

James M. Nissen

Research Test Pilot
and Renowned Airport Director



James M. Nissen, youthful experimenter, civilian, military and research test pilot, aeronautical engineer and aviation visionary, worked over 30 years to build San José's airport from a tiny dirt landing strip into a modern, thriving jet airline hub.

Born in Livermore in 1915, Nissen began building and flying full-scale gliders at age 11 and powered aircraft as a teenager. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley, he piloted Navy seaplanes on long-range journeys.

In 1940, Nissen flew four-engine Pan American Airways Clipper flying boats from San Francisco across the Pacific to Asia.

The following year Nissen became a research test pilot with the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics – the precursor of NASA. He made hazardous test flights to explore the aerodynamic forces and performance characteristics that were critical to jet aircraft design.

In 1945, Nissen and two partners leased 16.4 acres of San José's undeveloped airport land, built a hangar and short runway, and started an aviation business. The city soon decided to develop its airport and hired Nissen as the city's first airport manager.

The first commercial airline flight at San José Municipal Airport took place February 1, 1949.

Over the next quarter century, Nissen developed the airport with three runways, a new passenger terminal and extensive airline service. Passenger traffic grew to 1 million a year in 1968, 2 million annually five years later.

Nissen retired in 1975 and restored a 1917 Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny," a World War I vintage biplane favored by the barnstormers of the 1920s. He flew the Jenny at air shows until 1992. He died in 1994 at age 79.

In 2003, the San José City Council unanimously named this airport's passenger complex the "James M. Nissen Terminal."

1915 Born in Livermore.

1926 Builds and pilots full-scale gliders at age 11.

1932 Begins flying powered aircraft.

1936 Graduates from UC Berkeley, pilots U.S. Navy long-range flying boats.

1940 Flies Pan American Airways Clipper flying boats from San Francisco across the Pacific.

1941 Joins National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics as research test pilot investigating flight aerodynamics at high speeds, soon to be achieved by jets.

1945 Leases 16.4 acres of San José's dormant airport land from city, launches flying business, later sells business to become city's first airport manager.

1949 San José Municipal Airport opens with airline service.

1950s / 1960s Directs airport development, acquiring more land, building runways and facilities. New passenger terminal opens.

1966 Jet airline service inaugurated.

1969 Transcontinental service begins.

1975 Retires at age 60 to his ranch-airfield in Livermore. Restores 1917 Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" and flies in air shows.

1994 Dies at age 79 in Livermore.

2003 San José City Council names passenger terminal complex "James M. Nissen Terminal" in his honor.

