

Ernie Renzel

San José Airport Founding Father and Visionary



Ernest H. Renzel Jr., businessman, civic leader and aviation enthusiast, is known as the “Father of San José Airport.” Without his vision, this Silicon Valley economic engine likely would not exist today.

The airfield – the runways and the land – is named for Renzel, who led the public campaign to build an airport in San Jose to attract airline service. He later served as mayor and chairman of the San José Airport Commission.

Born in 1907 as a third-generation San Josean, Renzel graduated from Stanford University and joined the family’s wholesale grocery business.

In the late 1930s, he headed the Citizens Airport Committee in a campaign to “get San José out of the horse-and-buggy class.” The committee found 483 acres a couple miles north of downtown San José for a new airport site.

Renzel negotiated the sale to the city for \$300 an acre in 1939 and led a tax campaign to finance the purchase. Development was delayed during World War II.

In 1944, Renzel was elected to the San José City Council and served as council president (mayor). After the war, the council decided to develop the airfield. The first commercial airliner flew into San José Municipal Airport on February 1, 1949 when a Southwest Airways DC-3 landed on its way to Los Angeles. San José’s political and business establishment was on hand for the airport dedication, with Renzel as master of ceremonies.

Renzel later served on the San José Airport Commission for eight years, including a term as chairman.

In December 2003, the city council voted unanimously to name the airfield “Ernie Renzel Field” in his honor.

Renzel died in 2007 at age 100.

1907 Born in San José.

1929 Graduates from Stanford University, joins father’s wholesale grocery business.

1938 Leads citizens group that locates 483 acres northwest of downtown. In 1939, arranges to purchase the property to hold for the city.

1940 Leads election campaign to pass tax increase to pay for airport property and get San José out of the “horse and buggy class.”

1941 Airport development plans delayed by World War II.

1944 Elected to the San José City Council, serving four years, including two years as president (mayor).

1946 The city decides to develop Municipal Airport. Renzel recruits James M. Nissen to become airport manager and lead the program.

1949 San José Municipal Airport opens. Renzel is master of ceremonies at the civic celebration marking the first airline flight.

1969-1977 Renzel serves on the San José Airport Commission, which advises the city council and airport staff on policy issues.

2003 City Council names the airfield – the land and runways – “Ernie Renzel Field” in his honor.

2007 Dies at age 100 in San José.