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Helen Richey Field Gets Makeover as Celebration Begins

Category: History, News || By Jason Togyer
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Work is underway to rebuild Helen Richey Field just as McKeesport Heritage Center prepares to open an exhibit celebrating the life of the famed aviatrix.

City council this month awarded W.G. Land Co. of Champion, Fayette County, a nearly \$60,000 contract for improvements to drainage systems, the playing surfaces, and other features of the regulation-size ballfield in Renziehausen Park.

Funding for the repair work --- which is already underway --- is coming from the Allegheny Regional Asset District's 1 percent sales tax.

The upgrades will include new sod, new drains and a tarp for the infield, replacing the backstop, relocating the dugouts and other measures that should eliminate the swampy, lumpy conditions which have plagued the field during wet weather.

The field is named for Helen Richey, the world's first female commercial airline pilot and a native McKeesporter.

On Saturday, following a special invitation-only reception, the nearby McKeesport Heritage Center will begin a year-long celebration of Richey's life in anticipation of what would have been her 100th birthday next November.

"When I was a kid, that field used to be comparable to Forbes Field, with the exception of the size of the bleachers," Mayor Jim Brewster said. "We need to get back to that level of quality."

Helen Richey Field is currently used by McKeesport Area High School's varsity teams and other baseball teams. All of the work should be complete before WPIAL high school baseball season starts March 1.

City officials said long-term plans include the possible installation of batting cages, which would bring Helen Richey Field up to the standards of fields at other WPIAL schools.

Brewster said his ultimate goal is to lure the Pittsburgh Pirates and minor-league Washington, Pa., Wild Things to the city for exhibition or charity games.

The city also would like to see Serra Catholic High School --- which presently uses a field in Elizabeth Township for home games* --- play at Helen Richey Field.



Helen Richey Field (Click for Google Maps view)



McKeesport Heritage Center is celebrating the life of Helen Richey, the world's first female commercial airline pilot, with a yearlong schedule of events. The Richey celebrations will conclude with a dinner in November 2009 during the centennial of her birth in the city. (Photo courtesy McKeesport Heritage Center)

Richey grew up on Jenny Lind Street. Born Nov. 21, 1909 in McKeesport, she was the youngest of six children of McKeesport School Superintendent Joseph Richey and his wife, Amy Winter Richey.

Considered a "tomboy" by her peers, Richey's parents wanted her to become a teacher. According to Bob Hauser, president of the Heritage Center, Richey spent a few unhappy months at Carnegie Institute of Technology (present-day Carnegie Mellon) before dropping out.

Her interest in flying was piqued by an airplane trip to Cleveland, and she convinced her parents to allow her to take flying lessons at the former Bettis Field in present-day West Mifflin. Richey earned her pilot's license at age 20.

"Helen really had kind of a natural ability," Hauser says. "She was able to just get into an airplane and take off."

Reportedly the first Pittsburgh-area woman to earn a pilot's license, Richey was soon in demand on the airshow circuit. In 1932, she and another female pilot set an endurance record by keeping a plane continuously aloft for 10 days with the help of mid-air refueling.

Two years later Richey was hired as a co-pilot by Central Airlines (a predecessor of United Airlines), based at the then-new Allegheny County Airport.

But Richey couldn't seem to get any assignments from the airline. Male pilots resented her presence and refused to allow her to join the Air Line Pilots Association.

Upon being told by Central management that her hiring was a publicity stunt, Richey resigned in disgust. She was hired by the federal government to help mark some of the early national airways.

Another famous aviatrix, Amelia Earhart, is said to have praised Richey for being a better pilot than she was.

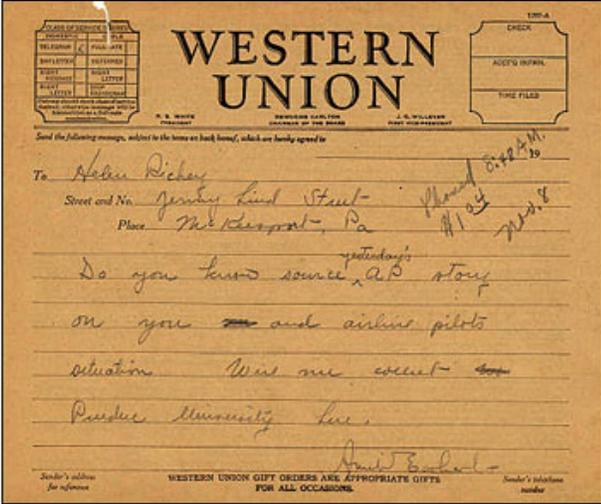
In 1936, Richey set a world's record for flight in a heavier-than-air craft, taking a single-seat airplane to more than 18,000 feet. That same year, Richey and Earhart teamed up to compete in the 1936 transcontinental Bendix Air Races, finishing fifth.

They used the same Purdue University financed twin-engine Lockheed Electra that Earhart was flying with she disappeared the following year.

During World War II, Richey trained pilots and flew military transport planes. But after the war, a surplus of male pilots and the decline of "barnstorming" left jobs few and far between.

Plagued by depression and kept from the commercial cockpit, Richey died from an overdose of pills in New York in 1947 in what was widely assumed to be a suicide.

Two years ago, a documentary entitled The Helen Richey Story: The Pride of McKeesport reintroduced Richey's story to the public.



Telegram from Amelia Earhart to Helen Richey in McKeesport after her resignation from Central Airlines. (Click to visit Purdue University Archives)

The idea for a yearlong celebration of Richey's life was sparked by Heritage Center volunteer Evette Wivagg, a fan of Helen Richey who loaned a biography of the flier to Hauser.

"When I read the first sentence and saw that she was born in 1909, I thought, 'This is 2008, we've got to have a centennial for her!'" he says.

Wivagg, Hauser and Executive Director Michelle Wardle are part of the committee planning the Richey centennial, along with volunteers Donna Frederick, Joyce McGregor, Joy Johnson, Mary Fey and Joanne Rodgers.

In addition to the exhibits on display, which tell Richey's story through original photos and memorabilia, the Heritage Center will also host a series of activities for children that explore aviation and women's history.

During March, in honor of Women's History Month, a special display of material from the National WASP WWII Museum in Sweetwater, Texas, will visit McKeesport.

The celebration will culminate with a dinner on Nov. 21, 2009 --- what would have been Richey's 100th birthday.

The Heritage Center also hopes to get a historical marker placed in West Mifflin near the old Bettis Field, now site of Bettis Laboratory.

Hauser says it's a long overdue tribute to an aviation pioneer who would otherwise be all but forgotten.

"She really was feisty --- she wanted to fly and she knew it," Hauser says, "and she stuck to it."

McKeesport Heritage Center is located at 1832 Arboretum Drive. For more information, call (412) 678-1832 or email mck-heritage@yahoo.com.

* --- Correction, not Perfection: This article gave an incorrect location for Serra High home baseball games. Thanks to Alert Reader Bart for the update.



Renovated Helen Richey Field in McKeesport PA

Home for the Penn State Greater Allegheny
Baseball Team

