

Amelia Earhart Slept Here

The country's first airport hotel opened in Oakland, California, in 1929.

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The ambitious Oakland Airport Inn featured 37 rooms, a restaurant, barbershop, and airline ticket office. (Photo HST-116, July 1935, by Clyde Sunderland. Courtesy of Quantum Spatial Inc., Novato, CA.)

In March 1937, Amelia Earhart needed to finance her round-the-world flight. As she and navigator Fred Noonan waited to fly the first leg from Oakland, California to Honolulu, she spent hours scribbling her autograph across souvenir “covers” that would sell to stamp collectors for \$5 each. “Even at night,” reported the Daily Boston Globe, “at the Oakland Airport Inn she takes a batch of her philatelic ‘homework’ with her to do before she tumbles into bed.”

Earhart was no stranger to the Oakland Airport Inn, having stayed there many times. The Inn—the very first airport hotel in the United States—had opened July 15, 1929. It boasted 37 rooms, a restaurant, barbershop, and airline ticket office. The lovely building faced the flying field. Built at a cost of \$55,000 by the operators of the Oakland Municipal Airport, it was leased

to the Interstate Company, which invested an additional \$29,000 in equipment and furnishings, according to a 1931 article in *Aviation*.

“Oakland Airport was considered one of the largest and finest in the United States when it was built,” says aviation historian William Larkins. Because it was several miles from downtown Oakland and across the Bay from San Francisco, it was hoped that air travelers would stay overnight at the hotel. It was supposed to be the first in a chain of such hotels. But as *Aviation* notes, that thinking soon changed. The response from airline travelers was underwhelming, and when two airlines shifted their operations to other fields, “This situation left the hotel almost completely devoid of patrons after a year of operations.”

Management decided to change the hotel’s focus: Instead of relying on the transient air traveler, the hotel would cater to airport personnel—employees, pilots, and Boeing School of Aeronautics flight students—as well as the local population. Soon, flight students became “permanent guests at the hotel throughout their training period, two occupying each room.” The hotel also arranged lunches, afternoon teas, and dinners for various clubs and organizations in Oakland and the surrounding area. Under the new tactic, just one or two rooms were set aside for air passengers.

The building still stands; it is occupied—appropriately—by the Amelia Earhart Senior Squadron 188 of the Civil Air Patrol.



In 1929, San Francisco airport had a long way to go to compete with Oakland. (Courtesy William Larkins)

The location of the world’s first airport hotel is harder to pin down. A *New York Times* article dated August 14, 1927, tells passengers what to expect after reaching Le Bourget in Paris, Croydon in London, and Tempelhof in Berlin. “Though commercial aviation is only seven years old,” says the *Times*, “any one of a score of European cities already points proudly to its airport.” Le Bourget had a good restaurant and a waiting room for passengers, says the *Times*,

as did Tempelhof. "Passengers intending to fly from the Berlin airport can...eat a good meal at the airport restaurant and wait there until a little page boy, in a neat uniform all covered with brass buttons, bursts in with the announcement: 'All aboard for Moscow!' or 'The Cologne plane starts in ten minutes!' "

Croydon is specifically mentioned as being in the process of building a new hotel, which is "replacing one more like a shack than a regular hostelry which stands close to the present administration building." (The upgraded hotel would open in July 1928, featuring 50 rooms, a dining room for 150 people, a saloon, and a smoking lounge for the aerodrome staff.)