

# Pearson Air Museum dispute over management results in two museum programs for now

By [Dean Baker, Special to The Oregonian](#)

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[View full size](#) Laureano Mier led the Fort

Vancouver National Trust's effort to set up the hangar museum-education center. The hangar will exhibit the trust's 15 antique airplanes while it waits for Congress to settle its dispute with the National Park Service over management of the Pearson Air Museum. Dean Baker, Special to The Oregonian  
Two aviation education programs have emerged in Vancouver while Congress works out issues dividing the competing sponsors of the [Pearson Air Museum](#).

"We work really hard with our volunteers and aviation community to make this an asset," said Laureano Mier, the displaced Pearson Air Museum manager and education programs coordinator.

He works for the [Fort Vancouver National Trust](#), which is in a dispute with the [National Park Service](#) over management of the Pearson Air Museum.

In effect, Mier has led the trust's work in setting up a de facto, temporary museum in a hangar near the museum building. The trust made that move after the [Park Service took over the museum's operation in February](#).

The two groups were at odds over some of the trust's programs -- such as dances, marriage ceremonies and fundraisers. The Park Service argues those programs are not in concert with its historical mission. The trust disagrees, and moved out its assets, including 15 antique airplanes. It moved some of the planes into the nearby hangar where Mier is working now, while others were flown away by private owners to hangars at other airfields.

Mier said the owners are anxious to bring the airplanes back if the dispute resolves in the trust's favor.

## Act of Congress

[Rep. Jamie Herrera Beutler, R-Wash.](#), has taken the dispute to Congress. [Her bill, HR 716, would restore local management to the Pearson Air Museum](#). The museum had been managed by the city on behalf of the trust. In March, the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee approved the bill and sent it to the full House of Representatives. It's unclear when a vote might come.

If the bill is approved, the trust would move its assets back into the museum, Mier said.

Now, out of the hangar, the trust is operating a series of programs for kids: summer aviation camps, Boy Scout gatherings, school kids tours, and high school life skills education. The trust's hangar isn't open to the general public, but it is available for school tours and other uses through arrangement, Mier said.

He said he is at pains to have the opportunity to tell the story of aviation in Vancouver, which includes all kinds of tales from the early days, including adventures by famous women aviators such as [Leah Hing](#), the first Chinese American woman to earn a pilot's license.

[Pearson Field is one of the oldest operating airfields in the United States.](#) In 1905 [Lincoln Beachey](#) piloted the dirigible Gelatine in the first flight from Portland across the Columbia River, landing near the site of the present airfield.

Mier also noted Silas Christofferson flew his airplane from the top of the Multnomah Hotel in Portland to the Vancouver Barracks in 1912.

Then a dozen years later, Pearson was the last stop on a 175-day endurance test around the world by four Douglas World Cruiser airplanes that left Seattle on April 4, 1924. Two of them -- the Chicago flown by Lts. Lowell Smith and Leslie Arnold and the New Orleans flown by Lts. Erik Nelson and John Harding Jr. -- completed the journey and returned to Seattle on Sept. 28 after a stop at Pearson.

On June 20, 1937, [Valery Chkalov and two other Soviet aviators landed at Pearson](#) after a 63-hour flight over the top of the world.

### **Pearson stays open**

For its part, the Park Service is keeping the museum in operation, using the assets that it has. Those have included a covered wagon, a boat and a lot of military aviation paraphernalia.

Just now the museum is featuring the role of the spruce mill at the Vancouver Barracks and the U.S. Army in the development of Pearson Field. The exhibit, titled "Army Boots and Army Wings," looks at the Army's arrival on the site of present-day Vancouver in 1849 and the founding of the airfield some 50 years later.



[Enlarge Beth Nakamura, The Oregonian](#) April 16, 2013 - A 1931 Graham-Paige used for surveying new roads on exhibit at the museum and on loan from the Federal Highway Administration in Vancouver, Wash. Pearson Air Museum in Vancouver recently reopened with a new exhibit, Army Boots and Army Wings. The exhibit

features some of the history of the Vancouver Barracks and Pearson Field. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian [An aviation spinoff at Pearson Air Museum in Vancouver, Washington](#) gallery (8 photos)



It takes visitors through the foundation of the mill that produced aviation-grade lumber for building World War I airplanes and to Pearson Field's role as an Army Air Corps base.

The mill processed local Sitka spruce, employing 19,000 soldiers at its height, turning out more than a million board feet of lumber a day.

The exhibit features archaeological and historic artifacts from the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site museum collection, including insignia worn by General Oliver Otis Howard, who once commanded Fort Vancouver.

It was Howard, a one-armed Civil War leader, who pursued Nez Perce Chief Joseph into Montana, leading to his surrender in 1874. The General O.O. Howard House, now headquarters of the Fort Vancouver National Trust, is near Officer's Row within the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site. Howard ordered it built in 1878 at a cost of \$6,938. Completed in 1879, the building was severely damaged by fire in 1986 and left vacant until the city of Vancouver renovated it in 1998.

Also on display are an ornately decorated pitcher and wash basin excavated from Officer's Row and welding gear used by a "Wendy the Welder" at Vancouver's Kaiser Shipyards during World War II.

"One of my favorite artifacts that will be on display in this exhibit is a small booklet that was given out to the men of the 1st Aero Squadron, who worked for the Spruce Production Division at Vancouver Barracks, after the end of World War I," said Museum Technician Meagan Huff. "Just like our high school yearbooks, it lists all the 'bests' and 'worsts' of each of the soldiers -- with categories like 'Squadron Tightwad' and 'Squadron Nut.' It shows that the soldiers who lived here back then are just the same as people today."

The display will be open to the public, free of charge, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, at the museum, 1115 E. Fifth St., Vancouver.

-- Dean Baker

## Pearson Air Museum in Vancouver, Wash.



Wednesday, April 17, 2013 8:14 PM

By [Beth Nakamura, The Oregonian](#)

April 16, 2013 - Accessories belonging to General Oliver Otis Howard are exhibited at the Pearson Air Museum, including this boot stick. Howard served in the Civil War, including the Battle of Gettysburg. He went on to become a founder of Howard University. Pearson Air Museum in Vancouver, Wash., recently reopened with a new exhibit, Army Boots and Army Wings. The exhibit features some of the history of the Vancouver Barracks and Pearson Field. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

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April 16, 2013 - Meagan Huff, a museum technician at the Pearson Air Museum in Vancouver, Wash. Pearson Air Museum recently reopened with a new exhibit, Army Boots and Army Wings. The exhibit features some of the history of the Vancouver Barracks and Pearson Field. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

This gallery:

[An aviation spinoff at Pearson Air Museum in Vancouver, Washington \(8 photos\)](#)

