



Chapter 4

HOBBY AIRPORT

*W*illiam P. Hobby Airport has grown tremendously through its eighty year history from a tiny private airfield to a modern airport providing service to over eight million passengers a year. Today Hobby is overshadowed by Houston's larger Bush Intercontinental Airport. This was not always the case. Hobby was the only commercial airport in town for over forty years as Intercontinental, on Houston's far north side, was not opened until 1969. Hobby is still thriving and expanding today. This airport remains a vital part of the southeast Houston economy by directly providing over six thousand jobs to the area's citizens.¹

On June 24, 1927, the announcement was published in local newspapers of the plan to build Houston's first airport, then simply called Houston Airport. It was to be built on four hundred acres of land east of Telephone Road. The airport originally wasn't primarily for commercial airplanes. There was virtually no regular passenger service at the time. The airport was to be used for "air mail planes,

army, navy, and marine corps planes, transport company planes, industrial planes, and privately owned and operated machines.”² The City of Houston did not have the necessary \$50,000 available to buy land and construct airport facilities. Therefore, the City leased the land from William T. Carter Jr. and associates. Carter owned a lumber and home building company. As part of the deal, Carter was to construct airplane hangars and other facilities. The City paid \$150 per month for rent of the airport to Carter.³ Carter’s assistance really provided a jumpstart to Houston’s future in aviation. This airport area was still very rural and undeveloped at the time. Telephone Road was still only a dirt road. A fence was built around the airport partly to keep livestock off the field.⁴ The airport became an economic stimulus that spurred development in this portion of Telephone Road that was otherwise out in the country.

Carter’s company built many of the homes in the airport area. In 1928 Carter began building much of the early housing for airport employees in a small subdivision called Airport Place on the east side of Telephone next to the airport.⁵ The few homes remaining in Airport Place today are surrounded by airport related businesses. It is very near some of the runways and can be a loud place to be when planes are taking off. The much larger neighborhood of Garden Villas, northwest of the airport, was also built by Carter’s company in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Garden Villas is still a prominent neighborhood that has been maintained well through the years. Garden Villas is known for its large lots and pecan trees that shade area streets.

On March 2, 1928, Houston’s airport was dedicated with 113 planes flying and performing stunts including a mock aerial battle over the city. Ten thousand spectators saw Houston formally enter the aviation age that day. In addition to the aerial show, members of the city government, U.S. military, and Houston Chamber of Commerce were part of the dedication. A reminder of how dangerous and unpredictable air travel was at the time came when a plane in

the show caught fire and was forced to perform an emergency landing north of Houston.⁶ The airport was very small at the time, and airplanes still a relatively new invention, so it is amazing that this is the only bad thing that happened with 113 planes flying around.

As the demand for aviation facilities grew, the private airport was purchased by the City of Houston in 1937 for \$150,000.⁷ The purchase of the airport and the money to make necessary improvements were funded by a \$500,000 bond. The runways were extended from 2,500 to 4,500 feet, and widened from 100 to 150 feet, to accommodate larger aircraft. At that time a large aircraft was a fourteen or twenty-one passenger plane. Before runways were lengthened, ten passenger planes were the largest aircraft that the airport could accommodate.⁸

One of the great moments in Houston Municipal Airport history was the tremendous welcome millionaire native-Houstonian Howard Hughes got on July 30, 1938, upon returning to town after



Howard Hughes giving speech at Houston Municipal Airport in 1938 upon completion of around the world flight. (Photo courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center)



Cars parked along Telephone Road for Howard Hughes celebration. (Photo courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center)



Crowds awaiting Howard Hughes' plane landing at Houston Municipal Airport. (Photo courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center)

completing an around the world flight. People lined the streets from the airport into downtown where Hughes stayed at the Rice Hotel. *The Houston Post* described the crowds as being “thick along Telephone Road and Leeland, but when the cars entered Main Street they moved through solid walls of humanity. The air was choked with fluttering paper and streamers tossed from the windows of office buildings along the route, and roar after roar swept abreast of the procession.”⁹ Hughes was very modest at the ceremony held at the airport. He gave credit to the Lockheed L-14 itself, and its makers, saying, “[w]hen you use your vacuum cleaner in your home you don’t talk about how smart you are—you talk about how smart the man was who invented it. By that same token, it is you men and women who have enabled me to have a ship like that, one that could fly around the world. I didn’t do anything except fly according to instructions.”¹⁰ At the ceremony the mayor’s daughter broke a bottle of champagne and christened the field Howard Hughes Airport. This name remained until local government officials learned the airport could not receive any federal money if it was named after a living person. The name was later changed back to Houston Municipal Airport.¹¹

A small wooden building was the airport’s only terminal when the City of Houston purchased the airport from Carter. A new larger terminal was needed for the growing airport. The project was partly financed by the federal Public Works Association. This new air terminal opened in 1940. At about the same time, two other major prominent PWA projects, the current Houston City Hall building and the San Jacinto monument, were constructed. Architect Joseph Finger designed both the City Hall building and the 1940 terminal. The newspaper gives a detailed description of the new architectural wonder. “The terminal’s main hall is airy and spacious, surrounded by a second story mezzanine and looking out onto the busy field through expansive windows and stately aluminum entry doors. A graceful art-deco railing borders the waiting room and descends

a marble-faced stairway. Above, a unique chandelier serves as the lobby's focal point. On opening day in 1940, a bright oriental red design glistened in the marble floor below. On one side of the lobby is a coffee shop, a favorite spot for visitors and passengers alike and down the hall was a busy post office. Operations, management, and radio offices also were located in the terminal. Below was a complete weather station."¹²

International flights to and from Houston increased dramatically through the middle and late 1940's. In Nov. 1946, Chicago and Southern began the first flights from Houston to San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Havana, Cuba. In Dec. 1946, Pan American World Airways began service to Mexico City. In 1948 Braniff opened service from Houston to various cities in Central, and South America.¹³ Despite expansion of the 1940 terminal to include an international wing, it became apparent that the airport was growing at such a fast



Aerial photo of Houston International Airport circa 1950. (Photo courtesy of 1940 Air Terminal Museum).

pace that airport and city officials recognized the need for a new larger terminal.

The new five million dollar Houston International Air Terminal opened on October 30, 1954. This terminal, with major renovations and additions, is still the same terminal that is in use today. The exterior front entrance is similar to its current appearance. "The façade is dark brick, topped by polished Texas pink granite and pink kasota stone."¹⁴ It had ticket, telegraph, and limousine service counters and offices, air-conditioned waiting areas to accommodate three hundred people, a barber shop, a thirteen room hotel, two glass-enclosed dining rooms, and a nursery for small children.¹⁵ The major airlines flying out of International at the time were American, Braniff, Continental, Delta, Eastern, KLM, National, Pan-American, Slick, and Trans-Texas. There was a two day dedication that included an air show featuring the Blue Angels, Texas Air National Guard fighter-bombers, and B-29 Bombers flyovers.¹⁶

The new terminal was put to good use as the next year Houston had its first year of over one million passengers. By 1964 the airport topped two million. Late in the same year the airport was named after Texas Governor William P. Hobby by the Houston City Council. Hobby had passed away earlier in 1964. It took several years for the name change to go into effect.¹⁷ Even in 1964 it was already in the works to move all commercial air operations to the new Houston Intercontinental Airport. It was thought that after the new airport opened Hobby would no longer be needed for commercial air travel. Sad newspaper articles told of how Hobby Airport closed to commercial air travel on June 8, 1969. One told of how a passenger showed up at the wrong airport to catch a flight just after midnight only to be told "you're out of luck, friend, this place is closed forever."¹⁸ The closing of Hobby coincided with the opening of the new Intercontinental Airport on Houston's north side. A Texas International DC-9 carrying VIPs and reporters took off about 11:30pm to circle the city