



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
www.gilbertgia.com

La Cresta Airfield, 1946

By Gilbert Gia

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“I saw a stunt pilot take off, turn upside down, and just as he cleared the cliff he nosed down and disappeared. We all thought he crashed, but he appeared moments later, and then he did the same thing several more times.” -George Gilbert Lynch, 2003¹

When Ralph Smith and partners opened La Cresta Airfield just east of Greenlawn Cemetery they hired John 'Monte' Montijo to manage it. Monte had been nurtured in a flying background and in fact was named after his father, John 'Monte' Montijo, who had been an Army flight instructor during WWI, a stunt pilot for Goldwyn Studios, and the

¹ Author's conversation with George Gilbert Lynch

man who qualified Amelia Earhart's solo.² During WWII his son, young Monte Montijo, was assigned to the 353rd Fighter Squadron in Europe where he flew P-51 Mustangs.



Monte at left and his brother Jim, 1945

Monte's fighter experience made him immanently qualified to teach flying under the GI bill. By 1946 La Cresta Airfield was busy teaching veterans and storing and repairing aircraft.

Before La Cresta Airfield existed, East Bakersfield had a history of flight.³ In the 1920s a landing strip was in use on Bernard street just

2 Lori Van Pelt, *Amelia Earhart: The Sky's No Limit*. Forge Books, September 2009. <http://books.google.com>

3 Regarding other early airfields, the Sep 1947 Kern County Employees' Magazine

west of Jefferson Park,⁴ and in 1934 a glider pilot named Hawley Rowlus measured wind conditions on the Bluffs but decided against establishing a glider school there.⁵ Recently, Brian Landis wrote to the Californian that during or just after World War I the Army Signal Corps built an airport at the site of La Cresta Airfield. Landis wrote, "The La Cresta strip was used basically as a safe place to land when needed and for refueling."⁶



Holloway Field "West of Baker Street," 1920

[McGuire Local History Room, Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, CA] wrote that Bakersfield's first airplane flight was on Jan 30, 1910 at Hudnut Park when a group of local businessmen brought Charles K. Hamilton here to demonstrate his aircraft. The first airport in Kern County was developed by the Kern County Chamber of Commerce near Highway 99 in 1925, about a mile west of the present airport site. That site was acquired Jul 22, 1927 from Emory Wishon, a farmer.

4 Author's interview with Bill Purdy.

5 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 11, 1934, p. He later chose White Wolf Grade near Arvin (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 18, 1938, p 1)

6 "Different Voices," Bakersfield Californian, Aug 29, 2010. Lieutenant-General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold was chief of the Army Air Force in 1942

In 1918 Lt. H.H. "Dutch" Holloway flew with the 141st U.S. Army Aero Squadron in France.⁷ By 1920 he operated an air service and flying school in East Bakersfield⁸ and in March 1922 started flights to Los Angeles from Holloway Field, "west of Baker Street."⁹ It is likely that the La Cresta strip Landis described was Holloway Field on Bernard.¹⁰

Interviews with East Bakersfield residents who knew the bluffs in the late 1930s suggest that an airstrip was first in use there sometime between 1938 and 1941.¹¹ Dean VanZant, a Bakersfield Junior College engineering student in 1942, recalled that the field was laid out that year, and shortly later someone asked his field class to move their surveying practice farther away.¹² VanZant wrote, "They had about half-dozen aircraft there. The runway ran north and south, and at the point of take-off at the bluffs, planes cleared the road by 100 to 150-ft. I had my first car then [1942]. Before that, when I rode my bike on the

7 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 30, 1918

8 Bakersfield Californian, Mar 8, 1920

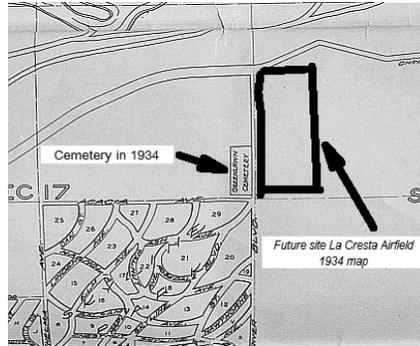
9 Bakersfield Californian, Mar 1, 1922

10 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 2, 1966, p 14C: Mrs. Smoot took an airplane ride with barnstormer Dutch Holloway former WWI flier and Ace. Open cockpit Flying Jenny [*the aircraft*] took off from what then served as an airfield at big lot at the end of Alta Vista Drive and the present site of a market on 34th [Bernard] St."

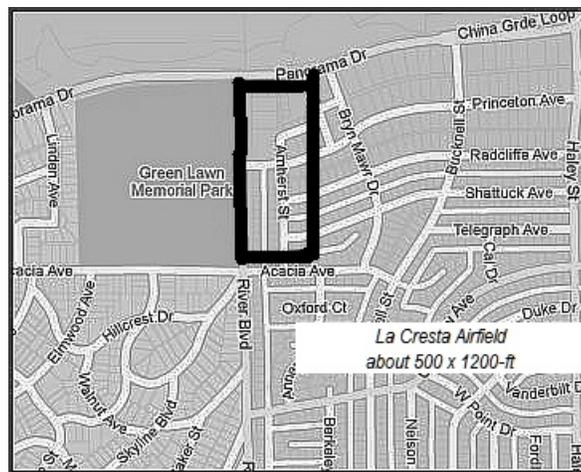
11 Author's interview with Ken Kramer: Kramer did not recall seeing an airstrip near Greenlawn Cemetery while he worked there in 1937.

12 Author's interview with Dean VanZant, 2003

bluffs, there was no airport there."¹³



Development on the Bluffs by 1934



Location, current map

Several residents had clear memories of the airfield. Roxana Francis wrote, "The airstrip was called Monty's La Cresta Airfield. It was along the east side of River boulevard across from the cemetery. The strip

¹³ Email to the author from Dean VanZant, Oct 31, 2003

ran from Panorama to maybe Acacia, but I'm not certain about how far south or how far east the borders were. The strip wasn't very wide. You took off north and had to clear the traffic on Panorama."¹⁴



East Bakersfield Bluffs, 1946. Greenlawn is at top left.

Dean VanZant: "The roadway in the foreground [*at top of bluffs*] was called China Grade loop, but is now Panorama drive. This road forks: one turns south to Union avenue, and the other veers to the right. I do not remember this right turn fork. It appears to be the present route from Panorama to Manor street, but that was not built until later. The building on the far side of the runway [*upper left*] was the airport operations office. I do not remember the route of the automobile entrance to the air strip. I don't think there were any hangers or other

¹⁴Email to the author from Roxana Francis, Sep 24, 2003

cover for airplanes. There were no landing lights.”¹⁵



La Cresta Airfield, operations shack is left of center, Greenlawn far left, Kern River at top. About 1949

Mary K. Shell, former mayor of Bakersfield and Kern County supervisor, worked at the airstrip in 1947.¹⁶



Mary K. Shell, nee Miki Jaynes, 1947¹⁷

¹⁵Email to the author from Dean VanZant, Nov 1, 2003

¹⁶The quotes following are from an email to the author from Mary K. Shell, 2003

¹⁷La Cresta Airpark images from 1947 are courtesy of Mary K. Shell. This author gleaned them from the 16mm motion film that Miki took that year. A

Shell: "I am pretty sure the field was built after WWII, in 1946.¹⁸ Right after World War II I worked at the Kern County Airport and in 1947 moved over to La Cresta Airfield on the bluffs. It occupied about 30-40 acres at the corner of Panorama drive and River boulevard and was owned and developed by Ralph Smith, the local realtor. There was no control tower. You just used your eyes to land and take off when it was safe. One great advantage at La Cresta was when you took off toward the northwest over the bluffs you had an immediate increase in altitude."¹⁹

digital recording of her motion film is held at the McGuire Local History Room, Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, CA.

¹⁸Kern County Board of Supervisors granted the airport license to Ralph Smith, Jr., and Rexroth & Rexroth. The field started flights in Feb 1946.

(Bakersfield Californian, Jul 15, 1946)

¹⁹Bakersfield Californian, Aug 16, 2010

2 Columns, May 11, 1946 The Bakersfield Californian

Skyway Associates

Take Pleasure in

ANNOUNCING

THE CESSNA 140

In Conjunction With
the Opening of

LA CRESTA AIRFIELD

Dorsey, Restaurant, Observation Booth Skyway Garage, Aircraft Facilities

Solo Flying Course
NEW 1946 AIRPLANES

\$81.00
PER HOUR
PLUS RENT
INSURANCE
CLASS OF LICENSEE

STANDARD • BEECHER • HAMILTON • PULVER • SHELL • CRYSTAL

Skyway Associates
LA CRESTA AIRFIELD
Telephone 2-3430


May 11, 1946

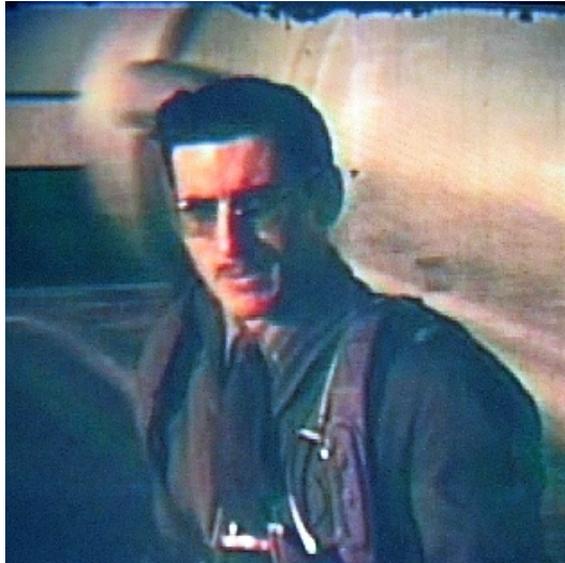
Grand Opening (Bakersfield Californian, May 11, 1946)



Monte Montijo, 1947

Shell: "John G. 'Monte' Montijo was the manager for the six, seven, or

eight years it was operating."The business was called Skyway Associates, which had the Cessna dealership and operated a flight school under the G.I. Bill. One of Monte's instructors was his brother, Jim." ²⁰



Monte's brother Jim Montijo, 1947

Shell: "Small-plane owners kept their aircraft at the field, and it was a base of operations for Atwood Crop Dusters, which was the largest crop dusting firm here at the time. Shell said most of the Atwood pilots were WWII veterans just out of the service."

²⁰ Ibid.



Above, Jim French, WWII ace. 1947



Steve Straub, WWII pilot, 1947

Shell: "One was Jim French, a Navy ace (listed on all the books on WWII), and another was Steve Straub, an American who volunteered

with the Royal Canadian Air Force before we were in the war. Steve Steve flew Spitfires.²¹ Another Canadian pilot for Atwood was Bill Jukes. I worked there in 1947/48 in the office, keeping books and dispatching planes. I had obtained my private pilot's license in 1947, and I received part of my pay at La Cresta Airfield in flying time."²²



Shell Corporation's Gas Island, 1947

In 2010 the Bakersfield Californian became interested in the field's history, and after their article the paper got many emails. Mary K. Shell wrote, "The La Cresta Airfield is becoming a saga! Your column today jogged my memory further. I well remember Johnnie Bresnahan and

²¹ Email to the author from Mary K. Shell, Oct 29, 2003. Shell: "Both Jim and Steve died here a few years ago, and I think both are buried at Greenlawn, across from where La Cresta Airfield used to be."

²² Email to the author from Mary K. Shell, Oct 29, 2003

his PT-19 and Jim Bowers and Hal Reed and their BT-13. Cliff Purple was the mechanic there."



Mechanic Cliff Purple, 1947



Cessna maintenance. Homes are in background. 1947

John Bresnahan read Shell's account and contacted the Californian. "I learned to fly out of Kern County Airfield in 1945 and received my

license in 1946. Shortly thereafter, I noticed the construction of La Cresta airfield, and upon its completion, I moved my PT-19 to La Cresta because I lived in the immediate area. I was 16 at the time, and my dad and I flew out of La Cresta into 1949. I met Jim French, and even flew my Fairchild to Arvin on two occasions to swamp for Steve Straub. My flying buddy at the time was Jim Bowers, and he parked his PT-15 next to me just beyond the gas island. I remember the P-40 that Monte bought and sold to the Mexican Air Force (I was told). In 1949 Jim discovered cracks in my Fairchild, and that ended that. When I found out that they tore it apart and sold the parts, I was crushed. I would have stored it all of these years just to have it, but I was away at school at the time and only discovered the frame much later in a gully south of the hanger."²³



La Cresta Airfield. Office is right. 1947

²³ "Other Voices," Bakersfield Californian, Sep 2, 2010

Mickey Pearson wrote to the Californian about his grandparents' work at the airfield cafe, where Ezra and Myrtle Pearson served burgers, fries, sandwiches and chili. Mickey Pearson recalled, "While eating lunch, you could try your luck at the punch boards. Pay your money for a chance to win cash. They had a small tool about the size of a toothpick. You would push a small rolled-up paper out the back of the board, unroll it and see if you won."²⁴



Snack Bar, 1946

²⁴ "Other Voices," Bakersfield Californian, Aug 19, 2010



Bakersfield Californian, May 22, 1946

In 1949 Monte Montijo was in charge of La Cresta Squadron of the Civil Air Patrol at La Cresta Airport.²⁵ Monte was an early leader in Civil Air Patrol, although the first commander was identified as "Harv Thornberg's oldest son."²⁶

25 "Air Patrol Meets," Bakersfield Californian, Mar 16, 1949. The newspaper referred to La Cresta as an airport, an airstrip, and an airpark.

26 Author's interview with Priscilla Spencer, Sep 27, 2003



Monte at far right, 1947

In 1938 George M. Wilkens subdivided Skyline Park,²⁷ and it was the next major subdivision after La Cresta tract in the foothills of east Bakersfield. By 1941 traffic through east Bakersfield had increased to the point that the county graded and oiled an unimproved extension of north Union avenue to the bluffs. Called Riverside drive, the road made access to Skyline Park easier and relieved traffic that formerly zig-zaged through east Bakersfield to reach China Grade.²⁸ After the war, housing grew closer and closer to Greenlawn.

²⁷ Kern Herald, Dec 30, 1938

²⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 5, 1941. The road was later renamed Panorama drive.



Flight path at La Cresta Airfield

In June 1946, 800 residents of Skyline Park filed a petition with the Kern County Supervisors objecting to the airport as a nuisance and asking that its permit be revoked.²⁹ Supervisors claimed that the operators had originally agreed to operate it a private airport, but opponents insisted it had become a commercial airport. Noise was the major complaint but also the fact that it was near Greenlawn cemetery and disrupted funeral services. Another complaint was the operators allowed student pilots to fly, which created a potential danger to the neighborhood. Supervisor took all charges under consideration, and on July 31st a special committee³⁰ visited La Cresta Airport to evaluate a

²⁹Bakersfield Californian, Jul 15, 1946

³⁰County Planning Engineer Chester James, County Counsel Norbert Baumgarten, Airport Commissioner Cecil Meadows, Rabbi Jack Levy, Ed Helm, owner of Greenlawn Cemetery; George West, property owner in the La Cresta area, and Supervisor Charles P. Salzer. (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 31, 1946)

new flight pattern recommended by the Civil Aeronautics Authority. It required take-offs to immediately head over uninhabited territory. Emotions ran high, and in August, Rabbi Jack Levy recommended a 90-day cooling-off period. The committee concurred.³¹ Their decision probably eased life for the Monte Montijo family. On August 8th the Californian wrote, "Mr. and Mrs. John Montijo [*Laura*] of River Boulevard announce the arrival of a son, Gregory James, born August 24. Mr. Montijo is manager of La Cresta Airport."³²



Monte's little nephew "Kess" and mom, Margaret (Mrs. Jim Montijo), 1947

The residents who objected to the noise in 1946 got a full dose of clamor in January 1947 when an air circus was held at La Cresta Field.³³

31 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 1, 1946

32 "I'm not sure you know that Monte and Laura lived about 200 feet to the west of the La Cresta office. The Montijo's lived there until the early 1950's when the airfield closed and they moved to 2401 Pine St." Email from Mary K. Shell to the author, Feb 21, 2011

33 Bakersfield Californian, Jan 10, 1947

The parachute jump and Bud Kimball's glider act added some quiet to the show's two hours, but the loops, twists, turns, and flips provided by Herb Page's \$20,000 "Bug" added plenty of racket.

Dan Stansbury wrote,

"When I was at BHS, graduating in June, 1947, I went to this air show because of my long interest in flying. What I saw was an old air show stunt to fool the spectators which was somewhat like Lynch mentioned. At a lull in the proceedings a pilot of a Piper J-3 Cub sitting out by the runway pulled the propeller and started the engine, then left the plane to sit there idling. He walked a few feet away and started talking to a man who was helping with the planes. Another guy, very old it appeared, and in baggy overalls staggered, perhaps drunk, onto the flight line and began looking over the Piper, almost falling into it at times. Then without warning he got inside the plane, with the air show announcer yelling on the loudspeakers, 'Hey, you! Get away from that airplane. Hey stop that man! Stop that old farmer!' A thrill went through the crowd as the engine revved up and the plane started a wobbly taxi with the original pilot running after and shouting, 'Stop!' But the plane kept on going, the tail rising and then banging back to

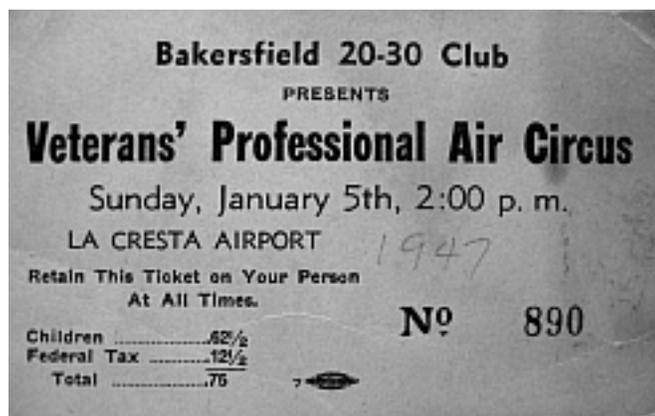
the ground, the plane turning in circles every which way with the pilot still pursuing and shouting. The plane momentarily straightened toward the bluffs and took off, bouncing and dragging its wings almost on the runway. It continued into the air 50 or 100 feet high or so and almost stalling, went over the edge of the bluffs and disappeared. The crowd screamed and the announcer shouted through the loudspeakers. Everyone was sure it was a tragedy. We all kept looking toward the bluffs, hoping the plane would somehow re-appear flying. Fire engines started, an ambulance headed for the exit on River, the announcer kept yelling, 'Oh, my God!' The crowd waited and waited and in a few minutes from the south, coming in low, here came the plane wobbling and tipping crazily. Then over the field it did some aerobatics and eventually came in to land. The old pilot-farmer jumped from the plane and took a bow. The announcer introduced the gentleman as a legitimate pilot and air show performer. We were all thrilled with the show."³⁴

"I believe it was at that same air show we saw the Flying Birdman (I think it was) who was dressed in a kind of leather bird costume with leather wings on his arms. He jumped from an airplane over the field

³⁴ Mar 2, 2011 email to this author from Don Stansbury,

and soared down in circles, his wings flapping noisily. Then about a few hundred feet high he opened his parachute and drifted down onto the field to the applause of the crowd. It was a great air show."³⁵

"At that same airfield in 1948 I took my first ride in a small airplane, a two-place Taylorcraft, which was similar to the Piper Cub, but with side-by-side seating rather than the Cub's tandem seating. That ride started me on a long love affair with flying which resulted in my attaining a Private Pilot's License in 1955, then a Commercial License in 1971, and in 1973 an Instrument Rating and Flight Instructor Certificate. I subsequently taught flying for eleven years."³⁶



La Cresta Air Circus Ticket, 1947 (Gift to author from Joe Brooks)

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

Those objecting to noise were not comforted in July when the first helicopter landed, a 175 HP, Bell 47B.³⁷ The airfield was a Cessna dealership, and a month after the helicopter landed, Frank Martin, west coast sales manger for the Cessna company, landed a luxury 300-HP, 195, five-passenger at the strip.³⁸



Touching down. From Mary K. Shell's video, 1947. Office and tanks, top right.

Noise was not in the news in February 1948 when an airplane took off and left pilot Jack Stepp behind. Stepp had started one of the Atwood crop dusters and went inside to wait for it to warm up, but the plane broke loose from its tie-downs, taxied across the field on its own, tore

37 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 17, 1947

38 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 30, 1947

through the fence at Panorama drive and tumbled down the bluffs.³⁹ While some might have thought it humorous, an accident there a month later was almost fatal. James M. Upp, 26-year-old operator of the county airport at Inyokern and his passenger William E. Ragan, 50, had just taken off and cleared the bluffs when their plane sputtered, lost altitude, and nearly crashed into a pair of oil storage tanks. Upp was struggling to return to the airstrip when the plane hit the ground near River boulevard and flipped on its back. Motorists pulled-out Upp and Ragan and rushed them to Kern General Hospital.⁴⁰ Ragan later sued Upp and Skyway Associates for neglectful operation.⁴¹



Monte at left with the Parakeet

39 Bakersfield Californian, Feb 22, 1948

40 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 2, 1948

41 Bakersfield Californian, Feb 17, 1949

The airfield tried to improve public relations. In 1951 the 20-30 Club sponsored a Kite Day for school children. ⁴²



Kite Day, 1951

Panorama drive was widened in 1954 and Mt. Vernon avenue extended north to Columbus avenue.⁴³ But the continued noise, accidents, and nearby construction of Bakersfield College closed La Cresta Airfield. Homes were built on the old runway; the airstrip disappeared.

In 1938 Monte's father had been killed in a freak flying accident, but Monte, Jr. came through WWII unscathed, flew at La Cresta, and when that business fell off he opened a used car lot at 24th and

42 Bakersfield Californian, Mar 16, 1951

43 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 31, 1954

Chester across from today's McDonald's.⁴⁴ By 1965 Monte was a partner with Central California Leasing Company in the construction of Monte Montijo's Chrysler-Plymouth agency of Delano.⁴⁵ But in April 1966 tragedy struck. Monte had just left the Crystal Inn in Bakersfield on his way back to Delano when at Highway 99 and the Shafter off-ramp he was in a car crash and was killed.⁴⁶ He was 46.

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44 Author's conversation with George Gilbert Lynch, 2003

45 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 19, 1965

46 Author's conversation with George Gilbert Lynch, Dec 4, 2003. Email to the author from Mary K. Shell