

# The Face of an Airport - Past & Present

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I was first initiated to the inner workings of an airport when I worked as a commercial leasing officer managing the federal real estate portfolio at Transport Canada. Here I learnt some interesting anecdotes and narratives on the history of airports and experienced for myself how airports changed over time.

Historically, airports started as municipal creations with federal oversight. The federal presence at airports was set out in regulations that lead to the monitoring of safety related matters.

Airports, however, proved to be costly to operate and many of the post depression airports were showing signs of major deterioration. As a result, the federal government became increasingly involved in airport operations, particularly the Department of National Defense as this department was given jurisdiction over the federal airports.

Their 'flying club initiative' which provided financial funding was wildly successful and kick-started both commercial aviation and general aviation in Canada. Airports began to spring up across the country.

In 1927, a Trans-Canada Airway, now Air Canada, was established. The initial fleet consisted only of two Lockheeds and a biplane. The construction of the Trans-Canada Airway represented one of the largest federal initiatives in Canadian history. The dramatic growth in the airline industry in Canada would not have taken place without it. The resulting benefit to the movement of persons and goods allowed great strides forward for the country.

When World War II began, the Canadian government was front and centre in its ability to provide viable airports for training. Under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, the Department of Transport (now Transport

Canada) was given the jurisdiction to select and build airports. The role of the federal government was limited to the establishment of air routes and to the construction and maintenance of federal airports. Airports that had been part of the Trans-Canada Airway were brought into the program and suitable municipal airports were leased, upgraded and expanded by the federal government.

In 1942 Canadian Pacific Railways purchased Canadian Airways and ten small bush airlines to form another Canadian scheduled airline -Canadian Pacific Air Lines. The new airline opened up the Pacific and developed routes to the Far East, Australia, South America and Europe. This advanced commercial aviation to another level.

There was a boom in general aviation both private and commercial after the war as thousands of trained pilots had been released from military service. In addition, inexpensive war surplus transport and training aircraft became available. Manufacturers such as Cessna & Beechcraft expanded production to provide light aircraft to the new middle class. Furthermore, by the end of the war, an astonishing number of new airports had been built and numerous existing facilities had been expanded. There were two categories of federally owned airports: national (larger sized airports) and community (regional/local). Canada's transportation system had thus become solidly focused on aviation as a builder of the nation in the same way as the railways had been critical in nation building prior to the war.

Apart from the airport infrastructure (runways, taxiways, aprons) a typical structure of an airport consisted of a terminal for processing passengers, a control tower or flight services area, a few large industrial type buildings (garage, fire hall) and hangars to accommodate the airlines and private aircraft owners. Airports were usually built in the periphery of the city/town in rural areas on large tracts of unserved lands. Hence, airports had to be self-sufficient and provide all the necessary services such as road maintenance, water, gas, hydro, fire, and garbage. They were, therefore, viewed to be independent little communities on their own.

Transport Canada now owned 135 airports across the country and out of these, 76 were owned and operated by Transport Canada including all the eight Major Federal Airports (MFAs), i.e. Halifax, Montreal (Dorval/Mirabel), Toronto (Pearson), Ottawa, Winnipeg, Calgary,

Edmonton and Vancouver. As the federal airports matured & the passenger levels and traffic rose, there was more development on the airport lands and more services for passengers introduced. Airports were divided into two categories: national being those capable of paying their way and regional/locals those requiring continued subsidization. The aim was for financial self-sufficiency for the system as a whole with full cost recovery for services at the larger airports. The goal for the smaller unprofitable regional and local airports was to recover costs from users to the extent possible.

However, by 1985 it became apparent that only the larger airports were financially viable; the government had been subsidizing airports at approximately \$500-million

Canada has prospered as a result of the government's initiative to commercialize airports. Today, they are an integral part of the communities they serve; they are more efficient and capable of responding to the needs of the users. Since the devolution in 1992, Canadian airports have invested more than \$14 billion in capital infrastructure commitments. Canadian airports are getting worldwide accolades from professional organizations for environmental projects & programs, architectural feats, customer service, cultural activities etc.

In 2011, the Ottawa Macdonald-Cartier International Airport was named by the Airports Council International "the number one airport of all sizes in North America, and the number two airport in the world serving between



per year. The federal budget of that year created the momentum toward a new era of self-sustaining airports. Funding for both national and community airports began to fall far short of paying for the required upgrades needed by the airports, putting their very survival at risk. Canada's transportation system, despite its past successes and achievements, was becoming a liability rather than an advantage to Canadian businesses and travelers. It was evident that the Canadian airport system was overbuilt as 94% of the airline traffic was at the larger major Canadian national airports. These 26 largest airports were thus slated to become part of today's National Airports system.

A transformative change occurred in the 1990's resulting in airport transfers from the federal government. The community airports (regional/local) were transferred to local entities and the operation of larger national airports were transferred to self-financing, not-for-profit Airport Authorities making leasehold payments to the federal government as Transport Canada retained the Landlord role and the regulatory role.

2 million and 5 million passengers annually. According to the World Economic Forum, Canada's air transport infrastructure is ranked first in the world.

Be proud of your Airport!!

*Upcoming articles will deal with airport operations and federal regulations.*

