

HISTORIAN'S CORNER –

April, 2004 – Glenn L. Martin Builds a Community

by Matt Grogan

While reviewing the 11 or so boxes of historian material stored in the MARS Room at DCF, I ran across an article about the time Glenn L. Martin (GLM) built a town for his employees. The article is entitled "Aero Acres—America's First Planned Community—1941." It was published in the June/July 1999 edition of *Air and Space* and tells the story of how GLM solved the problem of finding housing for the families of the workers for his new airplane factory in the rural hamlet of Middle River, Maryland. The article was written by John R. Breihan, Professor of History at Loyola University, who provided valuable help for my December 2003 Historian article on the Wright Brothers and GLM.

According to Prof. Breihan, in 1929 GLM built his aircraft plant in Middle River, MD, 10 miles northeast of Baltimore on a two-lane country road. He did that based on his belief that the glamour of the industry would attract workers from the city and to take advantage of cheaper land prices out in the country. The company also hoped to get a modern highway built from Baltimore. The trouble started in 1939 when Martin landed a series of large contracts to build Model 167 bombers, B-26 Marauders and PBM Mariner flying boats as war clouds descended over the US. The plant workforce rose from 3600 to more than 30,000 three years later and the new road had not been built. A 1941 *Life* magazine article described twelve tormented miles at the beginning and end of each of Martin's three daily shifts.

Despite efforts to accommodate the workers at Middle River (prewar population 161), the situation soon was causing alarming turnover rates and so GLM decided to go into the housing business! The company initially tried building conventional garden apartments near the plant, but they proved too expensive. The company then contracted for 600 houses to be built using 4 x 12 panels, 2 inches thick, made of a lightweight building material called Cemesto. The houses had 672 square feet with two bedrooms, bath, kitchen, dining alcove and living room and were grouped into two new neighborhoods called Stansbury Estates and Aero Acres on a wooded peninsula adjoining the factory. New schools and water/sewer lines were provided by the Federal Government. The design proved so popular that the Federal Government brought in the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to develop another 600-home area, Victory Villas, just across the highway from Aero Acres. After 1942, private developers joined

Martin and the FSA, and the population around the factory grew to more than 20,000. Eventually Martin's Baltimore plants employed more than 54,000 workers.

According to Breihan, the new residents called their new homes a "Garden of Eden," but loneliness could be a problem for the transplanted workers and their families. The government and Martin provided activities at all hours of the day and night, including scout troops, church congregations, civic clubs, bridge leagues, and sports with Martin concentrating on the sports, particularly baseball. GLM "... was always on the lookout for good players for the Martin Bombers and Bomberettes, terrors of the industrial leagues." Martin held its first Family Day in September 1942, drawing an estimated 130,000 to the factory airfield, while the plants continued their work without interruption.

The original Cemesto houses in Middle River are still there today. They are mostly owner-occupied since the company and the government sold them off after the war. Cemesto was also used to build the Manhattan Project's town of Oak Ridge. During WWII, the Martin plants were considered prime enemy targets and they and the surrounding neighborhoods were elaborately camouflaged and defended by anti-aircraft guns. Counterparts of Aero Acres arose outside the other aircraft plants across the country, and the Martin neighborhoods became prototypes for the prefabricated building methods and street layouts that came after the war such as Levittown on Long Island. I wonder if the Company had any thoughts about repeating such a home building effort when Martin Denver was founded in 1955?!

Anyone interested in reading Jack Breihan's original article, please call me. I have summarized his version to fit in the STAR and the original has lots more colorful details and pictures.

[Editor's Note: While I was unable to find the specific "Air and Space" magazine article referenced, an internet search using the article's title uncovered many currently available (2022) sources of information.]