

# STINSON MUNICIPAL AIRPORT: A TEXAS ORIGINAL

BY SUSAN MARX



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STINSON MUNICIPAL AIRPORT



If you're planning a trip to San Antonio any time soon, be sure to stop at Stinson Municipal Airport (KSSF). It's the second oldest continuously operated airport in the United States, it's just six miles south of downtown and has a full service FBO, San Antonio Aviation, offering fuel, expert repair service, and offers access to rental cars to make exploring the area easy. Both the FBO and the Terminal Building have a pilots lounges, Tel-net for getting weather reports and filing flight plans.

As the primary reliever for general aviation traffic, Stinson has four runways including the relatively recent addition of a 5,000 ft. runway that puts them on the map with dispatchers and schedulers for corporate jet traffic. Even so, most of Stinson's traffic is made up of small planes, student pilots, some military planes and private jets. There is no commercial traffic there. The tower operates from 7 am – 10 pm, seven days a week.

Morris Martin, Stinson's friendly manager, said, "Right now we don't charge anything for transient pilots and tie-downs – we make our money off the fuel." He also said that the airport is uniquely positioned for growth. "We're working with TxDOT Aviation to develop and improve the existing infrastructure." It shows. The dark black tarmac does indeed look brand new from a resurfacing project that keeps it one of the safest and most modern historical airports in South Central Texas.

Stinson is close to Brooks City Base, the Toyota Manufacturing Plant and Texas A&M University at San Antonio. Martin said, "Our busiest times are when the big schools have their games but we get a lot of traffic from Murphy Oil & Gas and companies like Halliburton too." While it looks calm and quiet, the historic airport is, in fact, a dynamic aviation hub. According to a private report published in 2011, Stinson adds \$63 million to the local economy every



year and is indirectly responsible for more than 1,000 city jobs (including 74 airport jobs).

The City of San Antonio, Martin and the rest of the management have done a fantastic job of making Stinson as practical and enjoyable as it is unforgettable. There's a new Cajun restaurant located in the Terminal Building that offers jazz on the weekends and thanks to the careful restoration and subsequent expansion of the original Art Deco style terminal – arriving at Stinson is like entering a time capsule dedicated to the beginnings of Texas Aviation.

SSF began in 1915 as a flight school. Its call letters literally reflect that legacy - San Antonio Stinson Flight School. The school began just 12 years after Orville and Wilbur Wright made the first successful flight in history near Kitty Hawk in South Carolina. Those first flights were only seconds long and

there were no reporters there to witness them but those early flights ignited the imagination of adventurous souls around the world, including the Stinson family. A few years later, Army Lt. Ben Falloy was the first military man tasked to learn to fly at Ft. Meyers and shortly after that he headed up the Army's first aviation R & D effort at Ft. Sam Houston – just down the road.

The entire Stinson family was passionate about flying. Their daughter Marjorie is said to have felt so strongly about it she went to San Antonio City Council and convinced them to lease the family 500 acres so they could teach flying. Marjorie's sister Katherine got into aviation by default. As the story goes, Katherine hoped to earn enough money barnstorming to finance her musical education (pilots could make as much as \$1,000 a show) but once she started flying, Katherine left her



musical aspirations behind to become the first woman to do the loop-the-loop.

When you walk in the terminal, you can't help but notice an impressive photographic collection of early aviators, student pilots and the now vintage planes and bi-planes the Stinsons flew, developed and used for teaching. Martin pointed out one in the lobby of Katherine as an older woman sorting through some old pictures. You'd never know from looking at her that she was such a daredevil and pioneering aviatrix.

Katherine did go to Europe but as a pilot, not a pianist. She traveled to several European countries and set endurance and distance records before WWI. Back then, the military didn't allow women pilots so Katherine flew for the American Red Cross, delivering supplies, raising money and driving ambulances. Martin said, "Katherine worked with the Red Cross until she contracted Tuberculosis." During WWI and for about 20 years after it, the City of San Antonio ran Stinson as its main airport and for a brief period it welcomed commercial flights from American, Braniff and Eastern Airlines.

The Stinson brothers, Eddie and Jack, on the other hand, focused their energies on the scientific and mechanical side of aviation. Eddie started the Stinson Aircraft Company in 1920 in Dayton, Ohio and built several planes for his Detroit backers, including automobile mogul E.L. Cord. He developed 6 models before his death in 1932, after which the company was acquired by investors.

The Air Force took control of Stinson during WWII and used it as a training base, which continued its flight school legacy. While the Air Force was in charge there, they built as many as 100 hangar-like structures out of corrugated tin. Some of them are still standing. An old U.S. Air Mail building can still be seen at the far end of the field, near where the original "terminal" was located. After WW II all commercial flight moved to the new San Antonio International Airport and Stinson started catering to individuals and private industry.

Stinson's place in aviation history is one of the reasons why it has been so lovingly restored. It actually wasn't until 1935 that the Works Progress Administration built the stone terminal that is at the center of the expanded structure you see today. In 2008, Martin said, "We worked with San Antonio's Historical Society to preserve the original feel." They've successfully kept the spirit of the early days by refurbishing the Art Deco style and adding "faux tin" wings on either side of the WPA era terminal. These create an additional 24,000 square feet of space.

Across the airfield, at 1234 99th Street, is the San Antonio branch of the Texas Air Museum. It doesn't look like much from the outside, except for the old war birds resting in the yard but inside is a commemorative area for Texas aviators who gave their lives in the service of our country as well as Katherine Stinson's bicycle-like Bleriot and an AVRO tri-plane. Over the course of its history, Stinson has welcomed aviation superstars like flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker, Charles





Lindbergh and the Galveston native, Douglas “Wrong Way” Corrigan – who got his moniker in 1938 by flying against the rules and making a nonstop transatlantic flight from N.Y. to Ireland claiming he got lost.

It's extremely fitting that there is still a flight school at Stinson. Although the Stinson School of Flying known as *Sky Safety* has no direct affiliation with the original school responsible for establishing the airport, lead flight instructor John Aken is dedicated to training today's pilots both in the air and with the state-of-the-art simulator equipment they have there. *Sky Safety* is affiliated with Palo Alto Community College and has students involved in the pilot program as well as in training students on air traffic simulators to get them ready to enter the FAA Air Traffic Control Training School. Stinson is also home to Alamo Helicopter Tours – a privately owned company that also offers pay-as-you-go helicopter pilot training.

SSF serves approximately 130,000 landings and takeoffs every year and is home to the Texas Wing of the Civil Air

Patrol (CAP). Local pilot Harry Perez said he first fell in love with flying as a cadet with the CAP. As an all volunteer organization, “CAP was tasked with the responsibility of search and rescue missions of lost civilian aircraft to take the strain off the military to find those planes,” Perez said. CAP flew thousands of those missions out of Stinson during WW II and during the Vietnam War from 1965-1974. CAP maintains a presence at Stinson. They meet twice a month to support flight operations and training programs.

Stinson's manager Morris Martin soloed in a Cessna at Stinson in 1987. He also holds an Air Frame and Power Plant license so overseeing operations at SSF isn't just a job for him. As he looks out over the runway from just beneath the current modern control tower, Martin is clearly living his passion. There are several conference rooms in the new wings, available free of charge and, again, thanks to the brilliant planning and retro modern architectural design, it's impossible to be there without feeling connected to aviation's adventurous past and evolutionary future.

TRAVIS WHITE PHOTO



[www.texasairmuseum.org](http://www.texasairmuseum.org) (210) 977-9885

<http://www.sanantonio.gov/SSF.aspx>

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