A Goodyear in Paradise

By Juan L. Riera, Ph.D.

While the Goodyear Blimp (Figure 1) is iconic at major athletic events and such, many people are not very aware of its history in South Florida.

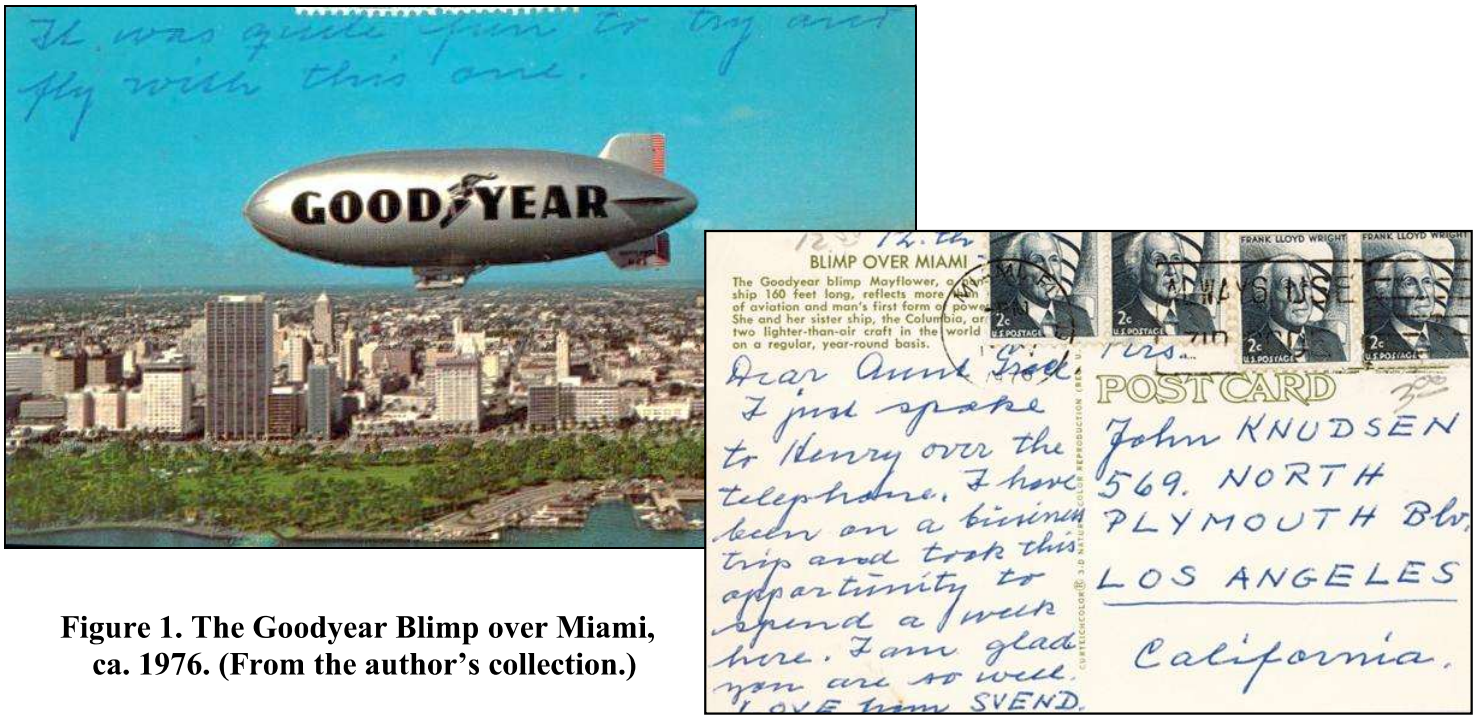


Figure 1. The Goodyear Blimp over Miami, ca. 1976. (From the author's collection.)

Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company built hundreds of dirigibles, or airships, throughout the 20th century. The vast majority have been for the U.S. Navy and some have been for the company's own use, mostly for advertising at athletic events. Airships are usually referred to as either Zeppelins, which have an internal rigid structure, or as Blimps that do not have a rigid structure and take their form by the bags that contain the lighter than air gas. There is also a third category referred to as semi-rigid that has a small rigid structure that is smaller than in a Zeppelin consisting of a keel.

There was a hostile takeover bid for Goodyear in 1987. This led the company to sell its subsidiary, Goodyear Aerospace, causing the company to end its manufacturing of lighter-than-air craft. The last blimp built was retired in 2017. Starting in 2014, it replaced its fleet of three with semi-rigid airships manufactured by the Luftschiffbau Zeppelin company. Although technically incorrect, Goodyear has chosen to continue using the term "blimp" for their airships.

The only passengers allowed on the blimps are corporate guests of the company and members of the press. Corporate guests have included the pole position winner for the Indianapolis 500 during the period when Goodyear supplied tires for the race, the winner of the All-American Soap Box Derby World Championship while Goodyear was a corporate sponsor, and during the blimp's 100 anniversary celebration (in 2025) three U.S. residents won an opportunity to ride the Goodyear Blimp. In addition, while one blimp was based on Miami's Watson Island between 1930 and 1978 during the winter, the lease agreement stipulated by the City of Miami required limited passenger tours.

Watson Island (Figure 2) is a man-made island from the dredging of the Port of Miami and was deeded to the City of Miami in 1919 with the restriction that it was to be used exclusively for municipal or public purposes.

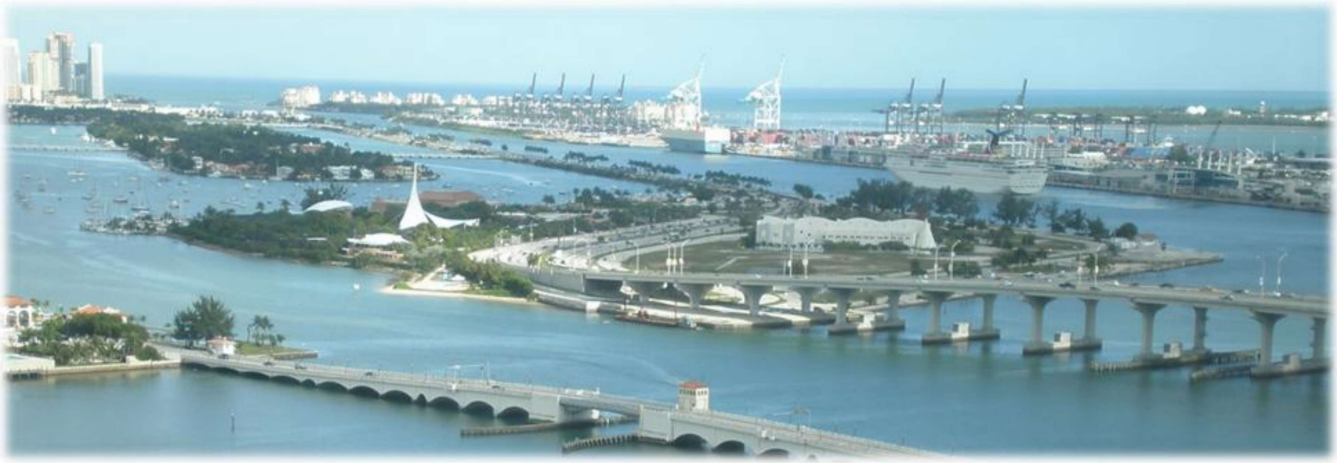


Figure 2. Contemporary view of Watson Island and the MacArthur Causeway with the Venetian Causeway in the foreground

Watson Island was originally named Causeway Island for the Causeway connecting Miami to Miami Beach that crossed the island (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. A Causeway postcard. (From the author's collection.)



Figure 4. A Causeway postcard. (From the author's collection.)

During World War II the name was changed to the MacArthur Causeway (Figure 5) in honor of General Douglas MacArthur and the island was renamed Watson Island in honor of Miami Mayor John W. Watson, Sr., 1912-1915 and 1917-1919.

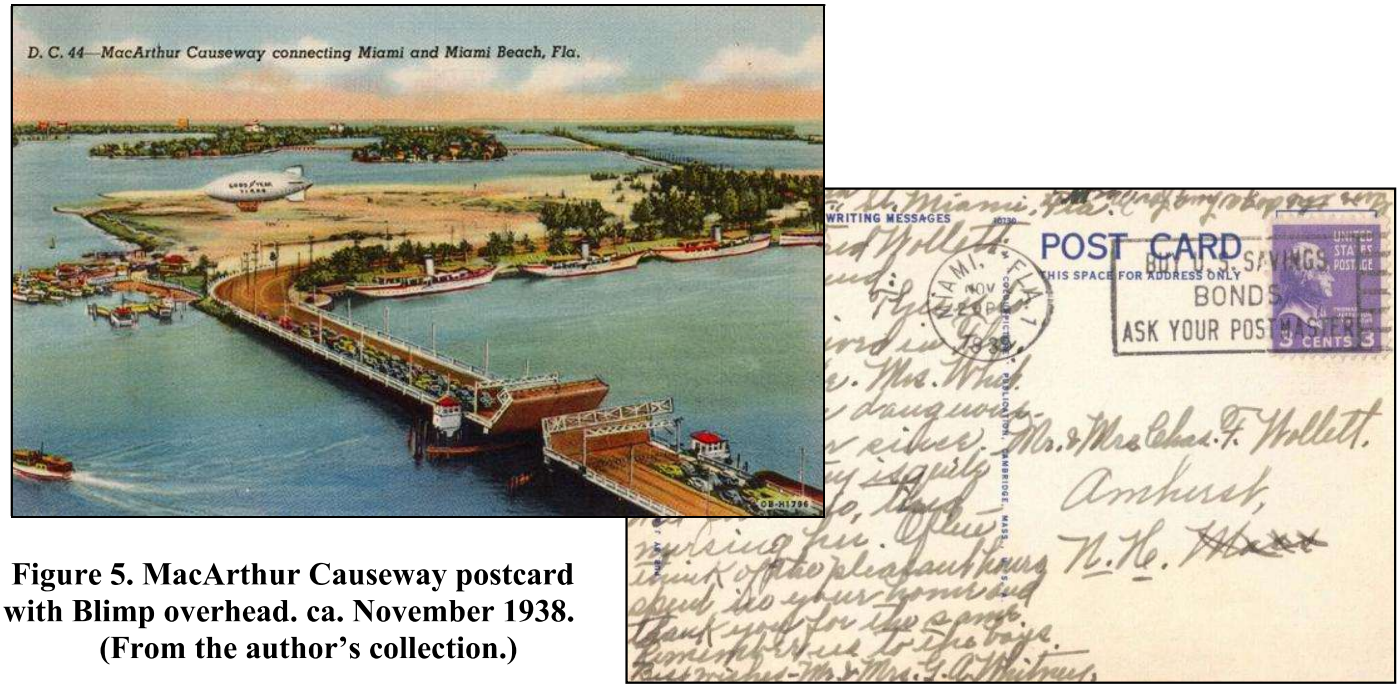


Figure 5. MacArthur Causeway postcard with Blimp overhead. ca. November 1938. (From the author's collection.)

A Goodyear Blimp base was located on Watson Island from 1930-1978, initially on the east side, but later moved to the west side of the island on a new landfill area. Goodyear moved the base to the Opa-Locka Airport after failing to agree to terms with the city of Miami for the leased property. The remains of the base that remain are the imprint of the mooring circle and a paved path for a tram that would take the passengers to the airship.

Glenn Curtiss, having retired from aircraft development and manufacturing in the 1920s, began a second career in Florida as a real estate developer. In 1926 he founded Opa-tisha-woka-locka, a native American name that was quickly shortened to Opa-Locka. In late 1925 Curtiss moved the Florida Aviation Camp from Hialeah, another city founded by Glenn Curtiss in 1925, to a piece of land west of Opa-Locka and surrounded by the Opa-Locka Golf Course. Curtiss donated this land with a small airfield to the City of Miami in 1929, which donated a surplus hanger from Key West. The Field became known as the Municipal Blimp Hanger, which the Goodyear Blimp began operating out of this hangar in 1930. What became of this facility and its use by Goodyear blimps is unclear to me at this point. I presume all Goodyear Blimp activities transferred to Watson Island.

In 1928, Curtiss donated land 2 miles south of Opa-Locka for Miami's first Municipal Airport, to which the Curtiss Aviation School later moved from Biscayne Bay. I believe that this now non-existent airport is the one Amelia Earhart flew out of for her unsuccessful around the world flight. A larger area to the east of the airport was developed during the 1930s as All-American Airport. After Curtiss died in 1930, his estate transferred a parcel of land north of the golf course and the Florida Aviation Camp to the City of Miami. This third parcel of land and facilities became Opa-Locka Airport.

Finally, Goodyear Blimp Base was established in January 1983 (Figure 6, next page) in a section of the Pompano Beach Airport. With that a near century long tradition continues between Goodyear Blimps and south Florida.

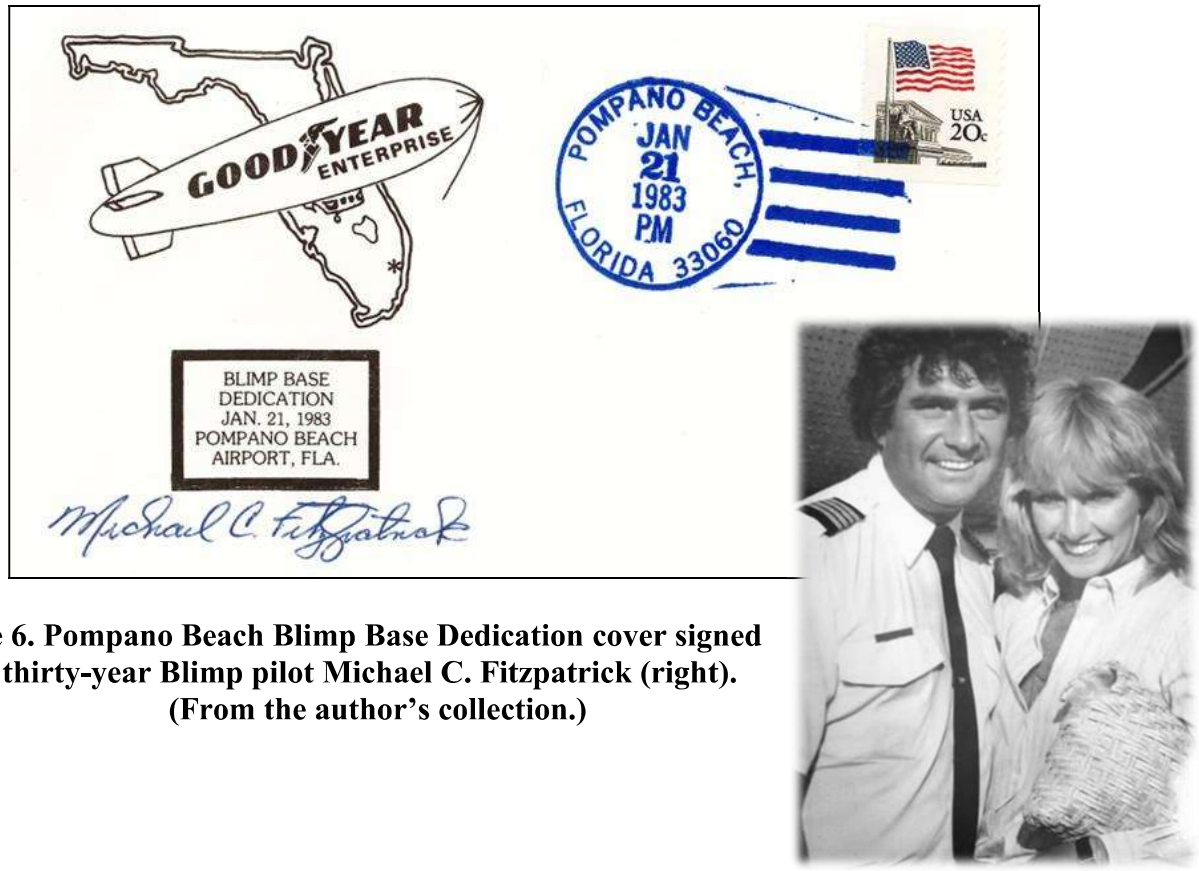
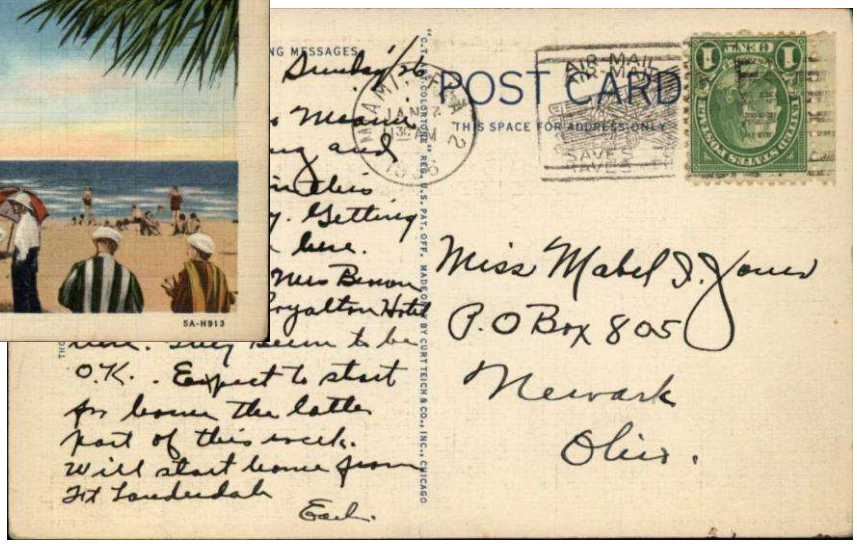


Figure 6. Pompano Beach Blimp Base Dedication cover signed by thirty-year Blimp pilot Michael C. Fitzpatrick (right). (From the author's collection.)

Editor's Note

An entertaining collection theme are postcards with various images of the Miami landscape and Goodyear Blimp aircraft. Below is an example.





Goodyear Blimp over Miami Beach.