TRAIL ABOVE THE PLAINS



Inside the hangar at the US Air Mail facility at North Platte, ca. 1922. History Nebraska RG3882-300

FLYING THE AIRMAIL THE AIRMAIL THE AIRMAIL NEDOUGH NEDASKA FROM 1920 TO 1930

BY KATHLEEN ALONSO

n January 10, 1930, a plane crashed in a blizzard ten miles west of Sidney, Nebraska. In an instant, twenty-eight-year-old Charles Kenwood became the first airmail pilot to lose his life in the state. Kenwood had dropped his two flares in an attempt to locate a landing site, but his efforts failed. Witnesses speculate that he did not realize how close he was to the ground when he crash-landed on the farm of Ben Crouch, leaving a debris field of 200 yards. After a funeral at St. Luke's church in South Omaha, Kenwood was buried at Graceland Park Cemetery.

The most incredible thing about the fatal crash is that it had been so long coming, given the myriad of tragedies which defined the beginning of the airmail service. In 1920 alone, nine pilots, five mechanics and other staff, and the newly appointed district superintendent for the Omahato-Chicago portion of the route died in the line of duty. The following year the fatalities included James T. Christiansen of Blair, Nebraska, who failed to locate the airport in Cleveland, Ohio, one foggy day. A propeller still tops the Danish immigrant's gravestone, defining his life as a flier.

Public outcry and congressional skepticism meant that the fate of airmail in the early 1920s remained uncertain, but by 1930 the well-established aerial trail across the country had become a fact of life. The Air Mail Service took off, survived, and eventually thrived due to the influence of people in power, the determination of its pilots, the vision of community leaders, and the commitment of mechanics and other airport staff on the ground. It also relied on individual farmers, doctors, townspeople, and passersby, who supported local airfields and assisted pilots when mechanical difficulty or weather forced them out of the trail in the sky.

Summary of the Service

The Air Mail Service, in which Nebraska would become a key player, began between Washington, DC, and New York City in 1918. Almost immediately after its creation Albert Burleson, the Postmaster General, and Otto Prager, the head of the Air Mail Service, pushed to create a coast-to-coast aerial highway with feeder lines from other cities connecting to the existing route. Despite the advancements in aviation during World War I, tremendous obstacles impeded the endeavor. The few airports that existed were little more than level fields. Pilots flew by sight, which made fog or unexpected storms deadly. The Post Office's

route required pilots to fly in open cockpits over treacherous mountains and remote sections of the western United States with no ready help available in the event of an emergency. Despite these challenges the first scheduled mail flew from New York to San Francisco via Cleveland, Chicago, Omaha, Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, and Reno in September 1920. Less prominent fuel stops also developed airports to aid the pilots.

A series of radio towers linked these cities and towns, allowing airports to communicate with each other regarding weather and the expected time of arrival for pilots. Soon after their installation, the new technology began providing non-aviation messages for the benefit of the local population. For example, in February 1921, William Votaw, manager of the Omaha airfield, received permission to transmit wireless weather reports to farmers in western Nebraska and eastern Iowa.⁴

In 1921, the Post Office feared that Congress, with the support of the new Republican President, would cut funding for the fledgling service. The Post Office responded with a publicity stunt of epic proportions. That February two planes set off from each coast in an attempt to fly the mail nonstop across the country, rather than transferring it to trains when darkness fell, the usual course of action. One eastbound pilot died in a crash over the Nevada desert, and fog kept both westbound planes from leaving Chicago. Pilot Jack Knight became a national hero by flying from North Platte all the way to Chicago when weather prevented his relief pilot from reaching Omaha. Towns lit bonfires along the way to help keep him on course. Front page headlines touted the success, and the wave of positive publicity became a huge asset for the new service. This, along with some Washington politicking, kept the service going.5

The Post Office's next step for improving the speed of delivery meant developing a strategic plan for permanent night flying, which involved a series of light beacons placed ten to fifteen miles apart between Cheyenne and Chicago. These would later be extended across the country. Pilots started testing the practicality of night flying in February 1923 by making twenty-five-mile flights in and out of North Platte.31 Kerosene lamps marked the Platte River, which bordered the south edge of the field, and staff set up two bonfires to mark where planes should land.32 A highly successful nationwide test run followed in August. For five days the mail left California in the morning, reached Cheyenne by nightfall, and Chicago by the following morning.³³ The regularly scheduled night service began on July 1, 1924.5

In September 1924, the United States Air Mail Service division, led by Carl Egge, relocated to the Federal Building in Omaha. Egge started his career as a postal clerk in his hometown of Grand Island before becoming a railroad postal clerk in Omaha. He worked his way up to postal inspector in Minneapolis before joining the Air Mail Service. The head office remained in Omaha only a short time before returning to Washington, DC, in July 1926.

The Post Office airmail pilots did not regularly carry passengers, although occasionally an official or other individual received special permission to ride along in the extra seat. World War I Ace Eddie Rickenbacker crashed at the Cheyenne field en route to Washington, DC, in May 1921, hitchhiked to Omaha with airmail pilot Christopher Pickup, and jumped in William Hopson's plane to reach Chicago. The development of private airlines allowed passenger service to really take off.

By 1925, commercial aviation had begun to catch up with the Post Office. Congress then passed the Kelly Act, allowing the Post Office to contract airmail services to private corporations. The feeder routes that ran into the main transcontinental artery became the first to be transferred, but it did not take long for the Post Office to completely extract itself from the business of aviation. In 1927 Boeing took over the transcontinental route from San Francisco to Chicago, including Nebraska. Boeing's passenger service later became United Airlines.

Airlines also bid for new routes. Universal Airlines instituted Nebraska's first route off of the main line when they began flying from Omaha to Saint Louis via Kansas City in May 1929. Although this company lacked the longevity and prominence of Boeing, the new route demonstrated the continued growth of aviation.

The Early Service in Nebraska

Nebraska's prominence with the Air Mail Service began in January 1919 when J. A. Jordan, a Post Office representative, arrived in Omaha to convince the Chamber of Commerce to build an airfield. According to city authorities, Jordan promised some reimbursement from the federal government, but despite pleas to congressmen, none came.¹³ A bill which would have returned some of the city's investment failed to pass in 1926.¹⁴

Omaha's Chamber of Commerce created an aerial transportation committee which reviewed several sites before arranging to lease a field



from the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben near 60th and Center Streets, south of their racetrack. The Chamber quickly began making improvements to the field: distinguishing a quarter-mile grass runway, making it visible from the air, erecting an airplane hangar, and lowering wires in the area.¹⁵ These rudimentary requirements demonstrate how early in the history of aviation the Post Office began attempting its monumental cross-country feat. Airmail's formal arrival was delayed for several months, from fall 1919 to May 1920, as the Post Office acquired planes and fine-tuned its existing services.

On May 18, 1920, the first scheduled mail plane arrived in Omaha, making it the eastern terminus of the airmail route. The transcontinental route opened in September, linking Omaha both to New York and San Francisco. The aerial activities at Ak-Sar-Ben, and all cities along the new route,

Boeing Air Transport pilot Charles Kenwood, July 12, 1929. On January 10 of the following year, the twenty-eight-yearold Kenwood crashed in a blizzard west of Sidney, becoming the first airmail pilot killed in Nebraska. HN RG3882-1-399



De Havilland DH-4 airmail planes at Omaha's Ak-Sar-Ben Field near 60th and Center streets, ca. 1922. The DH-4 was a British two-seat light bomber during World War I; the US Army Air Service also used them, and the Post Office modified them for airmail service. HN RG3882-263-a showcased the legacy of the airmail service. In May 1921 the airmail pilots "observed the third anniversary of the air mail service by carrying the mail on time, the same as they have done since the inauguration of mail flying here on April 15, 1920."34 People associated flying with standard business rather than individual barnstormers or stunt fliers at the county fair. Pilots had become regular working men, rather than entrepreneurs. They married, raised families, promoted aviation locally, and became active in service organizations such as the American Legion and the Chamber of Commerce. The army trained many young men to fly during World War I, and the Post Office provided some of them with a steady, well-paying job doing something they loved.

For the most part, pilots came and went from Ak-Sar-Ben Field in their de Havilland DH-4 airplanes without incident. However, landing a plane is the most dangerous point of a flight, and on occasion various parts of town became makeshift airstrips or crash sites. As Arthur Cox circled for a landing during his first trip from

Cheyenne to Omaha in December 1920, wind blew his plane into the wireless tower near Ak-Sar-Ben Field. Luckily he sustained only minor injuries.¹⁷ In June 1921, Robert Ellis's plane stalled just before landing, causing him to crash through the Center Street fence south of the field, stopping fifty feet from the Dublin Inn. After extracting himself from his vehicle, an angry Ellis lit a cigarette and began hurling "pet names" at the plane. 18 In November, William Hopson crashed into a tall cottonwood tree about two miles east of the airfield. 19 In March 1923, Hopson ran out of gas as he approached Omaha and landed in Fontenelle Park on the city's north side to refuel. He landed on his airplane's skids, which had replaced the wheels for wintertime travel.²⁰

Mishaps also occurred on the ground. In June 1921, the assistant field manager, Frank Pendleton, ran into a propeller and ended up in the hospital. The story took a happier turn when an elevator operator named Rose Lehr visited him several times; they were married in October of that year.²¹ Most incidents did not lead to such serious injuries;



more frequently wrecks damaged the planes more than their pilots or ground crew.

Although Ak-Sar-Ben field was considered one of the best airfields in the country upon its completion in 1920, the Chamber of Commerce never intended the location to be permanent. Almost immediately they began making plans to build a municipal field elsewhere and considered several locations. ²² However, the Chamber had not yet found another location when the Post Office began flying overnight in 1924. Since the Ak-Sar-Ben field lacked lighting facilities and night flying required longer runways, the Post Office had to seek a field elsewhere.

Ira Radar, one of the officers at Fort Crook in Bellevue, decided in the early 1920s that the army base should have its own airport for military endeavors. Though Radar had a limited budget, he and his staff, particularly Staff Sargent Byron Fowler, utilized manual labor by soldiers, bartered with the locals, and created a landing strip and hangar with minimal cost to the government.²³ When the Post Office began searching for an

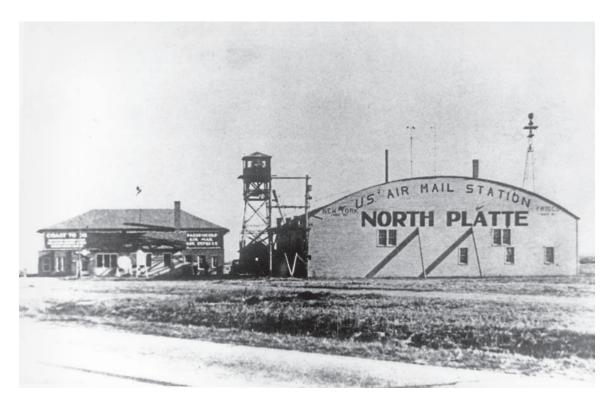
alternative to the Ak-Sar-Ben airport, Fort Crook became the obvious choice, particularly since the military did little regular flying at that time. A week before the scheduled transition to Fort Crook, two windstorms on subsequent days destroyed the Ak-Sar-Ben field's hangar and several airplanes. The facilities at Fort Crook proved to be adequate, although the Post Office complained about the poor roads between the main Post Office downtown and the field.²⁴

When Boeing took control of the mail service in 1927, they arranged to continue using the military location, although rumors circulated that they would move out of Omaha and relocate elsewhere. Potential sites included Lincoln, a proposed civilian field in Bellevue, Council Bluffs, Iowa, or possibly St. Joseph, Missouri. The stories turned out to be mere speculation, in large part because none of the mentioned locations had any better facilities than Omaha.²⁵

The transition from government to private airmail flights went smoothly. Boeing hired many of the Post Office's pilots, and the veteran fliers

Charles Lindbergh at Omaha Municipal Airport (today's Eppley Airfield) during his nationwide tour promoting aviation, August 30, 1927. HN RG3882-1-05-1

In 1919 the Post Office decided that North Platte would be the best second airmail stop in Nebraska. Undated photo. HN RG2929-148



had no trouble with the transition. At 1:40 am on July 1, Ernest "Allie" Allison flew from Omaha to Cheyenne with Boeing's first batch of airmail. I. O. Biffle, better known for teaching Charles Lindbergh to fly, headed west toward Chicago. H. G. Smith and Reuben Wagner flew the inbound planes.²⁶

Though time and technology meant fewer crash landings, they did still occur. In 1928, Norman Potter hit a cottonwood tree while landing, and crashed into the house of Lee Watson, a former airmail mechanic. Potter normally flew from Salt Lake City to Cheyenne and had not landed at Fort Crook at night before. The mail burned, but luckily the pilot walked away.²⁷ In February 1929, snow prevented Jack Knight from locating the Fort Crook Field, and when his engine gave out, he crash landed north of the intended destination, a halfmile from Camp Gifford. William Coons drove him to the airport.²⁸

While the mail flew in and out of the government field in Bellevue, the Omaha Chamber of Commerce continued planning its own airfield despite limited funds and mixed public opinion. In 1925, the city purchased some "park land" near Carter Lake with the intention of building a Municipal Airport. Dean Noyes, the Parks Superintendent, began the basic work to clear and level the area. In January 1927, the Metropolitan Utilities district painted an arrow on a 200-foot-wide gas container to help direct local aviators to the

field, although much more work would be required to make it acceptable for commercial use.²⁹ The Chamber of Commerce expressed concerns that even with paved runways and better facilities, Boeing would not want to use the field due to regular fog in the area. However, by the late 1920s, it had become clear that aviation was the way of the future and that Omaha needed an airport.³⁰

In July 1927, the American Legion spearheaded a campaign to raise money for a hangar.³¹
National excitement surrounding aviation aided their efforts. Clarence Chamberlain, an aviator from Iowa who flew from New York to Germany a week after Charles Lindbergh's famed transatlantic flight, visited Omaha in August.³² A week later Lindbergh himself arrived as part of his nationwide tour, landing at the Municipal Airport. The sight of the most famous plane in the world protected by a chicken wire fence emphasized the rudimentary nature of the field. It is fitting that Lindbergh's visit provided the necessary funds for a new hangar.³³

By the time the city of Omaha had begun preparing the new field, the standards for a modern airport had changed drastically. In 1920, a quarter-mile strip of grass with a clear approach and heated hangar had been luxury quarters; however, by 1928, a city the size of Omaha needed paved runways with much more preparation to compare favorably



with other metropolitan areas. After narrowly passing a bond issue for field improvements in the 1928 election, the city hired the Austin Aircraft Corporation to build the new field. In 1930, the open grass field had completed its transformation to a modern airport, and Boeing brought the airmail, as well as its passenger service, back to Omaha.³⁴

Moving West

Pilots leaving and returning to Omaha defined a new type of road. Although lacking physical substance, the new aerial highway impacted the communities which lay below it. While traveling across the state, pilots tended to follow a set course, but variations occurred due to weather conditions or personal preference. Between Omaha and Grand Island, pilots could stay north, near current State Highway 92, or drift a little further south, closer to current US Highway 34. The official directions from 1920 instructed pilots to follow the section lines west out of Central City, and fly over St. Paul.³⁵ Few if any pilots attempted this. Although it meant a longer flight, pilots traveled south to Grand Island and followed the Platte River to North Platte. From there they followed the path of the Union Pacific Railroad and the Lincoln Highway, then crossed the state border and landed in Cheyenne, Wyoming.



J. James Duffy's aviator's jacket, 1924. HN 10414-1

Pilots Jack Knight (left) and Clarence Lange model cold weather flight suits, circa 1920. Knight became an Air Mail Service legend in 1921 by flying an extra leg of the first transcontinental night airmail flight. HN RG3882-266-a

Westbound pilots leaving Omaha reached the now unincorporated town of Wann, located seven miles north of Ashland, immediately after crossing the Platte River. Despite its small population, Wann's distance from Omaha and river bottom farmland made it an ideal spot for unscheduled landings. In March 1926, Jack Knight crash landed when he misjudged the location of the emergency landing field. Knight was uninjured, but the plane needed repairs. In November 1927, L. L. Bowen (pictured on inside back cover), was flying from Cheyenne to Omaha; fog prevented him from locating Fort Crook, so he returned to Wann at 1:30 am and continued to Omaha at noon after the weather had cleared.³⁶

The level terrain west of Omaha also proved to be an ideal testing ground for new technology, such as radio communication. On December 17, 1923, Jack Knight left Omaha with a government radio engineer, and managed to keep in touch with Omaha airport staff for 100 miles. He reported in as he crossed the Platte River while traveling at 3,000 feet. He also checked in at Mead and Grand Island. Despite some success with its experiments in plane to ground communication, widespread use of the technology did not occur until private companies began flying the mail.³⁷

Pilots tended to fly north of Lincoln until Boeing began landing there in 1928. 38 This





A section of J. James Duffy's rolled map (paper mounted on canvas) of the Chicago to Omaha route, which he used as an airmail pilot in 1924. HN 10414-2

addition demonstrated a significant shift in the focus of the service. In 1920 the goal was to get the mail across the country as quickly as possible, and stops were selected based primarily on the fuel range of the aircraft. In 1928, some smaller fields could be passed over, and Boeing could land in places like Lincoln if it felt the city would provide enough business.

As pilots traveled west, rural Nebraskans became accustomed to the droning of an engine overhead while continuing to assist pilots if they could not continue on. On April 23, 1923, a snowstorm forced James Murray down four miles east of Osceola, damaging a propeller. About fifteen minutes later Harry Smith, carrying the mail in the other direction, landed ten miles from the site of Murray's crash. The two men met up and Murray ended up taking Smith's plane to Omaha while Smith took the train to North Platte.³⁹

Pilots on a more southerly route would land closer to Benedict. Between 1924 and 1926 fog or rain forced at least three pilots to land near town. In at least once case the pilot took the mail to Osceola to be put on a train. 40 Frequently, if a plane went down, the Post Office sent another pilot from Omaha or North Platte to retrieve the mail. But in some cases the train became the better option.

In 1928, Marquette, just north of Aurora, became the site of the first airmail fatality in the state. That February, a year after the service had been turned over to Boeing, Frank Yager crashed into a tree while flying low to avoid headwinds between Omaha and North Platte. Yager sustained severe injuries when he was thrown from the plane, but survived. His passenger, F. H. Craig of Cheyenne, a flying aficionado, died at the scene. A local doctor treated Yaeger and took him to Aurora, while

L. L. Bowen flew in from Omaha to retrieve what remained of the mail. 42

Grand Island snagged an airmail spot in 1933, with much fanfare and celebration, especially since Boeing flew passengers as well as the mail. The position of former Greeley County resident Harriett Hurley as a stewardess on the first flight added to the city's connection. Hurley had gone to Denver to study nursing, and worked at a hospital when she discovered a new opportunity in aviation. The eastbound mail contained 7,220 letters weighing nearly 100 pounds. As frequently occurred on inaugural flights, this included a letter from the mayor of Grand Island to the mayor of Omaha, and the Superintendent of the Air Mail of Chicago came to town for the occasion.

Despite the late date of the official connection, Grand Island was never a stranger to the airmail pilots. It garnered a reputation as a town with a solid airfield which could be sought out when trouble arose between Omaha and North Platte. In fact, in July 1928, Jack Knight took some vacation time, told his friends he would be fishing in Michigan, then attempted a cross country nonstop flight. When the plane had a mechanical issue over Kansas, Knight turned north to familiar country and landed in Grand Island where mechanics repaired the plane. The previous year he had landed there when fog prevented him from continuing his scheduled airmail flight from Cheyenne to Omaha. Other pilots also utilized Grand Island's services throughout the 1920s.44

Between Grand Island and North Platte, pilots continued using convenient fields for emergencies. In February 1921 westward bound James Murray became disoriented in a fog and landed a few miles north of Shelton. The plane crashed through a fence, causing minor damage, and came to rest in a mud hole. Local farmers used two teams of horses to pull out the airplane, and one man loaded three sacks of mail into his pickup truck to put on the next train to North Platte. A mechanic from North Platte came to repair the aircraft. 45

This area also demonstrated the value of emergency landing fields, which had an overnight caretaker who could provide emergency assistance. In May 1925 Clarence Lange landed near the town of Wood River after becoming lost in dense fog. He hit a tree near the emergency landing field, and the attendant in charge of manning the light beacon came to his aid. Another pilot and two mechanics flew in from North Platte to retrieve the mail and salvage what they could of the plane. ⁴⁶ Fog forced James Murray down near Shelton during



A Douglas M-2 at Offutt Field, Fort Crook. Introduced in 1926, the M-2 was designed specifically as an airmail plane. It had greater range and payload than the de Havilland DH-4, which it replaced. The pilot, standing, is thought to be Lt. Lee F. Duncan. A passenger sits in the front cockpit, which was normally enclosed as a mail compartment. As with many biplanes of the period, the pilot sat in the rear cockpit for reasons of balance and visibility. In this case, it's all for the camerathis plane isn't going anywhere without its propeller. HN RG3882-310

a night flight in February 1926.⁴⁷ He waited for about two hours, then took off again, but another fog bank led to a crash landing a short time later. The caretaker of the Shelton field assisted him, and H. T. "Slim" Lewis flew in from Omaha to keep the mail moving.

Weather would always be unpredictable, but mechanical difficulties also felled pilots. On December 19, 1921, Clarence Lange experienced engine trouble and landed in the cornfield of Ernest Arbuckle, just west of Gibbon. The farmer and the pilot attempted to repair the plane, and when that failed Arbuckle took Lange and his ten sacks of mail to Gibbon, so that it could be put on the train to North Platte. 48

As planes became more reliable, mechanical emergencies became fewer, but they still occurred. In October 1929, Christopher Pickup landed at the emergency field in Elm Creek after he noticed a gas leak. The plane caught fire about 150 feet from the field, but Pickup got the plane down and managed to save about half of his cargo. A relief pilot came from Omaha to continue the trip.⁴⁹

In 1919 the Post Office decided that North Platte would be the best location for the second airmail stop in Nebraska. Its location halfway between Omaha and Cheyenne, its railroad connections, and its size made it the most obvious choice. That year, A. R. Dunphy came to North Platte and approached Harry Dixon, President of the Chamber of Commerce, with the request to build a municipal air field to host the service. Several prominent businessmen formed the North Platte Airport Terminal Company, and at least 112 men contributed a total of \$18,000 to fund the airport.⁵⁰

Like Omaha, North Platte claimed that the Post Office promised to reimburse the city for its troubles. In January 1925, an airport representative wrote to Congressman Robert G. Simmons explaining the situation and requesting his assistance. Congress considered a bill which would have authorized repayment to North Platte and sixteen other cities which had funded airfields to support the Post Office. Like the above-mentioned legislation for Omaha, the bill failed to pass.

The city of North Platte negotiated a lease with the Pawnee Springs Ranch for the land,



Offutt Field, Fort Crook, October 17, 1924. The main hangar is shown at left. The airfield had a beacon light, but no paved runways. Planes took off and landed on the grassy field according to the direction of the wind. HN RG3882-275

and later purchased the airport.⁵² The inventory taken when the city took over the airport from the federal government in 1927 provides a time capsule of how an airport functioned in the 1920s. The equipment transferred to the city of North Platte included two beacon lights of 36 inches and 24 inches, a 10,000-gallon crude oil tank, a 98-gallon gasoline tank, office supplies such as carbon paper, various tools, fire extinguishers, and an oil burning furnace. The hangar was 80 feet by 90 feet and the office was 12 feet by 18 feet.⁵³ The rudimentary facilities in North Platte and similar sites across the country fueled and repaired planes for pilots. Airport staff kept up with the necessary paperwork, sent and received information from other cities, located emergency landing fields, and did a million and one other things to keep the airmail moving. These sites were the glue which kept pilots in the air.⁵⁴

Due its level terrain and low population, North Platte gained a reputation as a place to try out new ideas. Like Omaha, it assisted with radio testing in November and December 1923. More significantly, when the Post Office realized that it needed to begin flying the mail at night to remain competitive with train and telegraph service, North Platte became the first site of experimentation. In 1923, airport workers set up kerosene lamps along the Platte River, which bordered the south edge of the field, and they lit two fires to mark where the planes needed to land.⁵⁵

Occasionally airmail pilots rendered aid to local communities. In June 1923, Anna Janebaur, who lived two miles south of North Platte, had a medical emergency. Floodwaters prevented a doctor from reaching the house by road, so Charlie Sluder, manager of the airport, called his superiors in Cheyenne and received permission to have a pilot fly Dr. C. E. Selby to the ranch. Harry Smith obliged, and the woman received treatment.⁵⁶

North Platte gained ties to the great people of the United States as well as the small when President Calvin Coolidge and his wife Grace spent the summer in the Black Hills in 1927. From mid-June to September, army pilots picked up the President's mail in North Platte and flew it to Rapid City, South Dakota.⁵⁷

Continuing west, pilots passed Chappell, which had an emergency landing field on its golf course. It became the site of the first emergency landing after regular night flights began when a storm forced Frank Yager down on July 7, 1924, damaging the plane. Jack Knight flew in to retrieve the mail, and traveled through the storm between Grand Island and Lexington. He commented that "it was one continuous lightning flash... I had to squint my eyes on the ground all the way, to keep my course by the beacon lights." This served as the first of many incidents which marked the success of the light beacons along the aerial highway.

Sidney immediately became a minor checkpoint for the airmail service, in large part because it was roughly halfway between North Platte and Cheyenne. At the time, Sidney, the largest town in the area, was just transitioning from "the Old West" to modern life. It began city mail delivery in August 1920 after houses were numbered. In September citizens approved a \$196,000 bond issue to improve public utilities. The advent of flight became yet another improvement to the growing town.⁵⁹ When the Post Office began preparing for night flying in 1923, Sidney took the opportunity to build its own airport. John McIntosh became the field's caretaker, which included operating the beacon overnight.⁶⁰ Emergency landing fields did not need to be so formal. Regular pastures could be used as long as they were kept clear of livestock at night.⁶¹ Like Grand Island, Sidney would be a reliable safe haven, and throughout the 1920s many airmail pilots landed either on the official landing site or in other fields in the vicinity.

Despite the aforementioned circumstances of Charles Kenwood, most landings near Sidney did not result in injury to the pilots. In April 1927, R. L. Wagner landed at the Sidney airport due to



fog. When he took off, he ended up a mile south of the usual flight path through Lodgepole Valley and wrecked the plane on an outcropping, but sustained only minor injuries. In May 1927, rain and fog again forced Wagner down near Sidney, and in May 1930 Wagner and Jack Knight were copilots on a plane forced down by fog.⁶²

Mechanical difficulties also took their toll. In October 1922, a westbound plane "offended the pilot with its odor of burning rubber," causing him to land at a field south of town. The *Sidney Telegraph* noted that "it is a good thing he did for the thingum-a-gig of the doo-dad was out of commission." Luckily pilots and mechanics knew more about a plane's workings than the local newspaper. Several townspeople saw the plane go down and went to assist or just to be part of the excitement.⁶³

In addition to assisting pilots landing in the area, the Sidney airport also served as a resource for nearby towns. In February 1928, Ernest "Allie" Allison got lost in a snowstorm, and began circling the town below him, which happened to be Potter, about twenty west of Sidney. The telephone operator realized from the continued drone of the airplane's engine that the plane was not passing the town and that the pilot was in trouble. She called the Sidney airport. The manager advised her to instruct someone to get some flares and mark a landing field, which the townspeople did. Allison landed safely, and Northwestern Bell awarded the telephone operator a special commendation for her efforts.⁶⁴

The airmail pilots were professional fliers, and most of the time they did their job efficiently

US Air Mail radio equipment, June 1924, probably at Offutt Field rather than Ak-Sar-Ben. HN RG3882-1-622-1



A Boeing 80A at Omaha **Municipal Airport, June** 5, 1930. Mayor Richard Lee Metcalfe stands in center. Boeing Air Transport (today's **United Airlines) took** over airmail flights in 1927 and introduced its tri-motor Model 80 the following year. More than an airmail plane, the 80A carried eighteen passengers in its heated, leather-upholstered cabin, where a stewardess attended to their needs. HN RG 3882-1-25-1

and according to regulations. That being said, the personalities required for "seat of your pants" flying, along with the solo nature of the work, gave pilots a degree of independence which could occasionally be abused. Perhaps the greatest testament to the roguishness of the early pilots occurred near Kimball on December 21, 1924. George Pomeroy decided to use his government airplane to assist a friend's antelope hunting. After landing in North Platte with a freshly killed antelope in addition to the mail, the pilot told his superiors that a forced landing near Lodgepole, Nebraska, had caused the delay, and that he had spent some time there fixing a stabilizer. Presumably he had an excuse for the deer as well. Further investigation disclosed that Pomerov actually landed on the ranch of Charles Norberg southwest of Kimball, where he used the plane

to herd the antelope so that Norberg could shoot them. The following month, the Nebraska Game and Parks commission fined Pomeroy \$100 for killing a protected animal. ⁶⁵ The Post Office suspended him for thirty days without pay. But, given the importance of experienced mail pilots, they chose not to fire him, and he continued flying with the Post Office until they ceased carrying the mail. ⁶⁶

After leaving Nebraska, pilots reached Cheyenne, the beginning of a more treacherous leg of the transcontinental route. Several pilots who regularly flew over Nebraska lost their lives in Wyoming. John Woodward of Mitchellville, Iowa, crashed into the side of a hill in Tie Siding on November 7, 1920. On May 7, 1921, Walter Bunting crashed after taking off from Cheyenne. He had been injured in a crash in Omaha the previous



By 1930 this photo was already a relic of a bygone era. Clarence Lange, shown ca. 1924, was an Omaha-based airmail pilot from 1923 to 1927. In March 1926 he took a break from service, reporting shattered nerves "due to the strain of night flying." HN RG3882-0-270

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December, and had only been flying again for a month. James "Dinty" Moore met his death on a hill near Egbert on December 24, 1923.⁶⁷ And Wyoming was just the beginning. The challenges of the western United States emphasize the importance of Nebraska in the development of aviation. In contrast to the uneven terrain of the Rocky and Sierra Nevada Mountains, or the desolation of Nevada's deserts, Nebraska had level terrain and a low population density with small towns dotting the landscape at regular intervals. Pilots flew without the concerns surrounding mountainous terrain,

finding ready assistance in event of emergency.

The airmail service has left an undeniable legacy in many different areas. The Post Office created the first organized, national system of flight, and today's modern aviation system can be traced back to their efforts. The two-seat biplanes of 1920 gave way to passenger planes of the 1930s that could hold 8 to 12 people, along with a pilot, copilot, and stewardess. As the number of planes in the air increased, standards in air traffic control and flying practices developed. Airplanes, navigation systems, and airports all improved as

Nebraska Air Mail Timeline

May 18, 1918	Post Office begins scheduled airmail service with flight from Washington, DC, to New York.
May 18, 1920	First scheduled airmail plane flies into Omaha, making it the western terminus of the Air Mail Route.
Sept. 8, 1920	First transcontinental Air Mail Route is flown, stopping in North Platte en route to Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, and San Francisco.
Feb. 22-23, 1921	Post Office stages first overnight cross country flight. Jack Knight flies from North Platte to Chicago, while towns lite bonfires to guide his way.
April 29, 1921	Airmail pilot J. T. Christiansen of Blair dies in a crash in Cleveland, OH. He is buried in Blair.
Aug. 21-24, 1923	Post Office stages five-day test in preparation for regular overnight flying.
Sept. 1924	Post Office moves its main air mail office from Washington, DC, to the Federal Building in Omaha.
June 22, 1924	Windstorm destroys Ak-Sar-Ben's hangar. Post Office begins using Offutt Field at Fort Crook (now Offutt Air Force Base), which is more suitable for night flying.
July 1, 1924	Regular overnight flying begins. Light beacons mark emergency landing fields along the route.
Feb. 2, 1925	Congress Passes the Contract Air Mail Act (a.k.a. the Kelly Act), which allows the Post Office to contract routes to private airlines.
Sept. 1926	The Post Office Air Mail main office leaves Omaha and returns to Washington DC.
1927	The Post Office contracts with Boeing to fly the mail from San Francisco to Chicago. They take over the route on July 1.
Feb. 27, 1928	Frank Yager crashes near Marquette, killing his passenger—the first airmail fatality in the state.
July 10, 1928	Lincoln is added to the Air Mail Route.
May 1, 1929	Universal Aircraft Corporation begins flying from Omaha to Saint Louis via Kansas City.
Jan. 1, 1930	Charles Kenwood crashes near Sidney, the first airmail pilot fatality in Nebraska.
Nov. 17, 1930	Omaha completes its new Municipal Airport, present day Eppley Airfield. Boeing begins flying the mail there instead of to Fort Crook.
Sept. 20, 1933	Grand Island added to Air Mail Route.
May 18, 1938	More than 200 towns across Nebraska receive a special airmail flight as part of a celebration recognizing thirty years of airmail.



the airmail service changed flight from a novelty to a way of life.

Pilots, most of whom had flown for the army in World War I, used their experience with flying the mail to become key aviation players in their own right. Harry Smith and "Allie" Allison went to China and helped found an airline there, the China National Aviation Corporation. B Jack Knight and H. G. "Slim" Lewis moved up the ranks at Boeing. Lewis ended up in Cheyenne, managing the western portion of the airmail route. Admiral Richard E. Byrd tapped Dean Smith and his crosscountry experience as one of the pilots in his expedition to Antarctica.

Many of the former airmail pilots later proved invaluable to the war effort during World War II. Having flown since very nearly the dawn of aviation, this group of men had gained recognition as some of the most experienced aviators in the world. Allison returned to the United States and test flew bombers for Boeing. Frank Yager and Lewis also assisted the war effort in this manner. Jack Knight joined the Civil Aeronautics Administration and later the Defense Support Corporation, which purchased supplies such as fuel and medicine for the Army Air Corps.

Current commercial aviation in Nebraska can be directly traced to the airmail service. Lee Bird Field in North Platte and the Grand Island Central Regional Airport continue to serve rural parts of the state, although the major airport for Western Nebraska is now Denver rather than Cheyenne. Lincoln's airport also continues to serve an important role. And Omaha's Municipal Airport, the present day Eppley Airfield, though not as prominent as the airports in Chicago or Kansas City, continues to keep Nebraska and eastern Iowa connected to the rest of the country. Despite the changes and growth which have

occurred, it is important to remember that these airports, and others like them across the country, owe their initial existence to the vision and hard work of the United States Post Office.

Airmail stamp, 1928. HN 10387-38

NOTES

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- $^{\rm 4}$ "Flash Weather Report by Radio to Aid Farmer," $O\!W\!H\!,$ Feb. 12, 1921.
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- ⁶ Leary, Aerial Pioneers, 178.
- $^7\,$ Blackledge, Keith, Interview with Louie Drost, former airport employee. Jan. 29, 1996. Courtesy of North Platte Airport Archives.
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- ⁹ "Ocean to Ocean Night Air Mail Inaugurated," *OWH*, July 2, 1924.
- 10 Leary, Aerial Pioneers, 154.
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