

## Famous Pilot Louise Thaden

In 1919, the Linebarger Brothers, having built the Bella Vista Summer Resort a couple of years before, decided to convert the cow pasture along the west side of Lake Bella Vista into a nine hole golf course, which they opened in 1920.

As airplanes became more and more popular, that golf course also became the local landing strip, as there was no nearby airport at the time. Since the Linebargers were always looking for new activities to bring more people to the resort, they encouraged planes to land there. The Linebargers even advertised a flying school and built an actual runway north of the Lake Bella Vista dam, but pilots usually used the golf course instead.

One of those pilots was Louise Thaden, a native of Bentonville, who set so many aviation records and earned so many honors that she was second only to Amelia Earhart in fame among female aviators of her time. She co-founded, with Earhart, the Ninety-Nines, an international organization for female pilots, and the Bentonville airport today carries her name.

In her autobiography, "High, Wide and Frightened", Thaden wrote that, after getting her pilot's license in 1928, she wanted to fly home to Bentonville but it "did not boast a landing field. The few planes stopping there landed on the rather small golf course at Bella Vista, a summer resort four miles away." Many people had heard she was coming and flocked to the golf course to await her arrival. She wrote, "For a moment I thought I was seeing a mirage for the green fairway was covered as by a carpet with people....It was necessary to dive at the crowd four or five times before it dawned on a few of the men I wanted the fairway cleared. Slipping to lose altitude, fishtailing to kill speed, we slithered in. The instant wheels touched grass I started applying brakes, gently, then harder and harder until I literally stood on the pedals, stopping with twenty feet to spare. The hysterical crowd swarmed around the plane."

Many years later, on Sept. 7, 2002, another plane used a Bella Vista golf course as a landing strip, but this time it was not pre-planned. A flight instructor and student pilot were flying a Piper Cherokee PA-28 when, due to a stuck throttle, they decided to land on the seventh fairway of the front nine of the Country Club golf course. The pilot later remarked that from the air, the entire fairway looked flat, and they realized only too late that there was a big dip crossing the fairway.

As the Sept. 11, 2002, Weekly Vista reported, they "hit the sand trap situated front and left of the hole and skirted to a stop on a berm behind it, missing the green completely." A propeller was bent and a wheel broken off, but the only injury was a scrape to the pilot's elbow. The plane missed by about 15-20 feet one of the four women on the fairway. Those women said they usually played the back nine of that course but had decided to play the front nine that day. They said they would probably be asking to play the back nine in the future!

*Lucas is a docent at the Bella Vista Historical Museum, located near the corner of Highway 71 and Kingsland. Visitors are welcome, Wednesday through Sunday afternoons, noon to 4:00 p.m., March through December. For more information, see [www.bellavistamuseum.org](http://www.bellavistamuseum.org).*

Picture 1: A plane is visible sitting next to the road on the edge of the old Linebarger golf course along the west side of Lake Bella Vista. There appears to be no golfers on the course that day, only a farmer. Courtesy of Bella Vista Historical Museum.

Picture 2: While the occasion is not known, this picture was taken in 1923 of a Curtiss Jenny that had landed on the golf course alongside Lake Bella Vista. Across the lake, on the east side, was the large bathhouse that was built shortly after the resort first opened in 1917. Courtesy of Bella Vista Historical Museum.

