

Airplane Filling Station in Powell, TN, Big Push to Complete Restoration

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 13, 2015)

Historically Speaking reaches beyond Oak Ridge to bring you the latest on something that has caught everyone's eye who has traveled Clinton Highway (Highway 25W) through Powell to Knoxville. On the side of the road sits an airplane...or a building that looks awfully much like one! I have watched it for years as it was used and then seemingly abandoned before an attempt began to be made to restore and preserve it. Mike Morrison provided the following update on the status of the Airplane Filling Station:

"Over the years, many of us have driven passed the old Airplane Filling Station (AFS) located in the community of Powell, north of Knoxville, along US Highway 25W leading to Clinton. If you've driven by recently, you will notice major—but still not complete—restoration. Originally constructed in 1931 as a gasoline station, this novelty structure was intended to entice passing automobile traffic to stop in and get their gasoline there.

"The restoration story starts with Powell native Tom Milligan passing the Airplane Filling Station one day in late 2002 and seeing two bulldozers sitting in front. He concluded that they were preparing to demolish the place. Concerned for the landmark structure, he helped convince the previous owners to sell the property and then put up earnest money to secure the purchase.

"At that point, significant parts of the AFS exterior were covered by kudzu. Much of the wooden interior and framing had rotted, the roof leaked, and the cladding was rusting, missing, or damaged. Neglect and nature had taken their toll.

"In 2003, other Powell and Knoxville natives—recognizing the historical, architectural, and cultural value of this landmark—began to rally to save the plane. The Airplane Filling Station Preservation Association (AFSPA), a 501c (3) non-profit organization, was created to restore the old plane to its former glory. All funds raised by this group go to the restoration work; none of the AFSPA officers or board of directors are paid.

"The next step in the preservation effort involved Dr. Tim Ezzell from the University of Tennessee. At the time, Dr. Ezzell was teaching a class in historic preservation and assigned some of the graduate students in his class to research the AFS and complete the necessary paperwork to get it on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). During this process, Dr. Ezzell learned that the AFSPA had been formed and contacted the group. The AFSPA assisted in the nomination submission to the NRHP. Finally listed on the NRHP, the AFS is also acknowledged by the Tennessee Historical Commission.

"Today, the exterior is again shiny sheet metal and the structure has new windows and doors. The wings have been stabilized and now feature mid-century lighting. Inside, progress includes erection of bead board walls and a bathroom, as well as installation of heating and air-conditioning. The original wooden propeller was removed to use as a model. A new wooden propeller was fabricated by woodworking students at Anderson County Career & Technical Center.

"Although an impressive amount of restoration has been completed, other projects are necessary to make the site safe and meet commitments to the NRHP. Remaining work includes: handicap access, parking lot resurfacing, safety fencing on west side of property, erosion control on west bank, and acquisition of vintage gas pumps and signs. It's been estimated that it will take somewhere in the neighborhood of \$60,000 to complete the restoration effort. Donation of services and materials to complete any of these projects is encouraged. Any such donations can be made by contacting Rock Bernard, AFSPA treasurer, at (865) 933-7158 or by e-mail at bernard1019@earthlink.net.

"When fully restored, the plan is to lease out the AFS as office space; thus making it financially self-supporting. The AFS should be ready for leasing in the near future. Anyone interested in possibly leasing the space can also contact Mr. Bernard using the contact information shown in the immediately preceding paragraph.

Airplane Filling Station in Powell, TN, Big Push to Complete Restoration

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 13, 2015)

History: The Story of the Airplane Filling Station

"In 1931, the Nickle Brothers, Henry and Elmer, wanted to build a gas station, but, to attract customers, they wanted a gimmick. Loving aviation, they decided to construct the station in the shape of an airplane. Their filling station was built to resemble Charles Lindberg's *Spirit of St. Louis*.

"Because of its novel architecture and historical significance, the AFS has been featured on two well-known television shows: the Heartland Series with celebrity narrator Bill Landry and Tennessee Traveler with its celebrity narrator Alan Williams.

"The plane functioned as a gas station until sometime in the 1960s or 70s when pumping gas was discontinued and the structure was abandoned for a while. Finally, other businesses moved in to keep it open—some of these businesses included a liquor store, a produce stand, a bait-and-tackle shop and finally a used car lot.

Fund Raising—Please Help Us Out

"In the first phase, the AFSPA's goal was to secure the land and stabilize the building. In 2005, Knox County awarded AFSPA a \$15,000 grant to purchase the property. To complete the restoration, however, was a major effort and was projected to cost between \$116,000 and \$210,000. Fundraising efforts were started in earnest.

"Over the years, funds for the restoration came from many sources.

"Sometime in the early phase of the restoration work, Tom Householder, a Powell native and manager of the Clinton Highway Home Depot, became interested in the restoration. He had read about the plane's plight. Householder recalled, "...It's been a historic thing, even back to when I was a kid." He made the decision to donate lumber, screws, scaffolding, and other construction material.

"The AFSPA has received several grants from the Tennessee Historical Commission. In addition, major contributions have been received from the Clayton Foundation, Knox Heritage, Saf-T Enterprises, East Tennessee Community Design Center, Highway Markings, Inc.—as well as countless other businesses and individuals, both nationally and internationally.

"Finally, can you help? Financial donations to restore the airplane may be made by making your check out to 'AFSPA' and mailing it to Rock Bernard, Treasurer-AFSPA, P. O. Box 1331, Powell, TN 37849. Any questions about donations can be directed to Mr. Bernard by e-mail at bernard1019@earthlink.net or by phone at (865) 933-7158.

"The AFSPA is continuing to work hard to finish the airplane so it can be rented out and become financially self sufficient. We appreciate your interest in our preservation effort and invite you to join us by making a donation.

"The restoration work on this historic structure has been a long and arduous activity, but it has also been a rewarding accomplishment for members of AFSPA and contributing members of the Powell/Knoxville community. The Powell Airplane Filling Station is a one-of-a-kind. No other exists in the United States or elsewhere.

"As time goes by, there are less and less of these iconic structures around for our grandchildren and great grandchildren to see and enjoy. Step up and help in completing the restoration. All donations—small as well as large—will be appreciated.

###

Contact Information;

Article Author: Michael Morrison
E-Mail: mikexmorrison@comcast.net
Phone: (865) 483-6523

Airplane Filling Station in Powell, TN, Big Push to Complete Restoration

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 13, 2015)

AFSPA Historical Information: Rock Bernard
E-Mail: bernard1019@earthlink.net
Phone: (865) 933-7158

There you have the story of the "Airplane Filling Station" on the side of the road.



A post-1931 photo showing the Airplane Filling Station with the addition of gyro-copter blades. (Photo: Courtesy of Clarence Naugher)

Airplane Filling Station in Powell, TN, Big Push to Complete Restoration

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 13, 2015)



Donors who contribute \$15 or more are eligible to receive a free thank-you gift of an 8x10 inch color print of the Airplane Filling Station suitable for framing. Donors who contribute \$25 or more are eligible to receive a free thank-you gift of an 11x14 inch version of the same art. Donors wishing to receive the art should include a shipping fee of \$6 in addition to your donation. (Art is by local Knoxville artist Linda Lee)