During the late 1920s, Dodson Field owned by "Cap" Dodson, was originally located at the present site of Jim Robertson Chevrolet. (Photo courtesy of Johnny Greer)

FLYING HIGH!

It was the barnstorming of Englishman, Tommy Weber, combined with other colorful characters and events which spurred interest in air travel to Kirksville and the early beginnings of what would eventually lead to the present-day Kirksville Municipal Airport.

In the early 1920s, WW I pilot, Tommy Weber, was barnstorming his way across the United States, finally settling in Kirksville and starting his own private airport because of the interest he found in aviation by local people. It was located on the north side of Kirksville at the present site of Jim Robertson Chevrolet. When Mr. Weber left the area a year later, the airport was taken over by pioneer aviator Roy B. "Cap" Dodson and named Dodson Field. At that time, he was one of the few pilots in the area. "Cap" Dodson was later contacted by the Civil Aeronautics Administration, because he was an experienced pilot, to choose a site suitable for the placement of a beacon light and an emergency landing site for passenger and mail flights between Kansas City and Chicago. During daylight hours planes followed railroad tracks and highways. To aid in flying at night, beacon lights were placed at regular intervals along flight paths between major cities. The area chosen by "Cap" Dodson was later to become what is today the Kirksville Municipal Airport.

With the onset of WW II came the need for a paved all-weather landing field to be used for the Civilian Pilots Training Program and the War Training Service of the Army Air Corps. Along with the new airstrip came hangars, a tower, and a restaurant. Both war training services ceased after WW II, and from that time until 1959, it was used by local pilots and as a stopover for planes flying through the area.

In 1959, in Omaha, Nebraska, the Civil Aeronautics Board held a hearing to decide what areas would begin receiving airline services. Representatives from numerous cities within seven states were in attendance. Kirksville officials learned of the hearing only the day before it was scheduled to be held. Even though they had no formal application and were technically ineligible to appear before the hearing examiners, six persons were sent to represent Kirksville.

Finally, sometime in 1959, Kirksville was accepted by Ozark Airlines on their Kansas City to Chicago route. The main reason for Ozark's acceptance of Kirksville was to keep rival airlines from getting into Ozark's territory. Unfortunately, the hearing examiner accidentally forgot to add Kirksville's name to the list of accepted sites; it was because of the testimony of Congressman Clarence Cannon from Missouri's Ninth District, who was also chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, that Kirksville was restored to the list.

On October 1, 1960, Ozark Airlines began providing commercial service with flights from Kansas City to Chicago. The airline also provided stops at Ottumwa, Cedar Rapids, Moline, and later Sterling, Illinois. Ozark's first commercial flight departing from the Kirksville airport was a DC-3 piloted by Phil Roberts, an Adair County native, who also flew the first prop jet, an FH-227-B, out of Kirksville.

When Ozark switched to the Des Moines - St. Louis schedule, the larger aircraft attracted a significantly larger
Several Kirksville dignitaries tour the airport shortly before commercial service began. The terminal building and the cafe that were present until the late 1960s are seen in the background. (Photo courtesy of Johnny Greer)

for flight school and charter service. Growing as fast as they were, Horizon changed its name to Air Missouri in 1976.

Along with changes in air service, came dramatic improvements in the airport facility. Since World War II there had not been any improvements to the airport. The airport's facilities were originally located at the north end of the runway, later to be torn down and rebuilt where they presently stand. Clarence Cannon had helped gain appropriations to update the airport and in 1960 the airport had its first paved runway. On November 20, 1967, a $535,000 bond was approved by the Kirksville citizens for improvements to the airport with $80,000 to go into construction of the new terminal building. Construction on the new terminal and weather station began in 1971. The balance of the bond money was used to extend the runway to 6,000 feet.

number of people than with the Kansas City - St. Louis schedule. The airport's top year with the Kansas City - St. Louis schedule was in 1961 with only 1,829 boardings compared to 2,000 boardings every year with the Des Moines - St. Louis schedule. Ozark retained this schedule until the company's last flight on April 23, 1976.

Another commuter service at the airport was Horizon Airways which began its service on April 4, 1972, with flights to and from Kansas City. Kirksville was the location of its home office and the service was operated by Dr. Steve Barber, a local dentist and pilot. Between the years 1972 and 1976, Horizon grew from a one-plane to a five-plane service with flights to and from Kansas City and St. Louis using a Cessna 402 and a Piper Seneca. There were three other light aircraft available.

This overhead view of the Clarence Cannon Memorial Airport was taken in 1961, when the facility was located at the east end of the current runway. (Photo courtesy of Chamber of Commerce)

By Tony Frost and Corey Pritchard

Every year several experimental and home-built aircraft stop in Kirksville on their way to a major airshow in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. This plane is dwarfed by an Ozark DC-3. (Photo courtesy of Johnny Greer)
long and 100 feet wide. On October 10, 1971, a ceremony was held in honor of the $960,000 worth of improvements to the airport and the new terminal building was dedicated to Clarence Cannon to honor his importance in the progress of the airport.

The Kirksville airport does more than provide air transportation. Redwing Airways conducts a flight training school, and aerial photographers work out of the facility. Several airshows have been sponsored in which stunt flyers show their in-flight aerobatics. Along with the interesting antique and hand-made planes which come to the airport for these airshows, there are others which use the Kirksville facility every year as their stopover in route to the largest air show in the country sponsored by the Experimental Aircraft Association and held in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

From barnstorming on grass fields and WW II trainers on a paved airstrip to an airport equipped to handle commercial aviation, Kirksville's Municipal Airport has played a part in the history of the community and continues to perform a role in the growth and development of Kirksville and the surrounding areas.

*The Alexander Eaglerock, shown here in 1927, was used for charter flights, pilot instruction, and sight-seeing. (Photo courtesy of Johnny Greer)*