



An Air Mail First in Milwaukee

by Michael L. Wilson

On August 1, 1928, the U.S. Post Office Department lowered the airmail rate to 5-cents for the first ounce. This was a significant reduction (down from an effective rate of 20 cents for one ounce that had been in place since February 1, 1927) and post offices throughout the country pulled out all the stops to promote the new rate and encourage the use of airmail.

In Atlanta, Georgia, for example, Postmaster E.K. Large sent a four-foot by two-foot letter to Postmaster Gen-

eral Harry New in Washington, D.C. with more than two dollars of postage (**Figure 1**). Of course, the envelope had the official "Via Air Mail" marking to make sure it went by plane. Newspapers carried stories, ran editorials and at least one, *The Bellingham Herald* in the state of Washington, published a cartoon (**Figure 2**).

My hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin may have had one of the more unique events to promote airmail and the new rate: a direct mail pick-up from



Figure 1: "Large Sends Largest Air Mail Letter," *The Atlanta Journal*, August 1, 1928.

a downtown post office by a folding wing airplane.

My research into that event started with my acquisition of a binder of mostly airmail covers from the 1920s addressed to Willard Roberts of Mil-

waukee. Born around 1922, Willard was just a kid at the time, so someone was obviously preparing and sending him philatelic items. That person was very likely his uncle, Herman Pietsch, the brother of Willard's mother Clara.

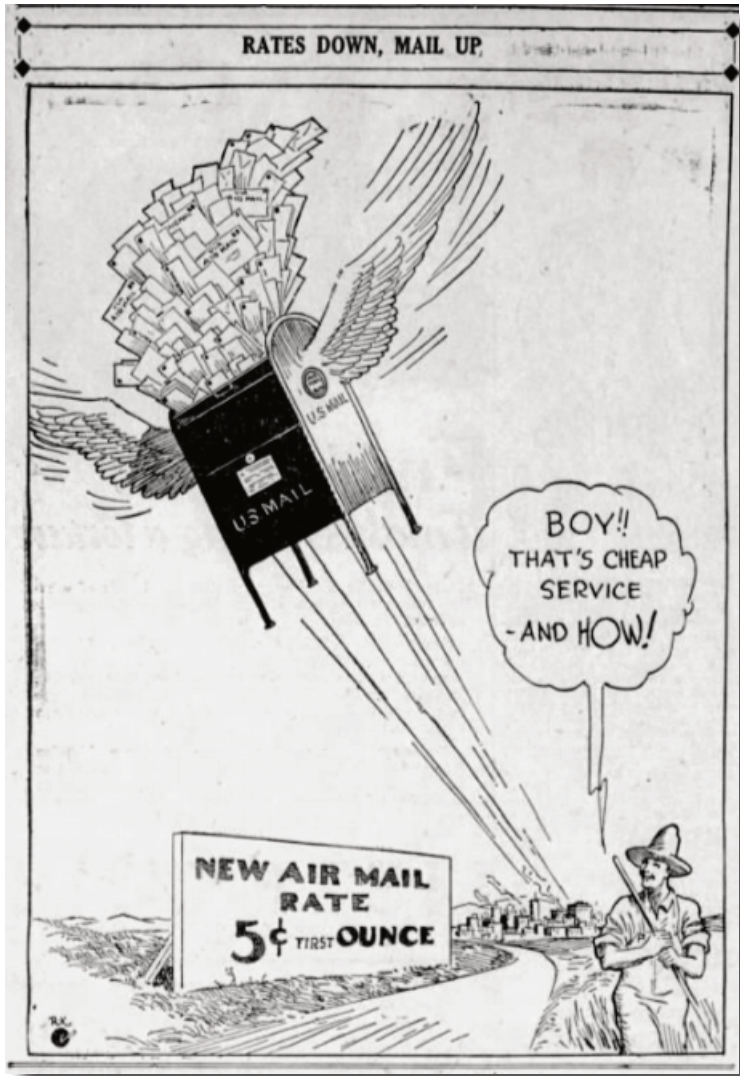


Figure 2: "Rates Down, Mail Up," *The Bellingham Herald*, August 1, 1928.



Figure 3: August 1, 1928 cover from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, commemorating the first day of 5-cent airmail (from the author's collection).

Herman started as a mail clerk in Milwaukee around 1900 and rose to the position of assistant postmaster of Milwaukee. His postal career ended abruptly in 1931 when he was arrested for stealing money from the mail, but that is a story for another time!

The cover that piqued my interest is shown in **Figure 3**. It is franked with a 5-cent airmail stamp depicting the Sherman Hill airmail beacon in Wyoming. That stamp was issued on July 25, 1928, to satisfy the upcoming change in airmail rates. The cover is postmarked with a Milwaukee circular date stamp dated August 1, 1928, at 5:00 p.m. The killer cancellation pictures a biplane with the slogan, "Air Mail Saves Time." That slogan cancellation was first used in the mid-1920s, and variations of it appear as late as the early 1940s.

The cachet on this souvenir cover is

a composite image (the mail bags in the lower left look a tad fake), but the plane is the real deal. It is a Fairfield FC-2 (**Figure 4**). The first iteration of this plane flew in 1926, and about 180 were built in the 1920s and 1930s. It was designed to be an aerial survey plane but was used as an all-purpose utility plane carrying passengers and cargo, including mail. The wings folded back along the fuselage to ease storage and transport.

I cannot definitively prove that this was "The First Air Mail Plane ever making direct pick-up from a Post Office," but a check of newspapers from the time suggests that may have been the case. Indeed, the only reports I could find of planes picking up mail directly from a post office were in *The Milwaukee Leader* of August 1 and August 2, 1928.



Figure 4: Fairfield FC-2W2 (courtesy Canada Aviation and Space Museum).

The festivities in Milwaukee started with the placement of a giant talking mailbox on the canopy of the downtown Boston Store advertising the new air mail rates (**Figure 5**).

That was followed by an extravagant parade as reported by the *Leader* on August 1:

An airplane demonstration and parade marked the inauguration of reduced air mail rates in Milwaukee today.

Twelve planes circled the downtown district at noon, after which two Fairfield monoplanes were taken to Red Arrow park, Wisconsin Ave. and 11th St., to remain on inspection until 5 p.m. when they will be part of a parade to the federal building.

With folded wings, these two

planes, piloted by Edgar Le Parle, reserve air mail pilot and L.G. Mulzer, Wadhams Oil Co. pilot, will taxi to the federal building.

The planes, headed by the Letter Carriers' band, will taxi to the post office to be loaded with the first air mail at the reduced rate, and will taxi to Maitland field for the hop to Chicago. An escort of planes will escort the mail planes part way to Chicago.

(Red Arrow Park is known as “the park that moved.” The original park found between 10th and 11th Streets on Wisconsin Avenue was bulldozed in the mid-1960s to make way for an interchange. The park, named in honor of a World War I U.S. Army division, was moved to an area north of Milwaukee City Hall in 1970. The Feder-

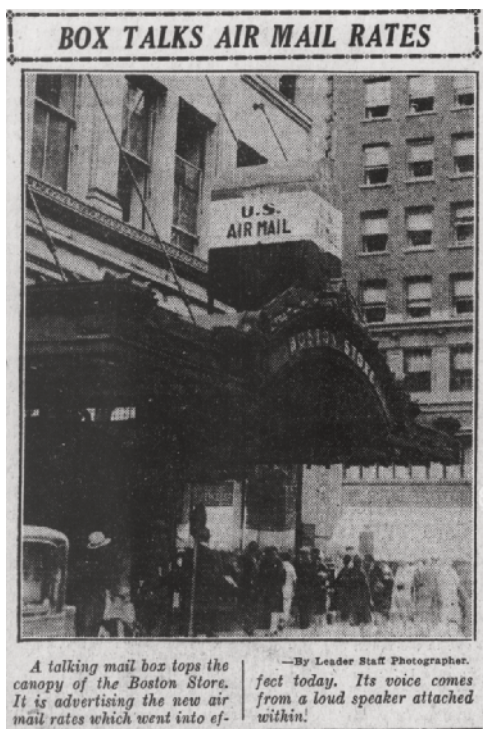


Figure 5: "Box Talks Air Mail Rates," *The Milwaukee Leader*, August 1, 1928.

al Building, constructed in the 1890s, still stands at the corner of Wisconsin Avenue and Jackson Street. Maitland Field is now the Henry W. Maier Festival Park, also known as the Summerfest Grounds.)

There are two photos of the parade in the George Hardie Photograph Collection at the Milwaukee County Historical Society. **Figure 6** shows one of the Fairfield monoplanes probably departing Red Arrow Park with members of the Letter Carriers' band pictured to the right. **Figure 7** pictures one of the planes in front of the Federal Building.

One of the building's arches is just visible at the far left, and it matches the image of the building in the envelope's cachet.

Among the passengers on the trip to Chicago was Milwaukee Postmaster Peter F. Plasecki. (His signature appears on several of the covers that were addressed to Willard Roberts in the binder I bought.) Plasecki was a huge proponent of airmail. In fact, after he arrived in Chicago on August 1, he lobbied Chicago officials to speed up the development of a lakefront airport and to cooperate with Milwaukee on aviation affairs.

Plasecki was extremely pleased with the results of the talking mailbox and the parade. He reported to the *Leader* that in July, an average of 38 pounds of airmail was sent from Milwaukee daily. On August 1, more than 136 pounds was sent, which included considerable souvenir mail, and on August 2, a total of 63 pounds was shipped.

An interesting postscript is that the Fairfield monoplane owned by the Wadhams Oil Company and piloted by Leslie "L.G." Mulzer took off north after dropping off the mail in Chicago to show the feasibility of setting up an airmail route from Milwaukee to Duluth to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Nothing came of this demonstration flight, but not because the Canadians were not interested in air mail. To the contrary, Canada was rapidly moving from experimenting to making airmail a regular service across the country at this time and was quite



Figure 6: Fairfield Monoplane probably near Red Arrow Park
(courtesy George Hardie Photograph Collection at the Milwaukee
County Historical Society).



Figure 7: Fairfield Monoplane in front of the federal building
(courtesy George Hardie Photograph Collection at the
Milwaukee County Historical Society).

keen on connecting with airmail routes in the United States. Shortly after Mulzer's flight, *The Manitoba Free Press* reported that based on an agreement between Canada and the United States, "Five cents in Canadian postage placed on a letter mailed in Winnipeg will carry it to St. Paul by rail and thence by air to New York, San Francisco, or any other part of the United States reached by air mail service."

Why the Wadhams Oil Company, a Milwaukee-based chain of filling and service stations in the early 20th century known for its Pagoda-style stations (Figure 8), would foot the bill to establish an airmail route to Duluth and Winnipeg is unclear, but it certainly provided the company plenty of good

press throughout Wisconsin.

In any event, as a native Milwaukeean, it was exciting to learn about how the city promoted the growth of airmail.

About the Author

Michael L. Wilson, a native of Milwaukee now residing in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, collects postal history and enjoys delving into the social histories of covers in his collection. He edits *The Philly Philatelist* and manages the website for the Greater Philadelphia Stamp and Collectors Club.



Figure 8: Wadhams' Gas Station in West Allis, Wisconsin, listed on the National Register of Historic Places (courtesy Michael Barera).