

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

The Founding of Selfridge Field

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Soldiers and equipment from Selfridge Field parade down Macomb Street on Armistice Day, 1918

In early 1916, Mount Clemens was abuzz with gossip that an aviation field would soon be located in the area. In the 13 years since the **Wright Brothers'** historic flight, aviation had come a long way and was being used in the prosecution of the European war. A large tract of land on Lake St. Clair was acquired by the **Packard Motor Car Company** at the urging of Packard president **Henry B. Joy**, who took a great interest in aviation and led the company to begin developing aircraft engines.

One year later, in the spring of 1917, Joy, the **Mount Clemens Business Men's Association** and other Detroit industrialists began lobbying Washington to locate a military airfield at the site of **Joy Aviation Field** on Lake St. Clair. The United States had just officially entered World War I on April 7. Proponents of the site pointed out the advantages of the field's proximity to the auto capital of the nation and the availability of the lake for practice bombing.

In May, 1917, word came from Washington that a deal had been closed, making Joy Aviation Field one of only nine military airfields in the country. Work commenced immediately to provide necessary road and rail access to the site. A new road was created from **Gratiot Avenue** east to the old **Cottrell** property, and it was christened **Joy Boulevard**. Grand Trunk officials expedited the work of running a track into the field as an extension from the sugar mill. The *Mount Clemens Monitor* noted that the track was being laid in record time with no regard for right-of-way, an issue which would be settled after the fact.

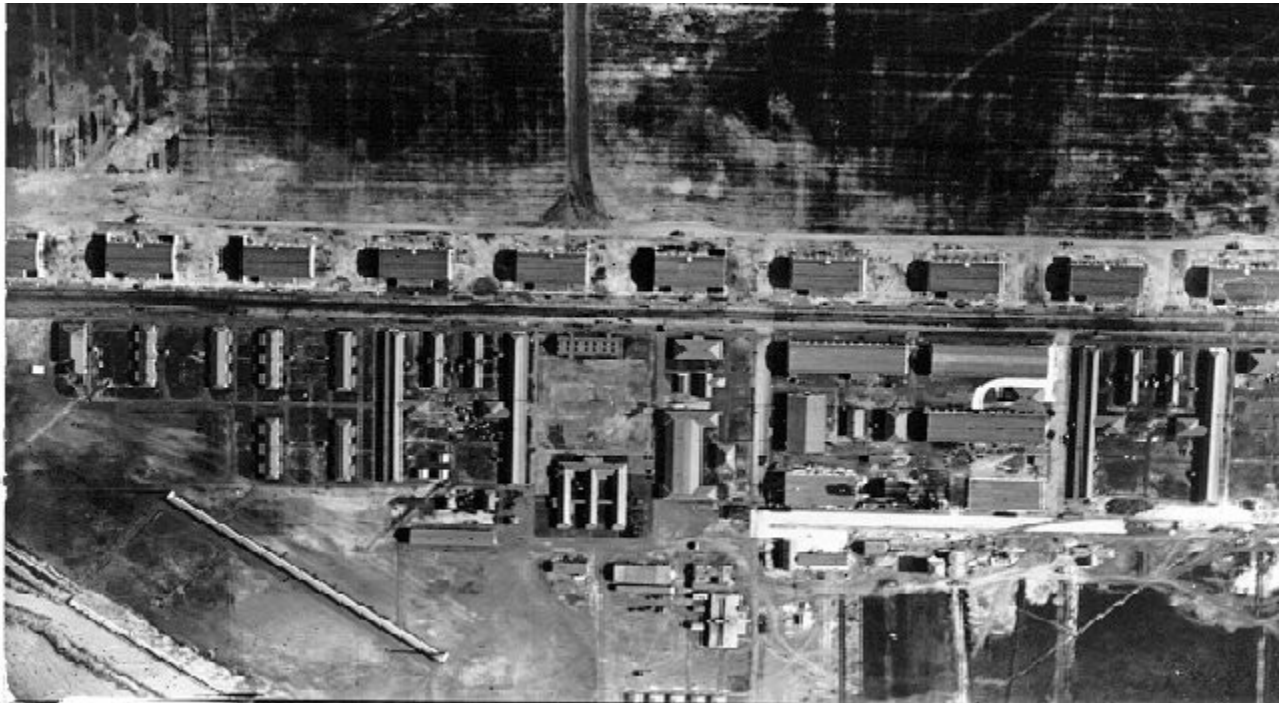
Within a month, the newspaper was reporting that 1,000 men were at work at the field constructing hangars, barracks, supply depots, machine shops and a school building. The name of the base had become **Selfridge Field**, in honor of the late **Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge**, who had perished in an airplane crash in 1908, the first military fatality of powered flight.

In July of 1917, the *Monitor* admonished the local citizenry to expect few details about the new military base. The United States, after all, was at war in Europe:

You will not get very much news about the aviation field in the newspapers, and don't

expect it. The government doesn't want a lot of stuff printed about its war plans and work, and while there is no censorship there distinctly remains the honorable obligation on the part of the newspapers not to spill out a lot of stuff some of which might be distinctly comfortable to our enemies.

The paper also reported that the field was patrolled and nobody would be allowed to enter without a pass. Since a piece of iron had been found wedged in the Grand Trunk track which might have derailed a train if not discovered, the track was also being patrolled.



An aerial view of Selfridge Field taken June 14, 1918, from an altitude of 3,500 feet

On July 9, 1917, Mount Clemens citizens saw the first airplane from Selfridge Field aloft over the city. Accommodations were underway for 150 aircraft at the field. The *Monitor* remarked that since the airplanes had begun to arrive, "Mt. Clemens is suffering severely from stiffitis neckitis." The pilots of the first airplanes at Selfridge were members of the **8th and 9th Aero Squadrons**. **Captain Byron Q. Jones** was the first commander at Selfridge. The base was gearing up to train men in flying, bombing, radio and photography for the war effort. During the summer of 1917, 72 men won aviator ratings and logged over 3,700 flying hours.

At the end of World War I, Selfridge became a pursuit fighter field when the **1st Pursuit Group** returned from France and reorganized at Selfridge on June 27, 1919. 1st Pursuit Group would make its home at Selfridge for the next two decades. In 1922, the field was declared a permanent U.S. military installation under the command of **Major Carl "Tooney" Spaatz**, who one day would become Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force.

For more information about Selfridge Field, we recommend:

- Larsen, Deborah J. "Henry B. Joy and the Founding of Selfridge Field," *Historical Society of Michigan Chronicle*, 30:2 (Summer 2007), pp.11-14.
- Larsen, Deborah J. and Nigro, Louis J. *Selfridge Field*. Charleston, S.C. : Arcadia, 2006.
- Thornton, Kevin and Dale Prentiss. *Building A Base: Selfridge and the Army*. Warren, Mich.:

U.S. Army TACOM, 1996.

- "A War Measure: A Cement Road to Aviation Field," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, June 15, 1917, p.1.
- "At Flying Field: Progress Not Rapid," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, June 1, 1917.
- "Cinched!: Uncle Sam Takes Over Aviation Field," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 25, 1917, p.1.
- "Let Us Be Joy-Ful!," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 18, 1917.
- "The Big Adventure: Representations in Favor of Our Aviation Field," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, April 6, 1917.
- "The Aviation Field," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, January 28, 1916, p.8, col.5.
- Follow this link for a photo of [Henry B. Joy](#) and information about his papers held at Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
- Follow this link to read the *Detroit News* Rearview Mirror article about the [history of Selfridge Field](#)
- Use this link to view the [Selfridge Field historical marker](#) on Jim Brennan's Michigan Historical Markers page.