

Paton Field Centennial Moment—February

1923-1929: Serving as Akron's Airport

Following the demise of the Ohio Flying School and Transport Company in 1922, airfield owner Rev. Edward Smith and his son Fred continued operation of what was generally called Stow Field. While Akron had a population that had grown to over 208,000, it lacked a municipal airport. It was Stow Field, located in a rural township of only 1,700, that would serve the area's aviation needs over the next years.

Lacking a municipal airport, Akron businessmen chose Stow Field in the summer of 1925 for two huge aerial exhibitions. The first, in June, was a two-day event sponsored by the Akron chapter of the National Aeronautic Association to promote "safe and sane" aviation. The program featured flying exhibitions, a reliability race for commercial airplanes, stunt flying, parachute jumping, and model aircraft contests. More than 75,000 people attended.

The second big event was held in July to open the celebration for Akron's centennial. Lighter-than-air events highlighted the first day. This included the christening of Goodyear's first helium blimp, *Pilgrim*, as well as the country's first race of balloons of 35,000-cubic-foot capacity. The next day brought in an estimated 80,000 people for the heavier-than-air events—flying demonstrations, parachute jumping, stunting. Traffic management was an issue for both events, with one day reportedly packing in twenty thousand vehicles for a mile around the field.



Pilgrim gondola at Smithsonian's Udvar-Hazy Center. 2019. Photo by William D. Schloman

Aircraft Construction and Testing

In addition to events for the public, aircraft inventors made use of Stow Field for construction and testing. This included V. C. Babcock, a recognized flying pioneer and one of the original 598 members of the Early Birds of Aviation. Babcock came to Akron in 1924, formed his own company, and began testing his planes at Stow Field. One was the Teal, a one-person biplane with a 90-horsepower engine that in 1925 set the Stow Field altitude record of 9,200 feet.

New Operator for Stow Field

Personal stresses prompted Fred Smith to seek new management for the airfield. Safety Airways took over in May 1926, but it would be a short-lived enterprise. Instead of building and selling aircraft as initially planned, Safety Airways relied on rides and aerial events to bring in business. Parachute jumping was a particular favorite. In August, a spectacular “night flying circus” was staged for a crowd estimated to be over 4,000 people. Featured was the “flaming spiral” -- a mock battle with flares attached to the airplane’s fuselage. An undetermined problem caused the craft to spiral into the ground causing serious injuries to both the pilot and co-pilot.

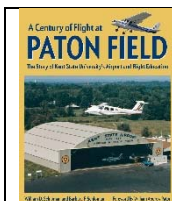


August 8, 1926. Courtesy of the *Akron Beacon Journal*

Within a month, Safety Airways was gone. Fortunately, the next chapter in the airport’s history would bring in a stable operator.

DID YOU KNOW?

Paton Field received notable aviators in these early years, including Billy Mitchell, Eddie Rickenbacker, Clarence Chamberlin, and Charles Nungesser. Contrary to earlier reports, there is no evidence and little likelihood that either Charles Lindbergh or Floyd Bennett landed here.



Excerpted from *A Century of Flight at Paton Field: The Story of Kent State University's Airport and Flight Education* by William D. Schloman and Barbara F. Schloman. (Kent State University Press, 2019). Used by permission. Available at the Kent State University Airport, from the [Kent State University Press](https://www.kent.edu/press/), and wherever books are sold.