

# History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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## About the City Archives

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# When Griffith Park Really Took Off

Hello, dear reader. Are you aware that at one time our beloved Griffith Park had its own airport? Well, it is true, so here is another incredible story in the history of the ever-fascinating City of Los Angeles.

It all began back in 1911 with Van M. Griffith, son of Col. Griffith Jenkins Griffith, the donator of the 3,015 acres that became the core portion of Griffith Park to the City of Los Angeles back in 1896. In 1882, the elder Griffith purchased the Los Feliz Rancho.

Van Griffith had become Motor Bus Transportation Commissioner for the City from 1917-25 and Park Commissioner, like his father 25 years earlier, from 1921-33. Both father and son had an affinity for aviation.

Van Griffith had aviation in his blood. By profession he was a journalist, but his hobby was aviation. At the age of 23, he published an aeronautical magazine, *Aviation*. The magazine remained in existence for only one year, but the purpose was to show fraud and phony stock schemes in the profession.

Father and son, with the affinity toward flying, opened what would eventually be called the Griffith Aviation Park, one of its many titles. The Aviation Park, in 1911, continued to be owned by Col. Griffith as part of the Griffith Reservation. Eventually the City purchased the property as an addition to the Park after the senior Griffith died in 1919. Today, that piece of land consists of the Greater Los Angeles Zoo parking lot, the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, the Ventura-Golden State Freeway interchange, and the John Ferraro Soccer Field. This land was also bordered by one of the bends of the Los Angeles River. In 1912, Van Griffith donated 100 acres of that land alongside what is now known as Griffith Park Drive.

According to Griffith Park historian Dr. Mike Eberts from his centennial history book *Griffith Park*, "The flying field was a mile long, 1,000 to 2,500 feet wide, and unpaved ... The old Los Feliz adobe was converted into a clubhouse for the Aero Club of California." Van Griffith had intended on building a 50-foot-high grandstand near today's Greater Los Angeles Zoo. The younger Griffith's intentions were to host monthly air shows on the first Sunday of every month. On May 12, 1912, the airfield opened, and Van Griffith was promoting rental spaces for his facility.

Young Griffith's proposal for the airfield comes from another quote from the Ebert book:

The establishment of a community field for aeroplane factories, branch establishments of Eastern factories, agencies of aeroplanes, motors, and accessories, operation of an exhibition field, schools of aviation conducted by whoever desires, private flights by new owners, etc.

The airfield was never considered a local center of activity for aviation needs. It was viewed as a small, out-of-the-way airfield with three hangars. One of the three individuals who built facilities there was Glenn L. Martin. He went on to fame and fortune in the field of aviation. Backed by Harry Chandler from *The Los Angeles Times*, Martin operated at that site a factory and flying school. One of his students was William Boeing, and Donald Douglas was hired as an engineer. Eventually, Glenn Martin went on to become a partner in the major aviation corporation Martin Marietta, corporate successor to

the Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company, which built large military aircraft. In 1995 Martin Marietta became partners with Lockheed, and the company is now known as Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Co.

In 1916, Glenn Martin left the Griffith Aviation Park to merge with Orville Wright & Co. When Martin left the area, he had become so dominant in his operation that some people referred to the airfield as Martin's Flying Field. Donald Douglas remained for a time, then he, too, left. The airfield was abandoned, and Van Griffith's private management days were over.

After World War I, in 1920, there was an attempt by enthusiasts to once again open the airfield. The proposed name was the Van M. Griffith Flying Field. A proposal was sent to the City's Park Commission. The reply was that the City did not own the Griffith Reservation at that time and could do nothing. Griffith Jenkins Griffith had passed away



Glenn L. Martin.



Non-commissioned officers in training in 1931.



Van Griffith.

the prior year; resolution of property rights would have to wait.

In 1924, Major Corliss C. Moseley of the California National Guard needed Griffith Aviation Field for his 115th Observation Squadron, 40th Division Air Service based at Santa Monica's Clover Field. The latter did not meet the needs of the Squadron. Moseley met with Van Griffith, who appointed him to the Park Commission's Airport Advisory Commission. Moseley's intent was not for social flying clubs or entrepreneurial desires. Moseley's only interest was military aviation.

Moseley quickly applied for a permit to lease the property, which was now owned by the City. He ran into some opposition from the Park Department and others because they wanted the land for a new golf course. But, the City Council wanted the resurrection of the airfield for a number of reasons appropriating \$10,000 for construction. From Volume 147, page 373 of the Los Angeles City Council Minute Books,

dated July 23, 1924, the following is an abstract of Council's reasons for their decisions to grant the money:

(1) ... the airport will be of no value to the community until it is equipped and improved; (2) ... it seems quite certain that ... Congress will provide for a regular air mail route if we are equipped to accept the same; (3) ... under the stimulus of your recent designation of the airport the Adjunct General of the State ... authorized the organization of a Divisional Air Service Unit of the California National Guard, subject to the City ... permitting the use of the necessary flying field and ... equipment; (4) ... through the National Guard Air Unit which has been ... Federalized is prepared to supply free of cost, f.o.b. Los Angeles \$250,000 worth of equipment ... to the field will ... place Los Angeles on the air map of America; and

(5) ... the field will give Los Angeles ... commercial [and government activities when needed].

As the National Guard used the airfield, Van Griffith disliked the operation. In 1929, he was one of two Park Commissioners who refused to give the Guard a lease extension. He was adamant about the Griffith Park airfield only being a temporary place for the Guard, not a permanent home base. Even more strongly was he opposed to having commercial flights arrive and depart from the facility.

In 1932, the Park Commissioners received a request from The Golden State Flying Service to make occasional passenger arrivals and departures. The Commissioners considered the notion and referred it to the City Attorney. But of much more concern was when Frank Shaw was elected Mayor and wanted to close fog-bound Mines Field, a precursor to LAX, and move the commercial airport to Griffith Park.



Col. Griffith Jenkins Griffith.

Van Griffith then lobbied the California Taxpayers' Association and other organizations to oppose the commercial airport consideration. Women's organizations and the reform-oriented Municipal League assisted Griffith in denying Shaw's consideration for the Park.

Finally, in 1934, the proposed expansion and commercialization of the Griffith Park Airport collapsed under pressure of economic weight. In March of that year, the airport was abandoned due to cost.

I have heard that whatever remained of the Griffith Park airport phenomena was moved to Van Nuys. But that would be another story.

Photos courtesy the Los Angeles Public Library, Security Pacific Collection; and the UCLA Library Dept. of Special Collections.

