

A living history lesson: Presentation focuses on local airport

By DK McDONALD The Daily News | Posted: Monday, February 29, 2016 1:37 am



AIRPORT HISTORY:

With a slide showing the front page of the April 15, 1971, edition of the Mohave Valley News, George Petterson talks about the history of Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport. Petterson built a private airstrip that formed the basis of what is the airport.

LAUGHLIN — George E. Petterson didn't plan on building an airport in Bullhead City; he already had one in Los Angeles County, Calif.

“My wife and I built a second home at Katherine Landing in the early 1960s,” he said. “Then L.A. County condemned my lease. We fought in court for years, but in the end, the county bought the land and took it over.”

Petterson used the money from LA County to lease a Bureau of Land Management parcel in Bullhead City just east of the Colorado River, and began installing aviation services and constructing an airstrip and hangars.

Sponsored by the Colorado River Historical Society, and hosted by the Riverside Resort and Casino, Petterson's recent presentation on the creation of the airstrip that became the Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport drew more than 100 aviation and local history buffs.

“I was so excited when George came into the museum,” said Elsie Needles, Colorado River Historical Society president. “We never realized there was a part of our past

missing — the history of the airport. We thought it a perfect opportunity to make the story part of our Living History series, and George agreed to give the presentation.”

Petterson spent more than 50 years in aviation, beginning as a flight engineer, and eventually working as an air safety investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board. He said he has a soft spot for Bullhead City.

“I looked to Lake Havasu as well, but in the end leased a parcel of land here and started building an airport,” Petterson said.

He chose the area, he said, because it was ripe for growth.

“I think it’s important for people in the area to understand the history of the airport and its impact on the area, then and now,” said attendee Tony Anderson. “I’ve been fighting to get commercial flights to and from the Midwest for years. The airport is an important economic driver for the community.”

Petterson operated and improved the private airport until 1984, when he sold it to Laughlin founder Don Laughlin.

“We signed the contract of the hood of my Ford Bronco,” Petterson said. “I knew Don could make it work.”

Don Laughlin told the crowd, “We’ve been great friends ever since.”

Laughlin continued to develop the airport until the 1990s when he donated it to Mohave County. The Mohave County Airport Authority now operates the airport, accommodating commercial, military, business, executive and general aviation aircraft and passengers.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to hear from a founding member of the community,” said Lisa McCabe, CRHS member and Heritage Center Task Force chairwoman. “George has done a lot for the community.”

In preparing for the presentation, Petterson found copies of his personal aerial photos of the airport and surrounding areas from 1971, 1981 and 1984. To help ensure the history is remembered, he gave framed copies of the photos to Don Laughlin, the Mohave County Airport Authority, and to the Colorado River Historical Society and Museum.

“It’s a wonderful gift,” said Karole Finkelstein, CRHS vice president. “We’re grateful to be able to add George’s story to the history of the area, and honor his contributions at the museum.”