

Mary Enos: farmer, landowner, 'mother' of Travis

By Nancy Dingler

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The last thing in the minds of most Americans on that fateful Sunday in December of 1941, was that our Pacific fleet would be attacked and we would be at war.

On Dec. 8, President Roosevelt would give his "infamy" speech as he and Congress declared war on Japan. The immediate pressing fear of everyone on the West Coast was that Japan would not stop with the Hawaiian Islands; they would continue in their conquest to California's shores.

Then, as now, the ordinary citizen wanted to fight back, to do something to combat the enemy. Home defenses were organized and the Armed Forces assigned the 4th Air Force to the skies to patrol and protect the West Coast.

By April of 1942, the Office of Chief of Engineers in Washington D.C. allocated \$998,000 for the construction of two runways, and a few temporary buildings on 945 acres near the twin farming communities of Fairfield and Suisun City.

The proposed site for the new airfield was strategically excellent. The prevailing winds were good, the site was somewhat remote, virtually flat, composed of short grass and vernal pools. In the spring, the land was ablaze with wild flowers set into a background of emerald green grass.

One can still view this beauty at the Jepson Prairie Reserve. Further reasons for picking the site was its location near a rail line, a shipping channel and close access to San Francisco.

By July, bulldozers arrived and began shaping the landscape into what eventually would become Travis Air Force Base. September brought the completion of the runways and operations buildings.

The site was occupied by a few scattered ranches where cattle and sheep were the principle agri-business. The farm families of Calveras, Frietas, Best, Chelps, Capral and Enos were approached by the federal government and made an offer of, on average, \$50 per acre.

By October of '42, the War Department decided that rather than have the 4th Air Force take over the new field, they were going to assign it to the Air Transport Command to

support and supply the war in the Pacific.

They would need more land. By September, an adjacent 1,312 acres was acquired through eminent domain. Shortly after the end of the war in June 1945, another 1,145 acres was added.

Then in the 1950s and '60s, the base increased in size again, which brought its total acreage to more than 6,000 - some 10 square miles.

Joseph and Mary Enos owned 320 acres. They initially sold 42 acres to the government for housing. Mary and Joe lived in a small, white-frame farmhouse raising their sheep, milking their cows and tending to their chickens. The original military housing was virtually tar-paper construction. The barracks were very crude and without amenities, such as running water, let alone hot water for bathing or washing clothes, and no dining facilities.

Mary and Joe opened their home to these young people, providing them with a place to wash and providing fresh eggs and vegetables. The Army Corps of Engineers set up their headquarters near a grove of Eucalyptus trees on the ranch, unofficially dubbing it "Camp Enos."

In their patriotism and generosity, the Enoses allowed full access across their land for water and power, and in return the base brought electricity to their little house in 1949.

Both Joe and Mary went to work in the base nursery. From the moment the air base was completed, Mary was active and involved. Shortly after the base's opening, she was named an honorary member of the Travis Officer's Wives Club.

In a 1965 interview, Mary was quoted, "We helped each other. When they wanted to cross our land with the pipelines and the power lines, we let them. Being so close, they let us connect on so our place had electricity long before the others around here."

She continued with praise, "The airmen even helped drive our sheep through the middle of the base so we could get them to market."

Mary became the "championship babysitter of Travis." At one time or another, she took care of the children of every base commander or staff officer.

When President Harry Truman stayed at the base in 1952, the Secret Service took over the base commander's home of Brig. Gen. Robert F. Kelly. Kelly was able to prevail upon Mary to care for his children during the president's visit.

Tragedy struck in 1962, when Joe became ill and was sent to Intercommunity Hospital. Mary went with him to be at his side when he died. While she was with Joe at the hospital, airmen and base families took care of the farm, feeding the chickens and milking the cows.

Mary was born in 1895 in Fall River, Mass. Mary Rose Mardell later married Joseph Enos, who was farming in nearby Somerset. The Great Depression of the 1930s was hard on the young couple.

An invitation from Joe's brother, Manuel, brought them to California. They bought a tract of land and began farming. Since Manuel was single, Mary took care of the house while her husband and brother-in-law worked the land.

When their world changed dramatically because of the war, the childless couple considered the young people to be their "boys and girls." Mary often referred to the base personnel who frequented their home as "my boys" and "my girls."

Shortly after Joe's death, Mary let the farm animals go. She had her dogs and continued to look after base children. In April of 1965 she was honored for her devotion and generosity, by taking her on a ride on the first C-141 stationed at Travis AFB - the Golden Bear. The flight took her over the Golden Gate and back.

On June 23, 1982, at 87 years of age, Mary was found unconscious by her caretaker and rushed to the hospital. Eight days later, she died.

Her funeral service was held on the base in Chapel One, and according to friends, it was "packed with Air Force blue." Mother Travis will not be soon forgotten for her dedication and generosity of spirit.

I want to extend a special thanks to Dr. Gary Leiser, director of the Travis Air Museum, for his generosity and assistance in gathering the material and photos for this story about Mary Enos. The Travis Air Museum is open to the public and besides the vast array of displays and planes, there are cockpits of a T-28, T-37 and a space capsule for children. The museum is open Monday through Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Visitors must stop at the main gate and call the museum at 424-5605 during this time of alert for an escort to the museum.

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