

The “Golden Age of Flight”: An Airmail Collector’s Wonderland

By Michael L. Wilson

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Introduction

When I was growing up in the 1960s, I was captivated by the space race. I don’t remember Alan Shepard’s first Mercury flight or John Glenn’s *Friendship 7* mission, but I do remember Ed White’s spacewalk during Gemini 4 and the tragedy of Apollo 1 that took the lives of three astronauts, including White’s. I most certainly remember the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969 and watching fuzzy video of Neil Armstrong stepping down the ladder to the lunar surface.

I couldn’t get enough of space “stuff.” I collected newspapers articles, built model rockets, and, of course, I wanted to be an astronaut, a dream dashed by having to wear glasses to correct my 20-200 nearsightedness.

Kids growing up in the 1920s and 1930s were likewise fascinated by airplanes. We take air travel for granted these days and don’t give a second thought to our cross-country letter going by plane, but both air travel and air mail were novelties in the “Roaring Twenties.” In 1928, there were just 4,500 planes in the United States (compared to today where they are more than 5,000 planes over U.S. airspace during peak hours every day of the week), so seeing a plane flying over your town or house was a big deal. The commencement of air mail in a town was front-page news. Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 was that decade’s equivalent of the moon landing in 1969. It’s no surprise that the 1920s and 1930s are called the “Golden Age of Flight.”

The range and pace of aviation-related events in those years was astonishing, and it seemed like every occasion was commemorated with a philatelic item. If you were a kid back then, you probably would have gladly given up your Tiddlywinks for a set of aviation covers to pour over and dream about the day when you would take to the sky.

Well, two siblings in Milwaukee – Willard Roberts and his older sister Milo – amassed more than one hundred such covers and postcards without having to sacrifice their squidgers courtesy of their uncle, Herman C. Pietsch, the assistant postmaster of Milwaukee, and his boss, Postmaster (PM) Peter Piasecki.

This is their story – including the sad ending to Herman's postal career.

Background on Herman and PM Piasecki

Born in Germany in 1880, Herman and his family arrived in the United States in 1881 and settled in Milwaukee. Beginning in the 1840s, Milwaukee was a destination for German immigrants, and by the time Herman’s family arrived, native Germans made up almost a third of the city’s population. The family undoubtedly felt at home among the city’s beer gardens, German newspapers, and recreational societies.

Herman's birth father died sometime after arriving, and his mother remarried. She and Herman's stepfather had four children, including Clara (Herman's stepsister) who would marry Edward Roberts and give birth to Herman's niece Milo in 1914 and nephew Willard in 1921.

Herman started working for the post office in Milwaukee in 1900, shortly after completing service as a corporal in the 1st Wisconsin Infantry, Company M during the Spanish-American War (Figure 1). He rose rapidly through the post office ranks from postal examiner to superintendent for mail to assistant postmaster by 1930.



Figure 1: Herman "Uncle Herman" Charles Pietsch as a corporal, circa 1898. Courtesy Milwaukee Public Library/Horace Seaman Wisconsin Infantry Photograph Collection.

PM Piasecki, who was born in Milwaukee in 1876 to German-immigrant parents and was known as "Colonel Piasecki" for his service in the Spanish-American War and World War I, was named Milwaukee postmaster in 1923. Herman and he not only became coworkers but close personal friends.

PM Piasecki was a cheerleader for expanding airmail service to Milwaukee, but Herman caught the air mail bug even earlier. Indeed, Herman's interest in air mail went back to the "pioneering days" of the 1910s as shown by the oldest item in Willard's and Milo's collection: A pioneer flight postcard from Milwaukee postmarked September 14, 1915 (Figures 2a and 2b).

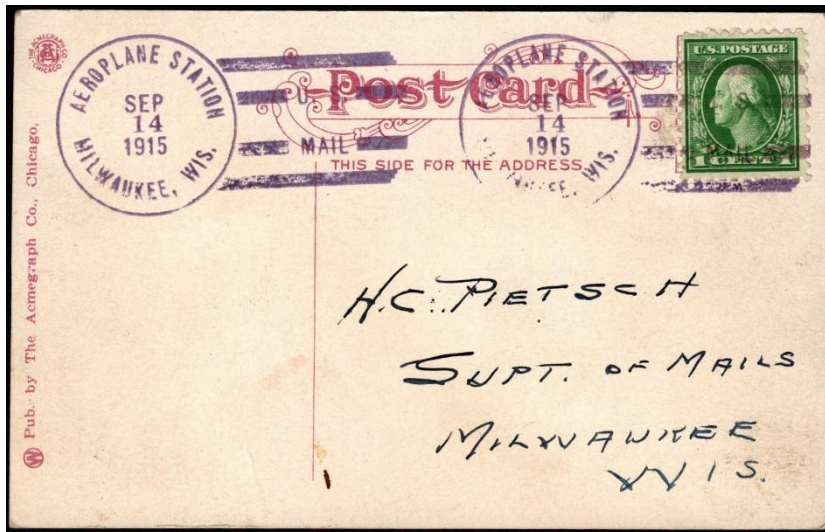


Figure 2a: This postcard was flown on an experimental airmail flight staged in Milwaukee September 14, 1915. It is franked with a 1-cent Washington from the 1914-15 issue (Scott 424) and postmarked "AEROPLANE STATION / MILWAUKEE, WIS. / SEP 14 1915.



Figure 2b: The back of the postcard pictures the Federal Building in Milwaukee where Herman and PM Piasecki worked.

Before the first regularly scheduled airmail flight in May 1918, the U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) authorized a series of experimental flights. Milwaukee got its first opportunity May 30-June 1, 1912, about nine months after the first demonstration in Garden City, New York. Unfortunately, the weather did not cooperate. Only mail postmarked May 30 was flown, and very few of those pieces survived.

Milwaukee's next chance to shine came September 13-17, 1915, and it was a much more successful event. This postcard was one of 547 items flown around West Allis Fair Grounds on September 14 during the State Fair Aviation Meet by aviator Obert E. Williams. After the mail was flown, it was taken to a nearby post office to continue its journey.

Willard's and Milo's Collection Grows

The first cover Herman addressed to Willard and Milo would come about 11 years later. It was for a seminal event in Milwaukee airmail history – the first contract air mail (CAM) flight on

June 7, 1926 (Figure 3). Chicago and Minneapolis were the end points of so-called CAM route 9 with stops in Milwaukee and La Crosse. The route was awarded to Charles Dickinson and his fleet of three planes. The inaugural flight from Minneapolis south was a disaster due to severe weather problems, but the afternoon flight from Milwaukee to Chicago on which this cover took a ride went off without a hitch.



Figure 3: Service on Contract Air Mail (CAM) route 9 between Milwaukee and Chicago started June 7, 1926. This cover flew on the second flight south from Milwaukee that day. In the American Air Mail Catalogue (AAMC), the cachet is numbered 9E2. The stamp was issued February 13, 1926, to meet the new CAM rates (Scott C2). Note the name "H.C. Pietsch" in the return address block.

Those first CAM flights to and from Milwaukee used Butler Field in suburban Wauwatosa. (That former airfield is now a county park.) About a 12-mile drive from their house, it is unlikely that Milo and Willard saw this event, but PM Piasecki attended the first flight from Butler Field to Minneapolis that morning, and there is a good chance Herman was there as well (Figure 4).



Figure 4: This is a photo of preparations for the first CAM 9 flight from Milwaukee the morning of June 7, 1926. On the far right is Milwaukee Postmaster Peter Piasecki. In the middle with the hood is pilot Dan Kiser. Courtesy Milwaukee County Historical Society, George Hardie Papers.

After Lindbergh made his historic flight in May 1927, "Lindbergh mania" swept the country, and Hermann was Johnny-on-the-spot to ensure his nephew and niece had a souvenir for their album. Lindbergh paid a two-day visit to Milwaukee August 20-21, 1927, and Herman addressed a nifty little postcard to Willard and Milo with a message from "Lindy" aka Uncle Herman (Figures 5a and 5b). Lindbergh flew into Milwaukee County Airport (what is now Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport) that had opened the previous month. An estimated 200,000 people – more than a third of the city's population – lined the streets to see Lindbergh parade down Wisconsin

Avenue past the Federal Building (see Figure 2b), the home of the post office. PM Piasecki and Herman certainly must have seen the parade, and PM Piasecki spoke at a dinner in Lindbergh's honor the evening of August 20.



Figure 5a: Charles Lindbergh visited Milwaukee August 20-21, 1927. This is the message and stamp side of the commemorative postcard Herman sent to Milo and Willard for that occasion. Note that they moved sometime after June 1926, and "1850 19th Street" would be their address going forward. The stamp, issued June 18, 1927, commemorates Lindbergh's transatlantic flight (Scott C10).



Figure 5b: This is the backside of the postcard in Figure 5a. The tall building to the left is Milwaukee City Hall built in 1895. It was the tallest building in Milwaukee until 1973. The structure to the right of City Hall may be the Federal Building, which housed the post office where Herman and PM Piasecki worked. Does the water ring indicate this was used as a coaster?!

"Lindbergh mania" continued into 1928 when Lindbergh once again flew mail on CAM 2, the airmail route between Chicago and St. Louis. Lindbergh was the first pilot on CAM 2 when service on that route started April 15, 1926, and he agreed to reprise his role February 20-21, 1928, to promote air mail. Multiple planes were needed to fly the tens of thousands of letters sent for this event, and Lindbergh flew each plane a part of the route. Herman made sure Milo received a postcard with the message "Greetings from 'Lindy' and Uncle Herman" (Figures 6a and 6b).



Figure 6a: When Lindbergh flew mail on the CAM 2 route February 20-21, 1928, to promote air mail, thousands of letters and postcards were prepared, including this one postmarked Milwaukee February 20. Many, if not most, of the items carried on those flights included the horseshoe ("Lucky Lindy") "Lindbergh Again Flies The Air Mail" cachet, which is number 2S7 in the AAMC.

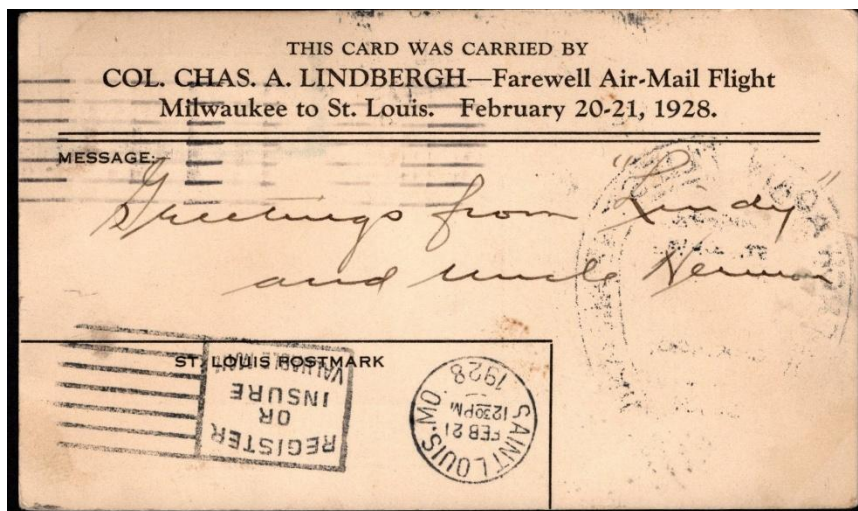


Figure 6b: On the message side of the "Lindbergh Again Flies The Air Mail" postcard, Herman penned to Milo, "Greetings from 'Lindy' and Uncle Herman."

That was the last item Herman addressed to Milo; all the later items were sent just to Willard. Milo turned 14 in 1928 and as a first-year high school student, she probably had more pressing matters to occupy her time than aviation and air mail. Willard was just seven and was likely becoming more aware of the world around him, so Uncle Herman kept the letters coming.

Less than three months after Lindbergh's return to CAM 2, Milwaukee played host to the "Bremen Flyers" who made the first successful east-to-west transatlantic airplane flight April 12-13, 1928. Of course, a special souvenir postcard was prepared (Figures 7a and 7b). The Bremen Flyers, who called themselves "the three musketeers of the air," consisted of two Germans – pilot Captain Hermann Köhl and plane owner Baron Ehrenfried Freiherr von Hünefeld – and Irish navigator Major James Fitzmaurice. The trio arrived in Milwaukee from Chicago the afternoon of May 13, and as with Lindbergh's visit, huge crowds turned out to welcome them – 250,000 by one estimate. More than 1,000 people attended the banquet that evening, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was described simply as the "former assistant secretary of the navy under President Wilson." At the time Roosevelt was making a political comeback and was elected governor of New York later in 1928. Paying homage to its German heritage, Captain

Köhl said Milwaukee made him feel more at home than any other city in America, while both Baron von Hünefeld and Major Fitzmaurice touted the growth of aviation.

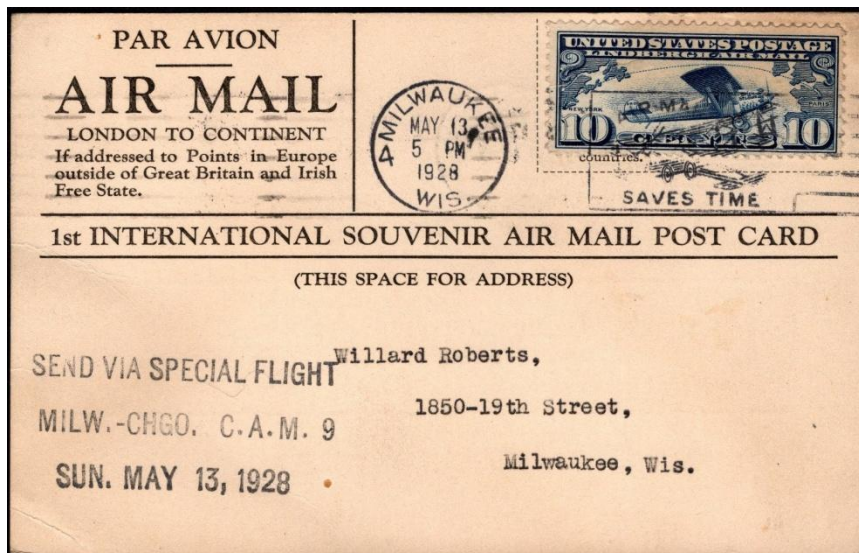


Figure 7a: The Bremen Flyers, consisting of two Germans and one Irishman, made the first ever east-to-west transatlantic flight April 12-13, 1928. Their success was widely toasted, including in Milwaukee where they paid a visit May 13-14, 1928. Their visit was commemorated with a special postcard.



Figure 7b: In addition to a message from Uncle Herman, the message side of the Bremer Flyers postcard features a backdrop of Milwaukee with photos of the three flyers (left to right Captain Hermann Köhl, Baron Ehrenfried Freiherr von Hünefeld, and Major James Fitzmaurice).

It is highly likely that as a post office employee, Herman tracked developments through the USPOD's daily *The Postal Bulletin* (PB). And from occasional news reports of his comings and goings, Herman clearly had contacts at post offices elsewhere in Wisconsin.

That might explain why Herman received an inaugural flight cover for the extension of CAM 9 from Milwaukee to the Fox River Valley cities of Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Appleton, and Green Bay on December 15, 1928. The PB announced this extension on November 26, 1928, and on the day of the first flight, Herman received an airmail cover from Fond du Lac with an enclosure signed by "Tom Watson" who was a mail carrier in that city. This cover promptly made it into Willard's scrapbook (Figures 8a and 8b).

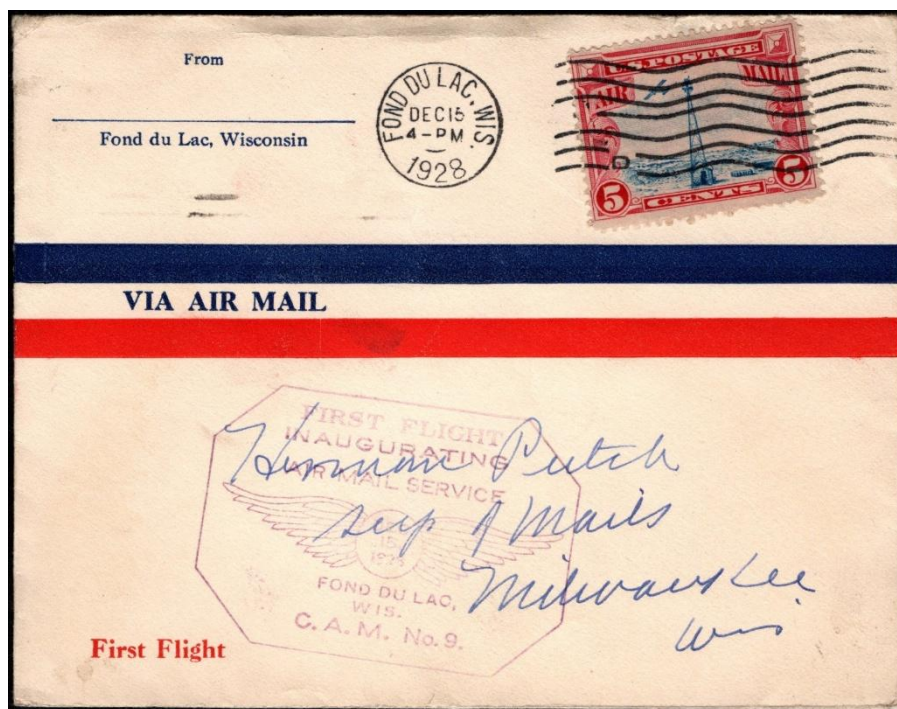


Figure 8a: CAM 9 was extended to cities in Wisconsin's Fox River Valley on December 15, 1928. This first flight cover (FFC), with AAMC cachet 9E9, was trucked from Fond du Lac to Oshkosh and did not leave by air for Milwaukee until the next day due to weather, which explains the December 16 Milwaukee backstamp. The stamp was issued July 25, 1928, to satisfy the reduction in airmail rates effective August 1 (Scott C11). The stamp depicts the famous light beacon that guided airmail pilots through the Rocky Mountains.



Figure 8b: The Fond du Lac FFC included a "Greetings" enclosure picturing Lake Winnebago and showing the locations of the Fox River Valley cities. It is signed by Tom Watson, a Fond du Lac letter carrier.

Tracking the Overall Growth of Air Mail

The first flight covers (FFC) that Herman prepared for Willard were not limited to Milwaukee and CAM 9. Herman sent him FFCs from elsewhere in the United States, as well as from Canada, Mexico, and Central America, documenting the rapidly expanding airmail system in the Americas in the late 1920s and early 1930s:

- August 1, 1928, Cincinnati to Cleveland on CAM 16 (Figures 9a and 9b);
- October 1, 1928, Mexico City to Laredo, Texas (Figure 10a and 10b);
- December 10, 1928, Winnipeg, Manitoba to Calgary, Alberta (Figure 11); and
- Foreign Air Mail (FAM) route 5 Miami to Cristobal in the then Canal Zone, February 4, 1929, and from Cristobal to Miami on February 10, 1929 (Figures 12a and 12b).



Figure 9a: Service on CAM 16 between Cleveland and Louisville started August 1, 1928. This “Souvenir Air Mail” postcard traveled that day on the northbound leg of CAM 16 between Cincinnati and Cleveland. The first flight cachet is listed in the AAMC as number 16N5.



Figure 9b: A variety of these “Souvenir Air Mail” postcards were produced each featuring a different Milwaukee landmark. The picture on the CAM 16 flight postcard is the Milwaukee Central Library building completed in 1898. In 1928 this building also housed the Milwaukee Public Museum.



Figure 10a: The first airmail flight between Mexico City and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico was scheduled for October 1, 1928. Due to stormy weather, the plane was delayed leaving Mexico City on October 1 and did not stop in Nuevo Laredo at all, instead landing on October 2 at an American Army Air Base across the Rio Grande in Laredo, Texas. This item is franked with 60 centavos of postage: a 10-centavos stamp issued in 1926 that pictures the Monument to Cuauhtémoc in Mexico City (Cuauhtémoc was the last Aztec ruler) and a 50-centavos 1927 airmail stamp depicting a golden eagle.

Figure 10b: The cachet on the FFC Mexico City to Nuevo Laredo was rubber stamped on the back of the cover. Below the date it reads "Official Air Route" and on the wings, "Inaugural Flight."



Figure 11: Like the United States, Canada contracted out airmail routes. Western Canadian Airways won the contract to fly mail across the Canadian prairie and began service on December 10, 1928. This is a FFC from that day between Winnipeg, Manitoba and Calgary, Alberta. On the inaugural flights, eight different cachets were used depicting familiar prairie scenes. This one depicts a monoplane soaring over grain elevators and a farmer with his loaded horse-drawn wagon. The stamp is a 1928 airmail issue called the "Allegory of Flight."



Figure 12a: Pan American Airways (PAA) started to carry air mail on its second Foreign Air Mail (FAM) route February 4, 1929. This route, designated FAM 5, was between Miami, Florida and Cristobal in the Canal Zone (what is today Panama). Charles Lindbergh was the pilot on that first flight, flying a Sikorsky S-38 flying boat. This cover should have included 27-cents of postage: 25-cents for the flight and 2-cents to cover the regular first-class letter rate. This cover was underpaid by two cents, thus the amount of postage due. The 20-cent airmail stamp was issued January 25, 1927, to satisfy the higher rates on longer routes (Scott C9).



Figure 12b: The return flight on FAM 5 from Cristobal to Miami left February 10, 1929. Again, the plane was flown by Lindbergh. The Canal Zone stamps, one of which is surcharged 25-cents for air mail, picture George Washington Goethals, the engineer who oversaw construction of the Panama Canal.

Herman must not have read the *PB* of January 19, 1929, closely enough because he underpaid the FAM 5 cover to Cristobal by two cents! Postage either way was 25-cents in addition to the regular postage of 2-cents for a first-class letter. The correct amount of postage in Canal Zone stamps was used on the cover to Miami.

And did Willard know that those two covers traveled on Sikorsky S-38 flying boats piloted by none other than Charles Lindbergh? After celebrating his groundbreaking flight, Lindbergh got down to business helping Pan American Airways (PAA) set up its Latin America routes.

A Trio of *Graf Zeppelin* Covers

Fixed wing aircraft technology was adequate for short-haul flights in the 1920s, but rigid airships dominated long distance flights. In fact, it was a real question at the time whether fixed wing aircraft would be able to compete with the likes of Germany's *Graf Zeppelin*. To hedge their bets, Herman and PM Piasecki made sure Willard had three *Graf Zeppelin* postal items in his collection.

PM Piasecki prepared a postal card for the first air mail to travel on the *Graf Zeppelin* from the United States to Germany (Figures 13a and 13b). The *Graf Zeppelin* started flying in September 1928, and in mid-October, it made its first commercial passenger flight across the Atlantic. After making repairs to damage incurred on the westbound journey, the *Graf Zeppelin* departed Lakehurst, New Jersey for Germany October 29, 1928, with PM Piasecki's postal card onboard. Backstamped in Germany November 1, the postal card returned to Milwaukee and ended up in Willard's scrapbook.



Figure 13a: This postal card was flown on the *Graf Zeppelin*'s first airmail flight from the United States to Germany in October 1928. The 3-cent postal card (Scott UX37) was issued explicitly for international use. At the time, 3-cents was the Universal Postal Union surface rate for postal cards and postcards. Per *The Postal Bulletin*, items carried on the *Graf Zeppelin* needed 50-cents added postage (satisfied by the 50-cent Lincoln Amphitheatre issue (Scott 570)). Why this postal card has 4-cents more postage in the form of a pair of the 2-cent 1928 Valley Forge issue (Scott 645) is not clear.

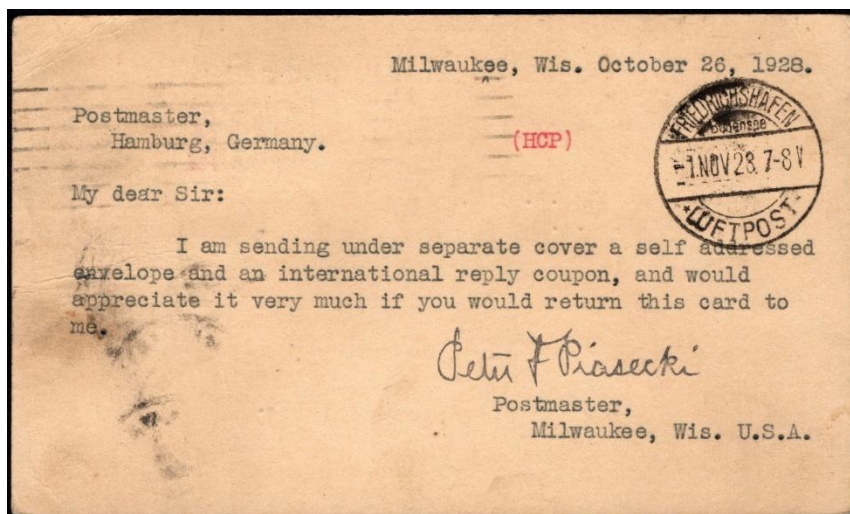


Figure 13b: On the message side of the Graf Zeppelin carried postal card is a message from PM Piasecki to his counterpart in Hamburg with instructions on how he hopes the postal card will be managed.

The second *Graf Zeppelin* cover to arrive at Willard's house was one that traveled around the world in 1929 (Figures 14a and 14b). It was signed by both Herman and PM Piasecki. The cover was postmarked in Milwaukee on August 5, 1929, and is franked with \$3.55 of postage, the required amount as specified in the *PB* of August 1, 1929. That was a significant amount of postage, equal to about \$65 in 2025.



Figure 14a: Cover that flew on Graf Zeppelin's round-the-world flight August 8-29, 1929 signed by both Herman Pietsch and Peter Piasecki. Regular first-class postage of 5-cents paid by use of stamp envelope (Scott UC1). Extra charge of \$3.50 for Graf Zeppelin flight paid by combination of four stamps: 5-cent Beacon on Rocky Mountain (Scott C11), 50-cent Arlington Amphitheatre (Scott 570), \$1 Lincoln Memorial (Scott 571), and \$2 U.S. Capitol (Scott 572).



Figure 14b: August 29, 1929, backstamp on cover shown in Figure 14a.

The cover likely traveled by train to Lakehurst where it was placed aboard the *Graf Zeppelin*. The airship departed from Lakehurst on August 8, 1929, and headed east to Germany for refueling and then across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to Tokyo. From there it flew nonstop across the Pacific Ocean to California. After a transcontinental journey across the United States, it arrived back at Lakehurst on August 29, 1929 where the cover was backstamped. From there, the cover hitched a train ride back to Milwaukee where it was delivered to Willard.

The third and final *Graf Zeppelin* postal item appeared in Willard's mailbox in June 1930. He was only nine years old at the time, but I am sure he sensed the hype of the *Graf Zeppelin*'s first European-Pan American flight (Figures 15a and 15b). Even though the *Graf Zeppelin* would get no closer to Milwaukee than New Jersey, the preparations for its journey and its actual flight were front page news in newspapers across the country.



Figure 15a: This postcard was carried by the *Graf Zeppelin* on the last leg of its Europe-Pan American flight. Postmarked Milwaukee April 22, 1930, the stamp is the 65-cent *Graf Zeppelin* issue of 1930 (Scott C13). The postcard traveled to Lakehurst and left on the *Graf Zeppelin* on June 2, 1930. It arrived in Friedrichshafen, Germany on June 6 and returned to the United States via ship.



Figure 15b: The back of the “Souvenir Air Mail” postcard in Figure 15a is a photo of the “Court of Honor,” a part of the median strip on Wisconsin Avenue in downtown Milwaukee dedicated to military figures. The steeple to the right is Calvary Presbyterian Church built in 1870.

The *Graf Zeppelin* stamps that the USPOD issued April 19, 1930, to essentially pay for the airship’s journey (93.5 percent of the revenue collected went to Zeppelin Airship Works) went on sale in Milwaukee April 21. Herman promptly bought one for Willard’s postcard, but he did not have to rush. The Great Depression was underway, and with unemployment surging 75 percent in Milwaukee, discretionary spending was severely constrained. Given their high values – 65 cents, \$1.35 and \$2.60 – the three stamps sold poorly and most were destroyed. As assistant postmaster, Herman was well off with a steady job and a handsome salary. His purchase of the 65-cent stamp did not overly burden him.

An Assortment of Aviation- and Airmail-Related Covers

Herman also gifted Willard an assortment of other covers, the only requirement that they had something to do with aviation or included the words “Air Mail.” A sample provides a flavor of the range.

Two covers Willard received were addressed to Herman by one Henry O. Meisel of Clintonville, Wisconsin. Meisel was quite an enterprising fellow. He ran a sales and service office for Indian Motorcycle in Clintonville and was a vocal proponent of using motorcycles to transport mail from the hinterlands to airmail stops. The USPOD experimented with motorcycle courier service on the East Coast early in 1928 and authorized motorcycle feeder lines nationwide in the summer of that year, provided that they could pay for themselves. Meisel took advantage of the opportunity and carried mail from Clintonville to airmail terminals like the one in Green Bay.

Meisel was also a stamp collector, dealer and promoter. He produced cachets for sundry events like the 10th anniversary of Armistice Day (Figure 16) and the 25th anniversary of the Wright Brothers’ first flight (Figure 17). (I find his addition of the tagline “IMPORTANT Great Philatelic Value” on the Wright Brothers’ cover to be quite amusing.) He was a member of the American Air Mail Society and founded the short-lived American Flying Mail Association. He established and was president for almost 30 years of the American Metered Postage Society,

which continues to this day as The Meter Stamp Society. In the 1940s, he turned his attention to designing first day cover cachets.

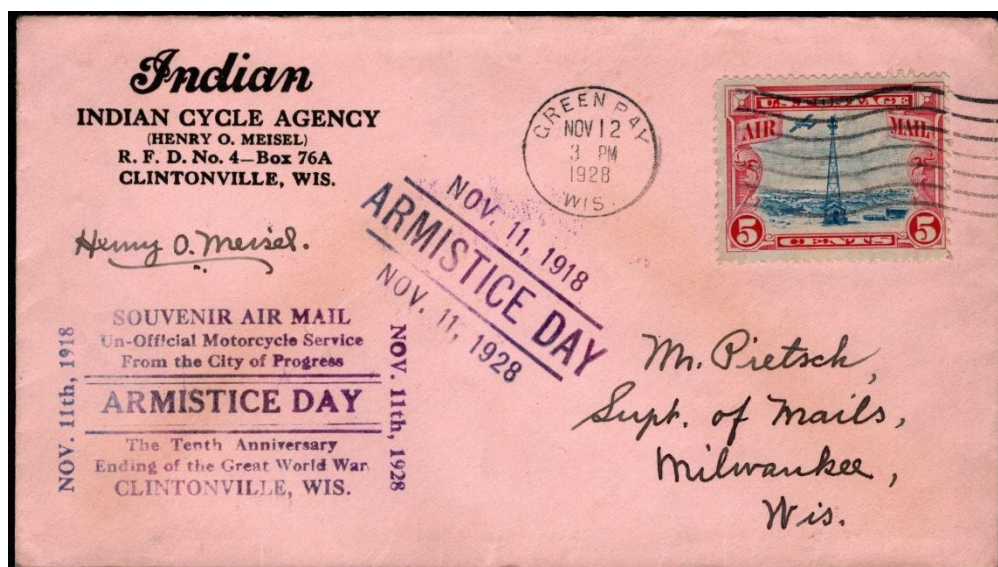


Figure 16: This corner advertising cover for Indian Cycle Agency was postmarked in Green Bay November 12, 1928. It commemorates the 10th anniversary of the armistice that ended World War I and is signed by Henry O. Meisel.



Figure 17: This cover prepared by Henry O. Meisel was postmarked La Crosse December 17, 1928, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Wright Brothers' first flight. Charles C. Looney, postmaster of La Crosse, signed the cover on the far left.

Aviation event covers also figure prominently in Willard's collection. The first International Aeronautical Exposition took place in Chicago December 1-9, 1928 (Figure 18). It showcased 81 American-built planes and included more than 130 booths exhibiting aviation accessories like electrically heated clothing to keep toasty in unheated planes. The highlight was a Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT) passenger plane with a 78-foot wingspan, three engines of 420 horsepower each, and a "spacious cabin" with "two desks, seats for eight passengers, and sleeping quarters." By way of comparison, a Boeing 737-800 has a wingspan of 113 feet, has two engines each of roughly 44,000 horsepower, and can seat a maximum of 189 people. Of

course, there are no sleeping quarters to speak of on a 737. The TAT plane could have been yours for only \$68,000, equivalent to about \$1.3 million today.



Figure 18: This is the cachet for the International Aeronautical Exposition that was held in Chicago December 1-9, 1928. The cachet is on a cover addressed to Willard postmarked Chicago, December 6 and backstamped Milwaukee December 7.

The Chicago exposition was held just before the first International Civil Aeronautics Conference convened in Washington, DC. Meeting December 12-14, the conference achieved little of anything, but there was an official cancel, which Herman ensured Willard received (Figure 19). There were also two stamps issued for the conference, but those probably were not available in Milwaukee when the conference opened. Herman, however, made sure Willard got both on later covers (Figure 20).



Figure 19: Less than a week after the Chicago exposition concluded, the International Aeronautics Conference met in Washington, DC. The cover Willard received via Uncle Herman for that event had a stamp cancelled with the conference's official machine cancellation in green.



Figure 20: The USPOD issued two stamps in honor of the 1928 International Aeronautics Conference. The 2-cent denomination (Scott 649) in Willard's collection was used on a CAM 19 FFC from Camden, New Jersey to Washington, D.C. postmarked September 15, 1929 (left). Another FFC in Willard's collection from Brownsville, Texas to Mexico City (FAM 8) postmarked March 9, 1929, was franked with the 5-cent denomination (Scott 650) (right).

One of the more frightening events if you were not paying attention to the news in southern Ohio was the “Army Air Maneuvers” centered around Norton Field in Columbus, Ohio May 18-25, 1929 (Figure 21). The Army wanted to simulate plane warfare, so it scheduled a 10-day “war” between Columbus (the “Red Army”) and Dayton (the “Blue Army”) that included 200 planes strafing opposing fields, driving off invaders in dog fights, and conducting mock bombing runs on large panels representing 800,000 ground troops. One of the Army’s massive “Keystone” bombers flew to New York and “theoretically devastated” Governor’s Island and Wall Street. (Wall Street would devastate itself about five months later in the crash that precipitated the Great Depression.) In one mock dog fight, two planes collided killing a pilot. Two other service members died in ground accidents. Despite those mishaps, the *Aircraft Year Book* of 1930 concluded that the maneuvers “demonstrated the value of aircraft as an arm of national defense.”



Figure 21: The U.S. Army conducted a mock war between Columbus and Dayton, Ohio May 15-25, 1929, to assess the effectiveness of airpower. The event was commemorated by an official cachet. The event was considered a success, despite the loss of three soldiers in accidents.

For pure entertainment, however, nothing could have topped the National Air Races that took place in Cleveland over a 10-day period from late August to early September 1929 (Figure 22). The event featured 35 races, numerous aerobatic demonstrations, and appearances by famous aviators like Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart. One of the most touted races was the first official Women's Air Derby – nicknamed the “Powder Puff Derby” by humorist Will Rogers – that started in Santa Monica, California and ended in Cleveland. Nineteen pilots competed flying a combination of heavy- and light-class planes. Fifteen completed the race including Louise Thaden who finished first in the heavy class and Phoebe Omlie who won the light class. The derby made 11 stops along the way, including one in Douglas, Arizona (Figure 23).

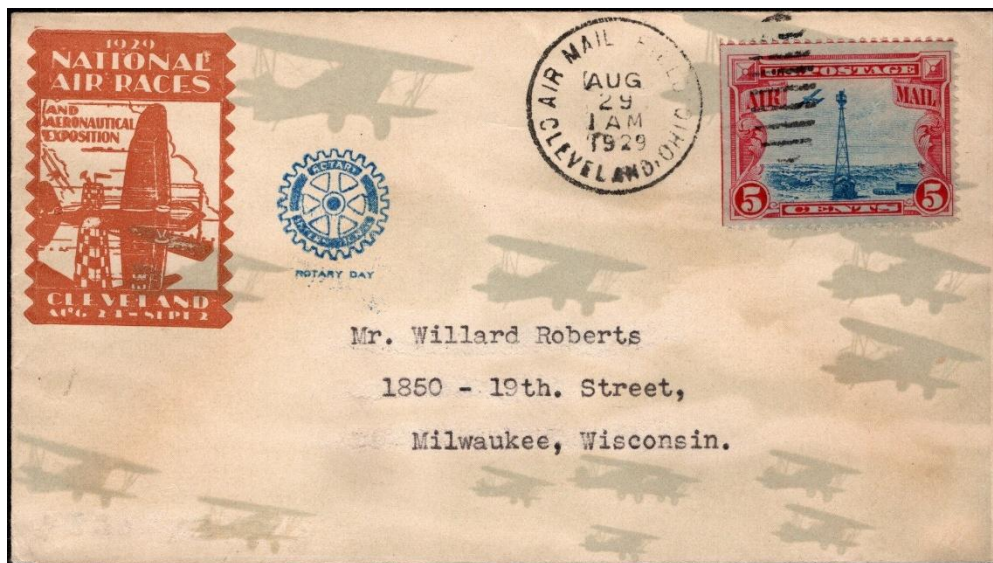


Figure 22: The first National Air Races took place in 1920 at Roosevelt Field, Long Island, New York. In 1929, the races were moved to Cleveland. The cachet for the 1929 event featured a plane racing past a pylon.



Figure 23: A highlight of the 1929 National Air Races was the first-ever “Women's Air Derby.” The derby started in Santa Monica, California and ended in Cleveland. Participants made 11 stops along the way, including one in Douglas, Arizona where this cover was postmarked August 20, 1929.

Aviation infrastructure, especially landing fields, grew rapidly during this period, and every airport dedication needed – you guessed it – a special cachet to honor the occasion. Willard ended up with several examples in his collection. The September 14, 1929, dedication of the New York Seaplane Airport in Port Washington, New York is an especially attractive one (Figure 24). The return address stamp of the “Aero Philatelic Society of Chicago” is a nice addition. The New York Seaplane Airport – now known as Sands Point Seaplane Base – was PAA’s base for its transatlantic Boeing 314 flights in 1939 and 1940.

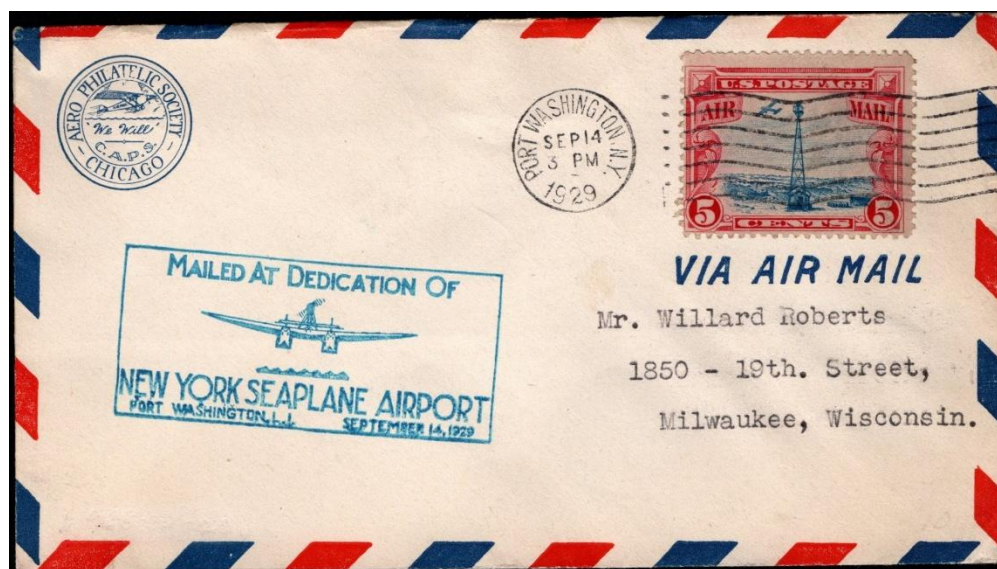


Figure 24: The New York Seaplane Airport, later a base for PAA's transatlantic flights in 1939 and 1940, was dedicated September 14, 1929.

Willard received a few more covers from Herman and PM Piasecki in early 1931, including a fine first day cover, sent via air mail, with a trio of the 1931 General Casimir Pulaski commemorative that was issued January 16, 1931, in Milwaukee and ten other cities (Figure 25).

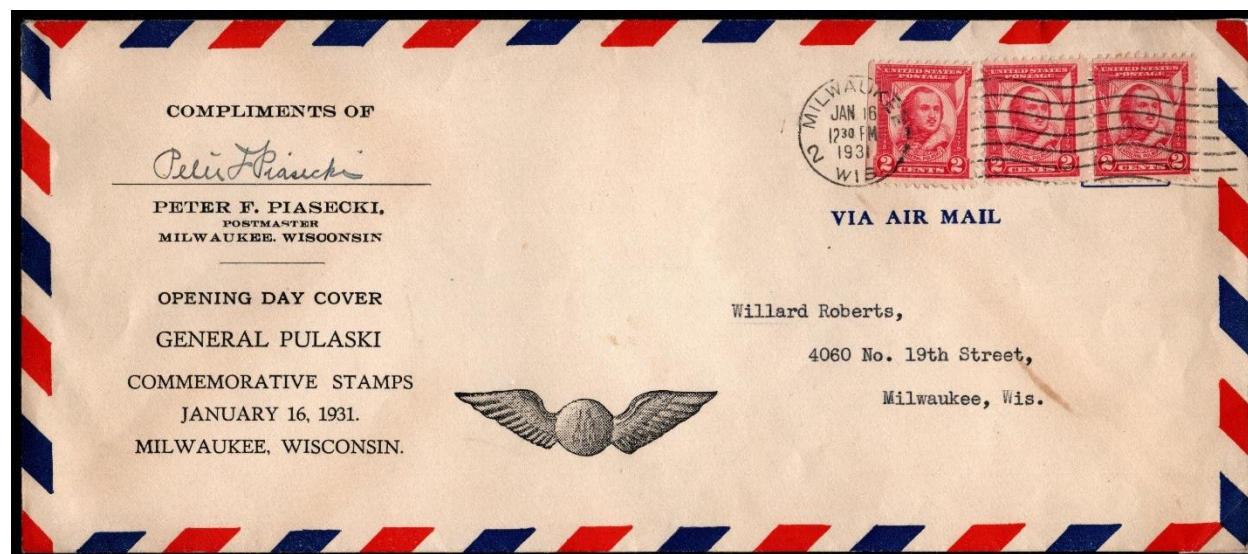


Figure 25: First Day Cover for the General Casimir Pulaski commemorative issue (Scott 690) postmarked Milwaukee January 16, 1931.

Herman Charles Pietsch: Postal Thief

After that date, the covers abruptly stopped, and the reason was a sad one: On May 18, 1931, Herman Charles Pietsch, a 30-year employee of the USPOD who worked his way up from the bottom to assistant postmaster, was arrested for stealing money from the mail.

Around Christmas time 1930, Postal Inspector R.M. Bates started investigating reports that money was being extracted from Milwaukee's outgoing mail. On May 18, Bates watched Herman all day, and late in the afternoon, he saw Herman leave the outgoing mail section with a bundle of letters. Bates followed him to his private office, and as he entered, he saw Herman tear open a letter and extract a dollar bill. Bates found that Herman opened four other letters, two of which also held a dollar bill that Herman pocketed. Bates at once placed him under arrest. Herman commented upon being arrested, "What a damned fool."

Initially, no suspicion was attached to Herman, and the thinking was a minor employee was responsible. Bates said, "It was finally by a process of elimination that we were forced to admit [Herman] Pietsch was the man." Bates continued, "Our evidence convinces us we are right, but personally I can scarcely believe it."

Herman was arraigned before a federal court commissioner and admitted to pilfering the mail on various occasions totaling several hundred dollars. (The exact amount he stole was never determined.) At his arraignment, he called his actions "darn foolish" and the result of being "hard up" financially. That latter point fell on deaf ears because Herman was unmarried with no dependents, made \$4,500 a year, and was estimated to have a net worth of \$75,000, a sizeable sum in those days.

Herman's "hard up" argument also was rebutted by a statement he made to Bates after his arrest. Bates testified that Herman said to him, "This is certainly a hell of a thing for me to do. I certainly did not need the money for I didn't even spend all of my salary. I don't know what made me take it other than to get some sort of a thrill in picking out the letters which contained money."

PM Piasecki was distraught. After wiring Washington asking permission to suspend Herman pending disposition of his case, Piasecki went home sick. He later said, "This thing has come as a tremendous shock to me, for I have known [Herman] Pietsch for a number of years personally, in addition to having worked intimately with him day after day during the years I have been postmaster. I would have wagered my right arm on his honesty and integrity. The only possible inference, in my mind, is that the man was money mad – mad in his desire to accumulate money."

Herman was released on \$1,500 bond, and the next day he was in a hospital being treated for carbon monoxide poisoning after an apparent suicide attempt.

People were perplexed by his arrest, with the *Sheboygan Press* expressing sympathy for him opining, "We cannot help but feel that a disorganized mind is in a large measure responsible." He had been lifting money from the mail for months before he was caught, but the amounts were

small. The *Sheboygan Press*, among others, concluded that “he acquired a mania for opening letters rather than a desire to rob.”

Herman’s case went to trial on Monday, December 12, 1932. The federal prosecutors called only two witnesses: PM Piasecki who explained how Herman’s position gave him access to the mail and Bates, who gave all the testimony supporting the charge. The defense did not dispute the thefts and instead argued that Herman was “mentally unbalanced” when he committed the thefts and should be found not guilty by reason of insanity. They pointed to his attempted suicide the day after his arrest and his subsequent confinement in a sanatorium for two months. The insanity defense resulted in the trial becoming a battle of competing expert “alienists” – the 1930’s term for a “psychiatrist” – from the defense and prosecution.

Herman did not take the stand in his own defense and spent most of the trial staring at the floor, never making eye contact with the jury, witnesses, lawyers, or spectators. Several prominent businesspeople who were friends of Herman did testify to his character, as did his brother and sister-in-law. Herman had been living with them since 1921, and they were the ones who found Herman on the garage floor the morning of May 19, 1931, and rushed him to the hospital after his attempted suicide.

The jury began its deliberations Wednesday afternoon, and after 13 hours of debate and 16 ballots, it returned a verdict of “guilty” the morning of December 15, 1932. Herman showed little emotion when the verdict was read.

On January 4, 1933, Federal Judge F.A. Geiger sentenced Herman to five years at Leavenworth prison and fined him \$2,500. When asked if he had anything to say before sentencing, Herman said, “I cannot comprehend myself in this position. I can’t seem to realize what has happened to me.”

Judge Geiger showed no leniency in sentencing Herman. Before handing down his penalty, Judge Geiger said, “The charge of which you were convicted is one that generally affects the more humble employees of the postal service, but that is not the case here. From your long service you were in a position where the hundreds of employees under you were to look up to you as an exemplar. The government has dealt generously with you, not only in the matter of promotion but in the way of financial rewards.” Judge Geiger also refused the defense’s motion for a new trial.

Herman spent the next two nights at the Milwaukee County jail. On the morning of January 6, 1933, dressed in a suit and tie and being spared the ignominy of handcuffs, Herman boarded a train to Kansas to serve his term.

Herman was paroled in July 1935 after serving 18 months and paid off the balance of his \$2,500 fine in January 1936. He would never work again and passed away in Wisconsin in 1973 at age 93.

Conclusion

Remarkably, despite his travails, Herman never lost his passion for air mail because among the covers in Willard's collection was one addressed to Herman in 1943 with a cachet celebrating the 25th anniversary of air mail service (Figure 26).

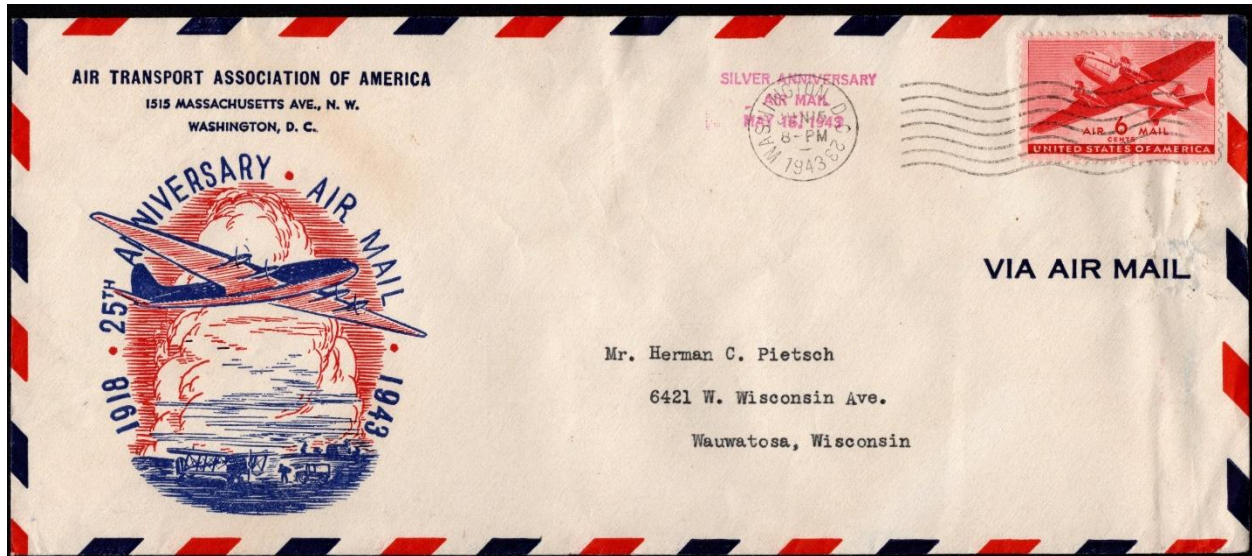


Figure 26: This cover was mailed to Herman Pietsch in 1943, about eight years after he was released from prison. It was sent by the Air Transport Association of America (now known as Airlines for America) and held a war savings bond. The stamp is a 1941 6-cent airmail stamp depicting a twin-motored transport plane (Scott C25).

The last cover in Willard's scrapbook is from 1944 with a cachet for the 59th convention of the American Philatelic Society held in Milwaukee that year (Figure 27). Maybe Uncle Herman arranged for this cover to be sent because Willard was nowhere near Milwaukee at the time. Willard went to work for Allis-Chalmers, a tractor and heavy machinery manufacturer, after graduating from high school in 1939 (Figure 28), but after the United States entered World War II, Willard enlisted in the Navy in 1942 and served aboard a destroyer escorting convoys across the Atlantic for the duration. He was discharged from the Navy in October 1945.

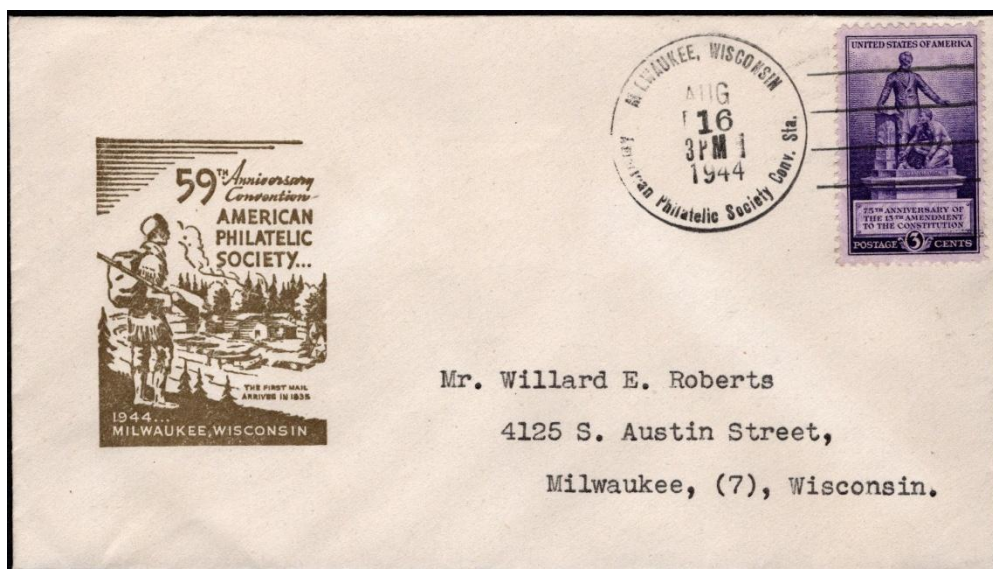


Figure 27: This is the final cover in Willard Roberts' scrapbook. Postmarked in Milwaukee, August 16, 1944, it is franked with a 3-cent stamp issued in 1940 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (Scott 902). The American Philatelic Society held its convention that year in Milwaukee. At the time, Willard was serving onboard a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Atlantic Ocean.

Figure 28: Willard E. Roberts, Rufus King High School Yearbook, 1939.



After the war, Willard earned a degree in electrical engineering from the University of Wisconsin, and he was living and working in Chicago by 1950. In the late 1950s, he was in New York State, and by the early 1960s, he was living in California where he would remain for the rest of his life. He passed away in 2014 or 2015 at age 93 or 94, about the same as Uncle Herman.

As for the other characters in this story, Milo Willard married and remained in Wisconsin until she retired to Florida in the early 1980s. She passed away at age 87 in 2001. PM Piasecki served as Milwaukee postmaster until 1936. He passed away at age 91 in 1967.

It does not appear that Willard was a lifelong stamp collector, or if he was, he was a very low-key one. That said, he took decent care of the album – really more of a scrapbook – in which he stored the covers he received from Herman and PM Piasecki. Some covers are a bit toned, but

none show damage from paper-loving bugs or humidity, and the photo corners he used to attach the covers to the pages left no marks.

To me, this suggests that Willard hung on to this album because the covers were a cherished childhood memory. They brought to mind a time when, quite literally, the sky was the limit. No doubt Herman's legal troubles were a blow to Willard and his family, and Willard's service in the Navy during World War II was no cakewalk. But in my mind, I see Willard in his golden ages flipping through the pages of his scrapbook reflecting on the "Golden Age of Flight."

Resources:

American Air Mail Catalogue, Volume One, Seventh Edition. American Air Mail Society, 2014.

Aircraft Year Book, 1928 through 1931. Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America, Inc. New York City.

2025 Scott Specialized Catalogue of United Stamps & Covers. Amos Media. Released October 2024.

Numerous issues of *The Postal Bulletin* were consulted, and several newspaper articles were sourced for facts on the aviation events and the individuals mentioned in this article.

Other notes:

The covers highlighted in this article were purchased at a Rasdale Stamp Company auction in May 2024. The auction description gave no indication of the backstory of these covers. It stated: "An original clean United States and worldwide mainly cacheted first flight holding from 1915//1943 having most from the late 1920s in an album and slipcase. Around 100 covers including US C13 postcard. Around the World flight German airship LZ127, 1931 plane crash Washington state, and 1915 Aeroplane Station, Milwaukee cancel postcard. First time on the philatelic market and mailed mainly to the person in Milwaukee. Unusual to find still intact."

The URL for this article is <https://www.mypostalhistory.com/post/the-golden-age-of-flight-an-airmail-collector-s-wonderland>.

A version of this article appeared in *The Airpost Journal*, July/August 2025 issue, pp. 10-31, with the title, "Mail Theft in the Golden Age of Airmail."

A separate article on one cover in Willard's collection can be viewed at this URL: <https://www.mypostalhistory.com/post/an-air-mail-first-in-milwaukee>.