

The Take-Off & (Hard) Landing of a Syosset Airport

by Tom Montalbano



A Ryan SCW-145 parked at the Hicksville Air Park (which was actually located on Robbins Lane in Syosset) in 1947.

World War II was in its critical final stages when 38-year-old entrepreneur George V. Spohrer decided to act on his long-time vision. An optician by trade and a flying enthusiast who had been active with the Civil Air Patrol, Spohrer dreamed of purchasing a plot of land on Long Island and opening a flying school. In 1945, he acquired a 35-acre parcel on the east side of Robbins Lane in Syosset, approximately ½ mile south of Jericho Turnpike, and convinced the Town of Oyster Bay to issue him a variance.



George V. Spohrer during his service with the Civil Air Patrol during WWII. The C.A.P.'s mission was to provide air surveillance of the northeast coast of the USA in an effort to spot enemy submarines. Courtesy of George V. Spohrer, Jr.

With what he believed were the necessary documents in hand, Spohrer cleared the plot to make way for an all-grass runway, a hangar, and an office. He then invested in fifteen military surplus Piper Cub airplanes at roughly \$700 each and enlisted twelve of his friends, mostly former Air Force pilots, as flight instructors. Within a short time, the operation, officially named the “Hicksville Air Park” (though technically located in Syosset) was up and running.

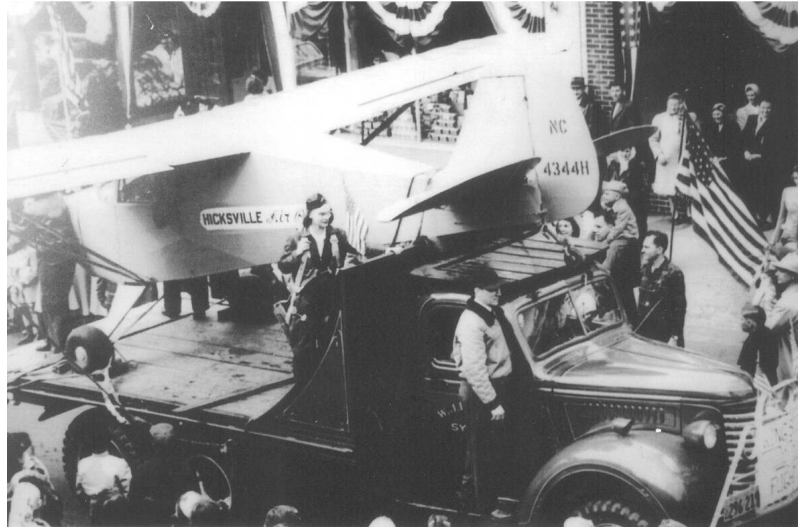
Aspiring pilots soon flocked to the park for \$5 lessons, and scores of Syosset “country folk” jumped at the opportunity to see their homes from the air. Within months, the sky above Syosset was buzzing with single-engine propeller planes at all times of the day. For some, the hum of the engines was an invigorating symbol of American military might and the impending Allied victory in the war. However, for many prominent

local farmers and homeowners, the air park was a threat to the suburban quality of life they were desperately trying to preserve.

In 1946, a faction of concerned citizens, led by notable local farmer and landowner Samuel S. Underhill, angrily petitioned the Town of Oyster Bay to ground Spohrer's fleet on the basis that low-flying aircraft were frightening their cows and hindering milk production, while also causing numerous stillborn deaths among calves.

In addition, these residents argued that a constant barrage of student-piloted flying machines soaring above their rooftops would have a detrimental effect on property values. Syosset, like much of Long Island, was in the midst of a major transformation from farmland and sprawling estates to neatly subdivided residential neighborhoods. With developers offering top dollar for undeveloped property, those who had the potential to reap massive profits from the sale of their farms and country estates had a large stake in maintaining the community's quiet suburban character.

As the air park continued to operate through 1946, Underhill, his partners, and his attorneys persisted in challenging its legality. A Nassau County Supreme Court ruling in June nullified the year-old variance issued by the Town of Oyster Bay due to a technicality, silencing George Spohrer's engines for several months. Spohrer fought successfully for a new hearing, and his variance was reinstated; however, the matter was far from settled.



George Spohrer (on front fender) displaying one of the Hicksville Air Park's Pilot Cubs at a mid-1940's parade, trying to keep his dream alive. Courtesy of George V. Spohrer, Jr.



In April of 1947, the opposition convinced the Nassau County Supreme Court to, once again, reverse the decision of the Town of Oyster Bay, this time citing an ordinance which established that the air park was insufficiently spaced from the runway at Bethpage's Grumman Airport, located fewer than four miles away. This, they maintained, presented a safety hazard in the sky above Syosset and on the ground below. The NY State Supreme Court upheld this decision, but George Spohrer fought on, insisting that the Town of Oyster Bay, which had (perhaps wrongfully) issued him a variance, should either make things right or compensate him for the approximately \$90,000 he had invested in his air park. By mid-1947, Spohrer's operation included six storage hangars, a service hangar, a restaurant, and close to fifty planes, many belonging to private pilots from all over Long Island.

Anxious to resolve the conflict and get his planes back in the air, Spohrer came up with a new plan. In late 1947, he petitioned the Town of Oyster Bay with nearly 600 signatures to propose that the air park property on Robbins Lane be rezoned as a Business District, a change that would work in his favor toward either settling the air park issue or setting the stage for a new venture.

In November of 1948, after almost a year of inactivity at the air park, the Town of Oyster Bay finally approved Spohrer's application to rezone his property, bringing him one step closer to resolving the matter and filling Syosset's airspace with propeller planes once again. However, the post-war suburban building boom was, by now, unstoppable. Manufacturers and defense contractors were eyeing commercial space on Robbins Lane for new facilities, and aggressive residential developers, including Abraham Levitt (of "Levittown"), were very interested in transforming the west side of Robbins Lane into a massive block of single-family homes.

Airpark Case Is Back In Court Again

Ultimately, George Spohrer realized that, perhaps, private air parks were no longer the future of Long Island. Always able to recognize a new opportunity, he abandoned the struggle to operate his flight school and set out to repurpose his property. Within a short time, he converted one hangar into what became one of Long Island's first and most popular "farmer's markets," where the local growers who had once been his sworn enemies could offer their farm-fresh produce directly to the public two days a week. The market eventually boasted several unique attractions, including a popular children's amusement park and a futuristic 64-lane bowling alley, spread among several former hangars.



Dancers at The Las Vegas, c. 1958
Courtesy of George V. Spohrer, Jr.

When the farmer's market ran its course after a prosperous decade, Spohrer converted one hangar into a landmark western-themed night club. Built to accommodate up to five hundred guests, the *Las Vegas Music Bar* presented live entertainment and dancing that attracted crowds from all over Long Island and as far away as New York City.

Eventually, George Spohrer sold the last of his property on Robbins Lane and moved to Florida, where he returned to his original avocation of operating a flight school. He continued to fly into his late eighties, having renewed his aviator's license one final time at age 85.

Today, the air park George Spohrer built in 1945 is the site of the Robbins Lane retail strip and the adjacent industrial park, whose primary thoroughfare is aptly named "Aerial Way."