford. There is only one weapon to use against a man like Dr. Bodkin. That is the weapon that the United States government has in its hands but refuses to use -- the right to take immediate possession of the property, Dr. Bodkin's selfish protests notwithstanding." [SRI 9-23-31]

And meanwhile, only thirteen days after saying he was prepared to start construction, "Capt. Nurse, speaking as a private citizen and a member of the advisory committee, said that because of the delays he had been forced to cut his crew to a skeleton force and warned 'If we let this thing drag, we're going to lose it'." [SRI 9-23-31] Marvelous Marin Inc. appointed Robert Carson, Andrew DeVoto, Rolph C. Dolferty, Al Siemer, Bob Cary and Mayor William S. Nock as a committee to work with Greer and the supervisors to speed the Bodkin matter along. [SRI 9-23-31]

Just about this same time, Bodkins' attorney, M. E. Harrison and Marin's Henry Greer were negotiating an agreement to enter binding arbitration with waiver of rights of appeal but without participation by the federal government.

In October the details for the proposed arbitration still hadn't been agreed upon, and the Independent fumed: "*The Bodkin property, according to old time residents, has never been used for anything but grazing land for dairy purposes. It is hilly, with some level land, but over half of it is entirely unfit for cultivation . . .*

"*NOW let's see about this \$600 an acre price that the owners want. How do they arrive at such a valuation? Inquiry at the county tax collector's office develops the fact that they pay taxes to the county on a valuation of \$36 per acre on the best land. . . . Remember that Tax Factors appraised it at \$70 per acre [when the county made its initial offer to purchase for \$100 per acre]. I am also informed that the assessed valuation of the entire piece of 276.4 acres is \$10,070 for the real estate and \$2,040 for the improvements, making a total of \$12,110. Still the owners are asking the county to pay \$600 and acre for 160 acres or \$96,000. . . . The Independent would like to suggest to the county assessor that next year, unless this suit is culminated meanwhile, that taxes be collected upon it somewhere near the value the owners are asking the county to pay for it."* [SRI 10-2-31]

Finally the details concerning arbitration rules were concluded, and the pending lawsuits were placed on hold to allow time for the arbitration proceeding. On October 14, 1931, Marin county named W. M. Rutherford of San Anselmo as its arbitrator, and the Bodkins chose Charles J. Brennan, Fire Chief of San Francisco. Those two were to select a third arbitrator, but Rutherford couldn't reach Brennan to

arrange a meeting. While Marin waited Thomas Edison died and Winnie Ruth Judd made headlines by mailing the dismembered bodies of two of her friends from Phoenix to Los Angeles in a trunk. Finally on October 21 we read the seven column wide headline "**BRENNAN ACTS IN AIR BASE CASE**" [SRI 10-21-31] It was, however, two days later that the men actually met and agreed on the third member of their panel. By the time the parties approved the third member, it was October 27th.

The third arbitrator was George P. McNear, head of the Golden Eagle Milling Co. of Petaluma and president of that city's leading bank. Problem #1: McNear was in New York and not due to return until late in November. Problem #2: neither Bodkin nor the Marin Supervisors had yet signed the formal arbitration agreement. However, because the County agreed to post a security deposit equal to the price Dr. Bodkin was asking, he now became willing to consent to the start of construction prior to the completion of the arbitration process. Despite pressure from Marin, U. S. Attorney General Mitchell again refused to take allow any shortcuts, still insisting on clear title to the property before any government construction money was invested on the property. [SRI 10-31-31]

On November 4, Bodkin and the supervisors signed the arbitration agreement, and the supervisors posted \$100,000 as a bond with the Marin County Abstract Company to assure the county's ability to meet the terms of the highest possible arbitration award. [MJ 11-5-31]

McNear returned to the North Bay on November 25, and

was met at the train station by Brennan and Rutherford to arrange a hearing date. [SRI 11-25-31]

### **Finally we are almost airborne:**

On November 30, 1931, the seven column wide front page headline of the Independent crowed: "**BODKIN BOMBING BASE LAND PRICE SET**" and the three column subheadline: "**\$300 An Acre Given By Arbitration Board**" [SRI 11-30-31] This meant that \$50,000 had to be raised in addition to the bond proceeds. The money was raised with the help of our neighboring counties and a public subscription fund within Marin, but not without triggering some political repercussions that rocked Marin for the entire year of 1932. The story of the "secret contract" scandal is told in article #2 of this series.

On March 17, 1932, the Journal's eight column headline read "**Principals Meet to Close Bombing Base Deal**" "*All of the money necessary to complete the purchase contract with the California Packing Corporation for the base property is ready, and the meeting today will mark the final chapter in a three-year long story of hard and often discouraging effort to secure the location of the bombing base here.*" [MJ 3-17-32] This wasn't quite true, this effort would continue to produce crisis and frustrations for Marin throughout 1932. Several of these repercussions are detailed in other articles in this series. All these articles are part of a pamphlet available from the Novato Historical Guild, 900 Sherman Avenue, Novato, California, 94945.