



He's within shouting distance of the business center of Memphis, but this late afternoon arrival picks up a direct-line telephone to a downtown hotel



The Mississippi (foreground) and the Wolf rivers flow by the Memphis Downtown Airport, officially opened last fall on wing-shaped Mud Island

by BILL E. BURK • AOPA 161522

Thirty-one years and one economic depression after it was first brought up for discussion, Memphis, Tenn., has an airport on Mud Island, smack dab at its Mississippi River doorstep.

And the men who put it there—three pilots and a flying enthusiast—did so despite (1) warnings from U. S. Engineers that they would wash away the island, perhaps as soon as six years from now; (2) warnings from highway officials that they planned to build a multi-million dollar bridge over Old Man River which would cross at the north end of the runway; (3) predictions from veteran aviation men that an island airport would never be successful in the Mid-South; and (4) despite the fact that not one of the four men ever had any experience in airport management.

The quartet is composed of John W. Baird (AOPA 118893), Mallory Harwell (AOPA 241), Charles S. Breazeale (AOPA 91134), and Irby Seay, Jr. Together they formed the Downtown Airport, Inc. Baird, a well-known Memphis doctor, is president. Harwell is also a doctor; Breazeale, the president of a deter-

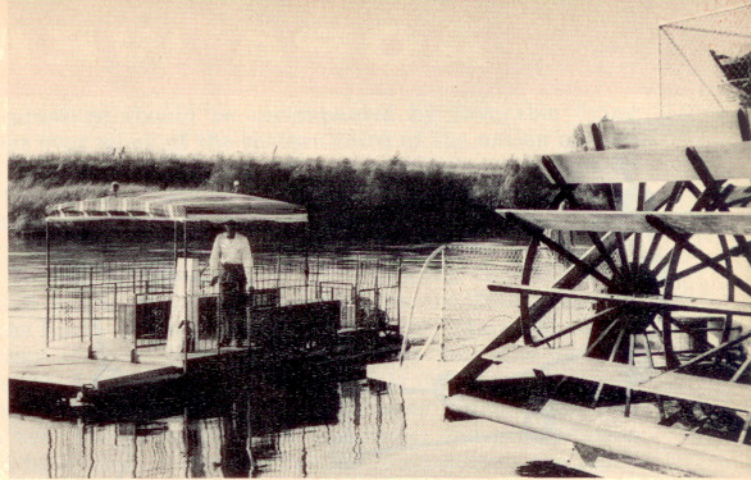
Mud Island Airport

New airport on an old mud bank gives general aviation modern landing facilities just five minutes from the commercial center of Memphis, Tenn.





Volkswagon bus dispatches passengers from tie-down area to the administration office or waiting ferry boat. Tie-down facilities can handle 200 airplanes



Six-passenger flat boat whisks pilots across the Wolf river in less than 60 seconds. Airport has its own docks on both city and airport shores

gent firm; and Seay, the only non-pilot, an engineer. Seay, it might be said here, has been at the control of private and business planes on trips and expresses confidence he could pass his flying tests.

This story actually has its beginning on April 12, 1928, when the newly-formed Airport Commission suggested the city build an airport on Mud Island. The Commission suggested Mud Island be graded and improved for use as a temporary airport "as soon as possible." The cost of an unpaved 2,500 foot strip was estimated at \$5,000.

"The future of aviation in Memphis," engineers said, "depends squarely upon the extent of municipal provision for landing fields."

Thus the idea for an airport was hatched a scant 16 years after the ugly island poked its head out of the murky waters of the Mississippi. Boyce House of Fort Worth, author and columnist, was a cub reporter with the Memphis Commercial Appeal in 1912 when the island made its debut. Said House: "I can remember it first showed up as just a little chocolate-colored bit of mud out there in the river. It kept widening just a little bit every day. The river-

men did everything they could to stop it. They worked out there in boats and they even tried to wash it away with big fire hoses. None of it worked, though, and I suppose it turned out to be a good thing in the long run."

No one knows how the island began forming, but one theory advanced by historians is that during the naval battle of Memphis in the War Between the States, a Yankee gunboat was sunk by Confederate marksmen atop the bluffs overlooking the river. Silt and mud deposits began sticking to the ship. Soon it began growing and spreading. Today Mud Island has grown to a length of about five miles, with a width at points almost a mile. Some years ago the northern tip joined the mainland to make it a peninsula. The name Mud Island, however, has stuck.

A month after the Commission made its recommendation, the infant aviation committee of the Chamber of Commerce raised many a citizen's eyebrow with the bold announcement of a planned \$2,250,000 airport to be located on the upper end of Mud Island, with a temporary strip on the lower end for "air mail and weekend passenger flights." The proposed airport was to be circular in shape, with a half-mile diameter. Planes could take off and land in any direction. The design was unique. Folks said it might well change the pattern of world-wide airport design if it succeeded. The engineering committee suggested the Mud Island site because of its proximity to the business district. Plans included a draw-

bridge over Wolf River.

This daring new plan of 1928 never developed. Little did anyone at the time suspect that America would find itself in the doldrums of a terrible economic depression the following year. The airport, along with many other projects, found itself wasting away on the shelf in blueprint form.

Down through the years, everyone with civic pride has thought at one time or another of a good use for Mud Island. There was a plan to build an art institute and museum on the island. There was a plan to relieve the downtown parking congestion by constructing either a bridge or tunnel across Wolf River and make Mud Island a huge parking lot. Then, too, there were plans for a municipal stadium, city park, open air theatre, fairgrounds, and a hundred other things—anything to change this weedy eyesore into something useful.

Throughout these years, however, aviation men have gazed at Mud Island and envisioned an airport. As early as 1940, Harwell saw the value of an airport on the island. He approached the late E. H. Crump, famed political boss of Memphis for over a quarter-century, on the subject and Crump answered: "I have other plans for Mud Island. I am not too fond of private aviation and you know why." (Months earlier, Crump lost one of his sons in a private plane crash.)

Meanwhile, talk over Mud Island still ranked second to the daily weather forecast in Memphis.

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◀ In 1937, Mississippi flood waters largely covered the island. Engineers now say annual high waters won't touch its elevated airport area

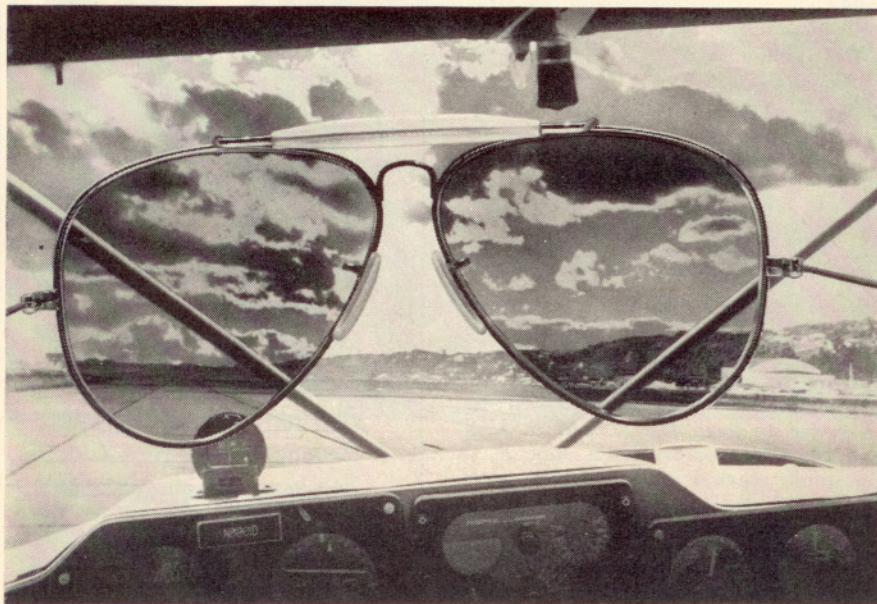
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Mud Island Airport

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Following World War II, Crump said: "The relationship of Mud Island and Memphis has become a warmed over romance. We feel that making love and talking to it has done no good. We've accomplished nothing and feel it is better just to part." This was like a death sentence for the island. Crump's statement served as a green light for U. S. Army Engineers to proceed with plans to do away with the island. In 1947 the Engineers proudly announced: "When the current of the Mississippi River goes over to the Tennessee side at Brandywine, it will make a straight chute down and cut Mud Island away."

To which Crump laughed and replied: "Predicting Mud Island's demise is like trying to predict when a snake will bite in the rain." He was right. The island wilderness withstood the onslaught of the river's mighty current and remained on the waterfront. In mid-1956, a new plan was made to wash away the island and the Engineers announced: "No major construction should be contemplated on Mud Island for at least five years because of the instability of the river's course."

It was shortly after this that the dream of aviation men began to come true. Harwell had talked incessantly of an airport on Mud Island. Through flying associations, he met Baird, Seay and

Aviation Club Formed

Concerned over the apparent lagging of interest in aviation in the three-state area of Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi, pilots and flying personnel at Memphis, Tenn., have formed the Wings Club of Memphis to help promote all facets of aviation.

The club will sponsor a General Aviation Day, Airline Day, Aviation Queen contest, and annually will recognize the person who has done most to promote aviation in the Memphis area.

With some 30 planes owned by members of the club, Wings also hopes to help small town airports with air shows, charity airlifts, and fly-ins.

President of the group is Alf Waddell, ESSO aviation representative, the "Mr. Aviation of Tennessee." Vice presidents are Dick Campbell (AOPA 144371), Piper Salesman, and Bill Thompson (AOPA 85801) engineer-pilot. Secretary is Bill E. Burk (AOPA 161522), aviation editor of *The Press-Scimitar*. Dr. Philip Markle, FAA medical examiner, is treasurer.

Breazeale. He discussed his ideas and all shared his enthusiasm. Soon they were pooling their ideas and money and Seay began making soil studies. A survey was made of 23 industries on nearby Presidents Island and it was found that there were 11 airplanes among them.

After Seay's studies, it was decided the runway should, as was suggested in 1928, parallel Wolf River on the east side of the land to avoid erosion along the Mississippi River on the west side. The elevation would be 38 feet. Studies showed that over the preceding 21 years the island was covered an average of only seven days a year. As the plans took shape and the group awaited City Commission approval to start construction, the highway people announced plans for a new bridge across the Mississippi near Memphis. One of the sites to be considered was at the foot of Auction Avenue, immediately adjacent to the north end of the proposed runway. After a brief huddle, it was decided to continue with planning of the airport and "let the chips fall as they may."

On July 9, 1958, the City Commission granted a 20-year lease for \$1 a year, plus two cents a gallon on gasoline sales and six cents a gallon on oil sales. After 20 years the airport would become city property. The deal involved 30 acres. Immediately the bulldozers went to work. Over 60,000 yards of dirt were moved. The runway, hangar and office sites, and ramp area were built up to reduce flooding threats. Initial plans called for a 2,800-foot landing strip, but these were changed to the present 3,100-by-100 feet, with 75 feet in the middle paved with soil cement. Seay served as engineer for the \$200,000 pri-

vate enterprise airport and kept his costs and fees to a minimum.

Though the strip was operational during the Cotton Carnival in May, 1959, it was not officially opened until the ribbon was cut on Oct. 3. Downtown Airport on Mud Island thus became the closest airport to a downtown metropolitan area in the United States.

Immediately, it became the popular stopping place for hundreds of Mid-South pilots—farmers, businessmen, salesmen, and others. A few businessmen living in the outstretched eastern suburbs began to commute from private strips on their property to Downtown Airport. Farmer-pilots found it convenient to fly to Mud Island, cross the river to nearby wholesale houses, pick up spare gin parts, and have their inoperative gins back in operation the same day. Advertising men, too, are numbered among Mud Island's many flying visitors. They have only to cross the river to reach the many Madison Avenue agencies. Some women pilots in outlying towns have found they can fly to Memphis, cross the river, and be in a modern department store five minutes after touching down. On football weekends, the airport is buzzing with small planes. Quite a few executive DC-3's have used the strip.

The river crossing, thought by many to be the major pitfall, has been mastered by use of a pontoon personnel boat that zips you across Wolf River in less than a minute. Soon an automobile ferry will be placed in operation and pilots will be able to park their cars on the island while away on flights.

The field is operational only during VFR weather. The runway is lighted until 11 p.m., has clear approaches, and is well-marked. The pattern calls for base legs to be flown over the Mississippi—a right hand pattern landing to the south; left hand pattern to the north. The comfortable little office building has a Unicom station and wind-ometer. The 100-by-200 foot hangar may soon have a lean-to added on the west side to house mechanical, interior decorating and fabric shops.

Once a pilot lands and has his plane cared for, he is whisked by Volkswagen bus to the ferry, across the river to a waiting taxi or his own car, and a short two-block ride (some prefer to walk)

THE AUTHOR

Bill E. Burk (AOPA 161522) has been aviation columnist for the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* two years. His predecessor, Hilmon Pinegar, for 16 years advocated using Mud Island for a downtown airport. When Burk took over, he continued pushing the policy. This is what Burk has to say about the Downtown Airport: "Memphis is a supply city for towns in a 200-mile radius. Most of the highways leading to town are wholly inadequate. Thousands of people come to Memphis annually from the trade area to shop. Heretofore, they could expect to kiss



Takeoff in the new Aero-Plane is just like driving off the runway

This One Is For Flying Only

Aerocar's second model—designed for flying only—will go into production when FAA certification is completed, according to M.D. Taylor, president of Aerocar, Inc., Longview, Wash.

The tricycle-gear, four-place *Aero-Plane* has the same distinctive fuselage and tail configuration of its close relative the *Aerocar* but removal of the "automobile" components from the roadable design has made it possible to cut empty weight by 300 pounds. Result is that four persons, 60 pounds of baggage and full fuel load of 24 gallons can be carried at the same gross weight as the two-place *Aerocar*.

The nose section has been redesigned so that occupants are seated almost entirely ahead of the high wing, making the pilot's visibility excellent. Access to the cockpit is made easy through an extra-wide door which the company points out is at "auto" height.

Wings, tail, powerplant, and tail-propeller arrangement are identical to the *Aerocar's* but the landing gear has been redesigned. Single-leg main gears have a double tapered spring installation which flexes along an "S"

curve during landing impact. A spring-oil arrangement is said to keep the new nosewheel maintenance free.

As on the *Aerocar*, wings fold back, reducing required hangar space to a minimum.

Price set on the *Aero-Plane* is \$12,500 including shoulder harness, stall warner and basic instruments.

Specifications and Performance

Empty Weight	1,200 pounds
Gross Weight	2,100 pounds
Wing Area	190 sq. ft.
Wing Span	34 ft.
Power Loading	14.7 lb/h.p.
Powerplant	
Lycoming O-320 (derated)	143 h.p.
Top Speed	Over 135 m.p.h.
Cruise Speed (70% power)	Over 120 m.p.h.
Rate of Climb (gross weight)	Over 700 f.p.m.
Landing Speed	50-55 m.p.h.
Stall Speed	50 m.p.h.
Fuel Consumption at Cruise	8 g.p.h.
Normal Cruise Range (standard tankage)	350 miles

END

finds him in the heart of downtown Memphis. Returning, the pilot goes to the Memphis Queen docks, picks up a straight-line telephone, and within minutes the pontoon boat is on its way. The airport also has straight-line connections to several Memphis hotels which,

off a whole day if they lived beyond 100 miles. Now, with the airport on Mud Island, people find they are less than an hour away in most cases from the big Main Street department stores. Charter services are gearing their Memphis flights along these lines. In my case, it means that I can be airborne from my office in less than 15 minutes. On more than one occasion, I have been able to get aerial photos of on-the-scene mishaps and have them ready for use in the day's editions. Downtown Airport, within sight of hundreds of downtown business offices, has done more to make Memphis businessmen air-minded than anything I know."

on being notified, send transportation to the flying visitors.

Downtown Airport has two tenants—Aircraft Incorporated, a sales firm; and Campbell's Aircraft Interiors. Both pay a percentage of their sales as rental. Late in 1959, the airport was linked with six Arkansas cities by Aztec Airways, offering daily commuter service in Piper Apaches.

Today, over 20 planes a day use the Downtown Airport on Mud Island. The airport only recently found its way onto the navigational charts. As word gets around, it is expected that the traffic will increase. Some members of the Airport Commission have expressed openly that they hope someday it will be able to handle all the general aviation traffic, and leave overcrowded Municipal Airport to the commercial and military planes.

On Dr. Harwell's office wall, a sign reads: "Don't Make Vast Plans with Half-Vast Ideas." In Harwell's case, as in that of Breazeale, Seay and Baird, it seems this advice was well-taken. END