



The AMA History Project Presents: History of the HIGHLAND LAKE FLYERS, INC.



Written by DH and DS, Reformatted and edited by JS (01/2013)

The following was submitted by Dave Schaefer to the AMA History Project in January of 2013.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE HISTORY OF HIGHLAND LAKE FLYERS, INC. KINGSLAND, TEXAS

AMA CLUB 2317

Some years ago, a fine man by the name of Clyde Stokes used to fly his models on the Sunrise Beach Airstrip. He flew alone as there were no other locals who were involved with models. A friend, Jim Boies, watched a bit and decided it would be fun to join Clyde. Then, another friend, Ken Balog, thought it would be fun to participate. Somewhere around 1985, the three came after me (Dick Hart) to get in on the activity. Being something I had always wanted to do, I was quite ready. However, I needed a bit of help, as I was wheelchair bound. Well, the three gave me plenty of help and we all sorta learned to fly models together. All of us, having held private pilots licenses at one time or another, were pretty sure of ourselves.

However, after a few models bit the dust, we discovered the buddy cord. Clyde being a member of AMA since its founding (had a 4 digit member number) was the lead in teaching us about models. Once Jim Boise and I went out together and buddied up thinking that together we would make half the mistakes. Seems we made twice the mistakes instead. We all managed to put a few into the ground, except Clyde of course. He never made a mistake, flew a model that was over 20 years old. Regrettably, most of you will never know Clyde. He has severe Parkinson's and is now in an assisted living development in Austin.

It seems that three or four guys from Marble Falls were flying off some rough ranch land somewhere. The name of the place escapes me. Soon they were invited to leave for some reason. One who left advertised all his models for sale in the Highlander newspaper. This caught the attention of an old time flyer named Hank Nilsen, who passed away some time back. Hank saw this fellow and simply wanted to know how anyone would quit such a great hobby. In the interim, someone spotted us at Sunrise Beach from across the lake. He searched us out for hours before he found us, so we invited him and a couple of friends to come join us. Good old Hank heard about us and he started coming over. It seemed model flyers started coming from out of the clouds as we soon grew to nearly a dozen. At that point, with most of us being members of AMA, Clyde sent off for papers to charter a new club, naming it the Sunrise Beach Flyers. On

June 30, 1986, the Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA) issued a charter to the club and assigned 2317 as the club's official number.

We grew by several more as time went by. Sure enough, the strip being in a residential area, some folks started to complain about the noise. Now, we all know that models don't make much noise (sic)!! Funny how that works. I used to get calls every weekend from folks wanting to come out and watch. Most thought it was real neat. Nonetheless, we were eventually asked to move on.

Sometime in 1987, we had a club meeting and agreed to change the name to Highland Lake Flyers. The name change became official on March 7, 1988 when AMA issued a new charter under the name Highland Lakes Flyers. The club's number remained 2317. In 1989, Hank searched out a realtor and got permission to fly off some vacant land along FM 1431 in Granite Shoals near where the Highland Lakes Elementary School is now located. We used that field for several years until construction started on the school in 1997.

Being near a busy highway, we had many visitors and quite a few who observed the activities and wanted to join the club and learn to fly. In November, 1997 the property's owner notified the club to cease flying activities. Too bad. This was a terrific flying site - long, level runway, good visibility, and plenty of undeveloped country to fly over. Plus, the location was perfect for advertising the club's presence and the rent was free.

We saw a lot of folks come and go through the years. Many couldn't take the inevitable crashes. Face it, it's a sacrificial sport! Crashes happen. There were a few who came along who were memorable. I remember one guy who built a beautiful P-51. I offered to buddy up with him but he boasted he had 10,000 flying hours. I simply said he was about to add 30 seconds to his flying experience. Sure 'nuff, he took off and made his turn straight into the ground. He silently picked up his trash and was never seen again. We had a few like that. Had quite a number of members throughout the years we were at Granite Shoals. And had a hellava lot of fun. And, most of all, made a lot of good friends. Personally, I miss the friends as much as I miss the flying.

As usual, we were finally told we'd have to leave as the land was being sold. Plus the new school was about to be built. We hung on for nearly another year but eventually had to go elsewhere. About that time, I moved back to San Antonio, but found it difficult to fly in the big city. Significantly, I discovered there was an almost total lack of friendliness. That was hard to take, as I still needed a little assistance with my flying. In the Granite Shoals days, I'd back my van up to the pit area, and before I could get out into my wheelchair, my plane and all the stuff that goes with it was out on the ground. Someone would be checking batteries and someone else would be topping off the fuel tank. What a great bunch of guys. I'll remember them all as long as I live. (Just a little note here, it was about this time that Gary Alderman wound up with eight dozen ball drivers. Whenever I needed one, I just got one of Gary's.) Finally I became discouraged here in San Antonio and sold all my equipment. Had quite a bit accumulated after 12 years of flying. But - all good things come to an end.

Following closure of the Granite Shoals field, member Hank Nilsen scoured the countryside for a replacement site. Somehow, he located some ground owned by Hoover Building Supply on the west side of Marble Falls adjoining some undeveloped granite quarry property. Hoover agreed to let the club have access free of charge. Club members started working on a runway and had something flyable by December, 1997. This was to be an interim site as club President Joe Alexander had already been negotiating for several months with the Lower Colorado River

Authority (LCRA) for a place near Wirtz Dam. The Marble Falls location wasn't the best. The ground was rough with high clay content. During periods of dry weather, large cracks appeared which swallowed the landing gear on many a model. Nevertheless, it was better than nothing and the rent was affordable.

By August, 1998, the club finally gained access to an eight acre tract of worthless ground near Wirtz Dam on LCRA's property. Actually, this was State Of Texas property managed by LCRA. After a couple of years of frustrating negotiations, President Alexander succeeded in obtaining a lease from the LCRA. The terms were tough for a club used to free rent and minimal restrictions. Dues had to be increased four hundred percent to pay rent and members had to frequently pick up trash on a two mile stretch of highway to satisfy LCRA's onerous demands. Again, members pooled resources and constructed a runway. At first, flying conditions were barely adequate. The runway was tricky, so member's flying skills improved considerably. The LCRA came in a few months after the runway was first constructed and spread cobblestones and boulders all along the east edge of the runway. More than one airplane perished in this artificial boulder field. Made our flyers very anxious when it came time to land. This location was remote from the public, so the club started advertising wherever possible to garner some publicity and keep the membership from dwindling. While conditions weren't optimum, the club kept on improving the runway and fixing up the place with the naive assumption that this was a permanent home.

In November, 2000, Hank Nilsen passed away after many months of a losing battle with cancer. Hank was the club's greatest asset. He kept things going over the years and was the reason so many learned to love flying model aircraft. Hank was always around, offering support, encouragement, and sound technical advice. Anytime a new face appeared there was Hank, offering his famous grin and warm words of welcome. If the field needed mowing, Hank did it. If everyone was running short of fuel, there was Hank, getting together a wholesale purchase. Not long after Hank's death, member Bob Holmes proposed naming the field after Hank. That idea appealed to everyone, so Hank's name remains in a highly visible place and memory of this great gentleman lingers on.

Nothing lasts forever. On September 11, 2001 (AKA 911), Arab terrorists hijacked some airplanes and flew them into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. Within two hours, the LCRA evicted the club and, shortly thereafter, with questionable justification, cancelled the club's lease. Who would have thought this remote event would have had any effect at all on Highland Lakes Flyers?

At this juncture, the club found its very existence threatened. Members started scouting around for new potential sites, but the outlook for an acceptable location was not good. One member saved the day. Like a badger, member Lynn Atkins got busy putting out feelers, checking with county officials, and going through county land records. Almost miraculously, Lynn found a ten acre tract near Kingsland owned by Llano County which, at one time, was a garbage dump. This old landfill had been closed and sealed according to Texas Natural Resource Commission requirements. After a short period of negotiations with Llano County Commissioners, the club found a new home in December, 2001 along with a ten year renewable lease.

Now, the club has an enviable flying site, and has reason to look forward to many more years of the same. Membership continues to increase, including several youth. Many improvements are in place and include a crushed limestone driveway and parking area, flight setup tables, flight line safety fences, two permanent shelters and several storage buildings. And, the club started up a Web Site not long after 2001.

On December 2, 2004, the club installed its first hard surface runway. In preparation, seventeen truckloads of granite gravel were added in late November to remove irregularities. This was graded into place by club members, then dragged and rolled to provide an optimum surface. A woven fabric geotextile (AKA Petromat) material was utilized to provide the surfacing material. This is a product commonly used as an under-layment for asphalt roads. It is available in rolls fifteen feet wide and three hundred feet in length. The material is porous to water. The result was a runway approximately 325 feet long and forty-four feet wide.

The project was accomplished with volunteer labor on the part of club members, twenty-two of whom participated. The geotextile fabric was fastened to the ground with wire staples, eight inches in length. Two of the club's members designed and fabricated four mechanical staple drivers. Workers also used rubber mallets for driving staples which were placed approximately six inches apart around the perimeter of each geotextile panel.

One member donated the use of his tractor with a bucket attachment. Another devised a tool for insertion into the center tube of the Geotextile fabric rolls which facilitated lifting and transporting with the tractor. Without the tractor, the job would have been much more difficult. The club's civil engineer had previously staked out the new runway's perimeter. A string was pulled into place defining the westernmost edge of the runway, and the first roll of material was rolled out from north to south, then stretched to remove wrinkles as much as possible. Members then commenced driving staples. As soon as the first run of material was fastened down, a second run was placed with a six inch overlap on the first. This was followed up with a third run similarly placed, this forming the easternmost panel.

Work started at approximately 8:30 am. Weather conditions were cool, in the fifty to sixty degree range. Skies were partly cloudy. Work was suspended at noon for a one hour lunch break. The job was complete at 3:00 pm, at which time club President Joel Green declared the new runway ready for use. Member Ed Bullock finalized inaugural proceedings by taking off and successfully landing a model aircraft before an enthusiastic audience of tired, but happy, club members.

After 2004, the club continued to improve flying site amenities. A security fence was installed at the south end of the field and electric service was connected to serve the needs of an increasing number of members flying electric powered airplanes. A few years later, the south end of the runway was extended forty feet, and the flight line was covered with Petromat.

On February 11, 2011, the club incorporated with the State of Texas as a non-profit organization in order to benefit from state law. The new name is Highland Lakes Flyers, Inc. On November 14, 2011, the Llano County Commissioner's Court approved a new ten year lease running from December 10, 2011 through December 9, 2021, and includes an option to renew for an additional ten year term beyond 2021. In 2012, adjacent property owner Kingsland Municipal Utility District (KMUD) installed an eight foot high woven wire security fence along the west and north sides of HLF's lease tract. A gate was incorporated in the fence to allow HLF members access for retrieving downed aircraft. Also in 2012, the club acquired a small boat and trailer for its periodic float flying activities on the Llano River.

The early history of Highland Lakes Flyers, Inc. (AMA Club 2317) was prepared by former member (now deceased) Dick Hart. The most recent history was written by member Dave Schaefer and covers the period after 1996.

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