

THE MID-ATLANTIC SOARING CENTER

What is today the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association with 100 active members, two tow planes, four Club-owned gliders and over 30 privately owned gliders, started as the Washington Soaring Club in December of 1946 with 8 active members. The Club in those days had a Pratt Read (new cost with trailer and instruments \$300) and an L-K. Operations alternated between the Greenbelt, Md. airport (now a road near the Goddard Space Flight Center) and the Martinsburg, W.Va. airport. For 30 years MASA (the name was changed in April 1955) moved from airport to airport:

1946-1950 Greenbelt and Martinsburg
1950-1954 Martinsburg
1954-1955 Westminster, Md.
1955-1956 Martinsburg
1956-1958 Winchester, Va.
1958 one month at Front Royal, Va.
1958-1965 Westminster, Md. 1965-1976 Frederick, Md.

During this thirty-year period MASA searched with varying intensity for Its own soaring site. Many sites were considered, but somehow all the pieces just never fit. MASA's Board of Directors felt there were five particular areas of concern in selecting a permanent soaring site:

1. A location convenient to its members. One to one and a half hours driving time was considered desirable.
2. A location with terrain suitable for soaring
3. A location which could be used as an airport. No zoning or other local problems.
4. A location as free as possible from airway traffic and other aviation in general.
5. An affordable location from an acquisition, development and maintenance standpoint

Raw land in the area of interest sells for between \$500 and \$2,000 an acre. Construction costs, zoning, etc. posed serious problems with almost every site that MASA considered. However, one location in the early 1970's began to emerge as the ideal spot:

1. It was only 25 minutes further away from Washington than our present site at Frederick, and was even closer to some areas of Baltimore.
2. It was located in the foot hills of the Catoctin Mountains (near Camp David). Thermal, ridge and wave were all sources of lift here.
3. It was already licensed as a commercial airport with FAA-designated airspace.
4. It was not on an airway, nor was it in the approach path of any airport.
5. It appeared to be affordable on all counts. The site was the Gettysburg-Charnita Airport. .

Charnita, Inc. was a land development company that was formed in the 1960's to develop the land in the Carroll Valley near Fairfield, Pa. By June of 1972 Charnita had developed not only land but serious financial difficulties. Charnita's electric bill was past due in the amount of \$65,000. One important cash source to the

company was a ski lift and snow making operation at a hill at the North West end of the airport. Without electricity this operation would close down. In order to keep the electricity on, Charnita gave the Adams Electric Cooperative a first mortgage on the airport. Within months Charnita, Inc. declared bankruptcy and the mortgage was in default. However, all the company's assets including the airport were frozen in the bankruptcy proceedings. As months passed chaos reigned. Charnita's attorney was sent to prison and the president of the company was shot and killed in a lovers quarrel. NASA made several inquiries about the airport but no one seemed to have the power to do anything about it.

Finally in the summer of 1975, MASA learned that Adams Electric had succeeded in removing the airport from the bankruptcy proceedings and was preparing to foreclose on the mortgage. About five potential buyers had approached Adams Electric about the airport. The electric company was preparing an extensive advertising campaign announcing the foreclosure sale in hopes of recovering their principal, interest and costs.

MASA's Board of Directors agreed that a serious effort should be made to purchase this airport. The site had both grass and lighted hard surface runways, paved and lighted taxiways, a new 6,400 square foot hangar, a large lounge with toilets and three separate fueling facilities. Martin Voelk, the airport manager, lived in a house adjoining the airport property. He came to Fairfield in 1969 as the company pilot for Charnita and in 1970 supervised the construction of the airport. Martin and his wife Edith maintained the airport even after Charnita collapsed into bankruptcy. Martin learned to fly in Germany in the 1930's and his early training was in gliders. When the airport opened he started a small soaring school with a winch and a Rhonlercher (a two-place German trainer). Martin and his wife were considered real assets to this site. Martin is now a member of MASA and remains as the airport manager.

MASA, having decided that it definitely wanted this airport, now had two problems – how to buy it and how to pay for it. If the mortgage could be purchased from the electric company at the right price, MASA could control the timing of the foreclosure sale and hopefully buy the airport at the auction. After several months of negotiations Adams electric agreed to sell the mortgage to MASA for \$75,000. Because of accrued interest and costs another bidder would have to bid over \$95,000 at the foreclosure sale in order to acquire the airport. MASA would have lost the airport but would have had a \$20,000 profit. We wanted the airport.

MASA considered several financing possibilities. Because of the history of the property, title complexities, etc. no lender could be found that had any interest in financing the airport for MASA. MASA's treasury had a reserve of which the Board felt about \$20,000 could be comfortably used as a down payment. We needed an additional \$65,000 to complete the purchase and cover all costs (legal, taxes, etc.). A plan finally emerged that permitted everyone to participate according to his or her ability. Each member was asked to subscribe to a noninterest bearing capital unit in the amount of \$750. In lieu of subscribing to one of these units a member could elect to have his or her dues increased by \$75 per year. Subscribing members were then offered a second or third unit until the \$65,000 was reached. The second or third units would earn interest at the rate of 10% per year (paid for by the non-subscribing members out of the \$75 dues increase). In three weeks we had all the money we needed and no member had to subscribe to more than three units (some had offered more). Full time students under twenty-five were excused from the plan.

The original sale date was scheduled for February. We hoped for a cold day with snow so that only the most determined buyers would appear. One technical delay after another pushed the sale date up to April 30, 1976. During this period other potential buyers appeared. But by the sale-date MASA had convinced all not to bid, and on April 30 the Sheriff of Adams County auctioned the property to the highest and only bidder: the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association

MASA firmly believes that this site will become the center of soaring in the mid-atlantic states and have accordingly renamed the airport the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Center. We refer to the site as "Fairfield" for the nearby town.

For those members of our families who are not totally devoted to soaring, there are a golf course, tennis courts, riding trails, a lake and hiking trails only yards from the airport. The battlefields of Gettysburg are only eight miles away and the trout fishing in the Catoctin State Park is superb. In the winter if the snow is too deep on the runway, you can walk to the chair lifts on the Liberty Ski slope. The Fairfield Inn, a restored revolutionary stage coach stop, serves excellent home cooked meals.

Plans are already underway to hold the 1977 Region 4 Championships at Fairfield. Did I hear someone mention the Nationals?

-- Jim Haynes, *Convecton*, August 9, 1976