

# WEST INDIAN AERIAL EXPRESS

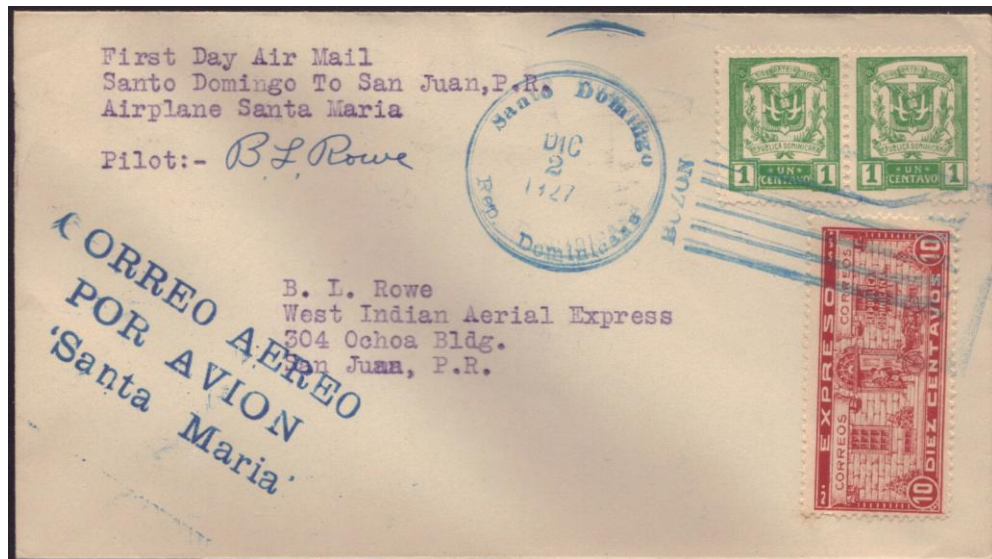
By Manny Marti



Through my voyages on the Internet searching for philatelic items I sometimes come across some interesting and unusual items. This is one of those items.

On one of my voyages, in search of my favorite philatelic items, Puerto Rico, I came across a cover from San Juan. It had rubber stamped across it (BLUE) the wording “CORREO AEREO, POR AVION SANTA MARIA”. It also had a pilot’s name, B.L. Rowe. It was addressed to himself at the West Indian Aerial Express, 304 Ochoa Bldg, San Juan, Puerto Rico. What was all that about? That was enough to set me off on my quest.

I decided to put a ‘watch it’ on EBAY, as there were still five days till the end of the auction.



My Google search on “West Indian Aerial Express” took me to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (as well as other sites) where it showed the following “Rowe, Basil Lee (Captain); West Indian Aerial Express (Santo Domingo); Fairchild FC-2W “La Nina”, Floatplane and a picture of Basil Lee Row.



Preparing La Nina for a flight to Santo Domingo (1927) for passenger operation across the West Indies

Now I have a name to go with the airline. The West Indian Aerial Express was founded by Basil L. Rowe in 1927 to provide service (both passenger and cargo) within Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Before the founding of the WIAE, there was no scheduled service between Cuba the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. In 1925 an inland service of “per 20 grams” (effective May 2, 1925).

On July 14<sup>th</sup> 1927 the trial flight by WIAE pilot Max Marin was made between Barahona, Dom. Rep, to Port-Au-Prince, Haiti. Postage of 2 centavos per ounce was charged. There was no extra fee for airmail. The airplane used for the flight was a WACO-9. A left over from Rowe’s barnstorming days. The return flight occurred on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1927 piloted by Bill Wade

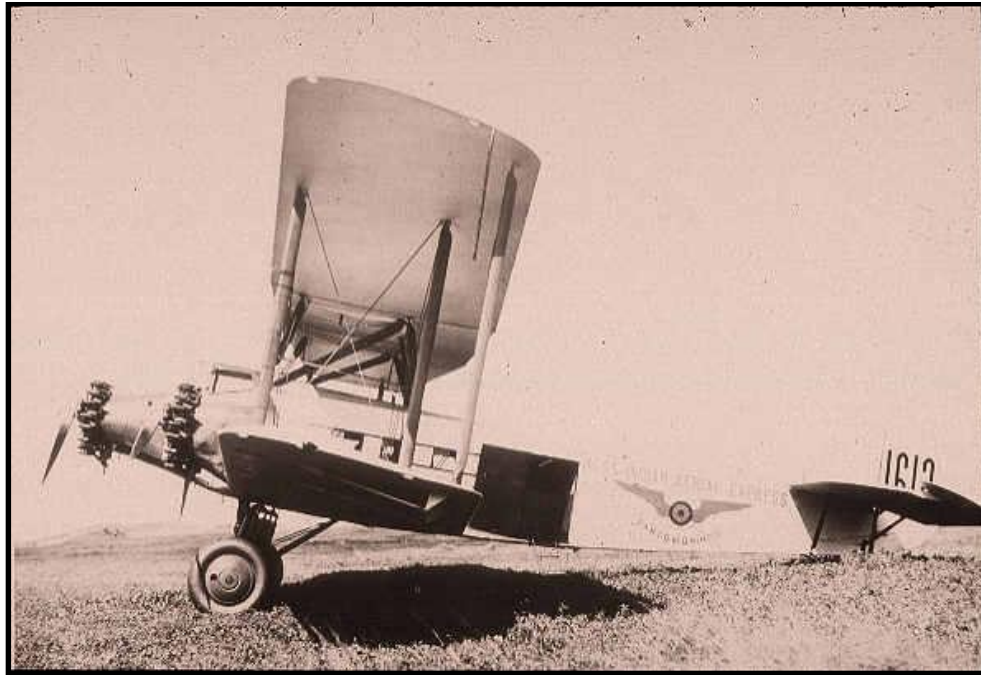
After these trial flights, Rowe purchased two additional planes. A Fairchild FC-2 equipped with pontoons (La Nina) and a Keystone biplane (Santa Maria)

With the purchase of the additional planes, service commenced between these major island (and their major cities).



West Indian Air Express (yellow) and CNCA (lavender) (Cuban company established by Curtiss) later to give Pan Am (PAA) full rights of passage to the West Indies

After around nine months of operations the WIAE was sold due to a hurricane destroying or damaging the WIAE fleet. Juan Tripps of Pan American Airways (PAA) purchased the WIAE from Basil Rowe (who became their lead pilot) after PAA was awarded the U.S. Mail contract for Foreign Air Mail (FAM6).

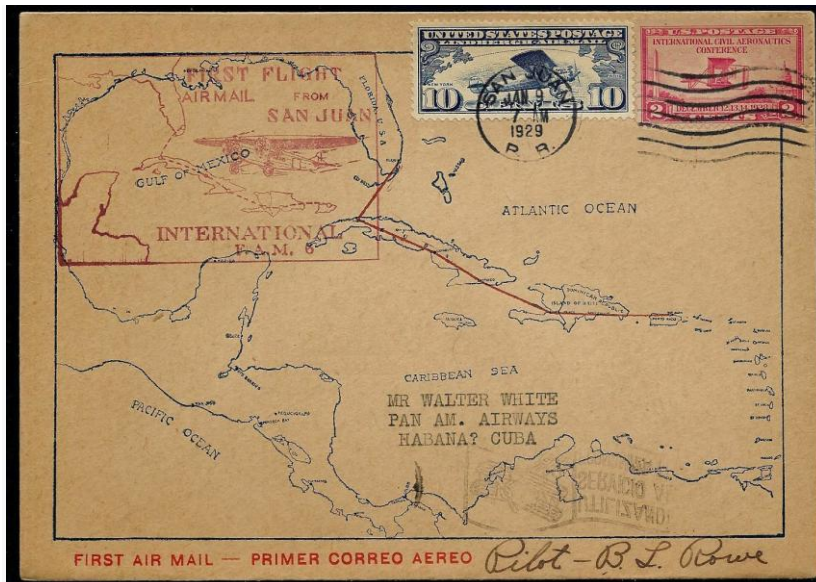


*Keystone Pathfinder 1928*

This Keystone Pathfinder could carry as many as 20 passengers and was put into service by the Dominican-based airline, West Indian Aerial Express. Named the Santa Maria, it was passed to Pan American Airways as part of its purchase of WIAE, in December 1928.



*Port au Prince, Haiti to San Juan, Puerto Rico SIGNED by Pilot B.L. ROWE*



**PUERTO RICO 1929 First Flight Cover San Juan to Havana, Cuba SIGNED by Pilot B.L. ROWE Now flying for Pan American Airway (PAA cover) FAM6**

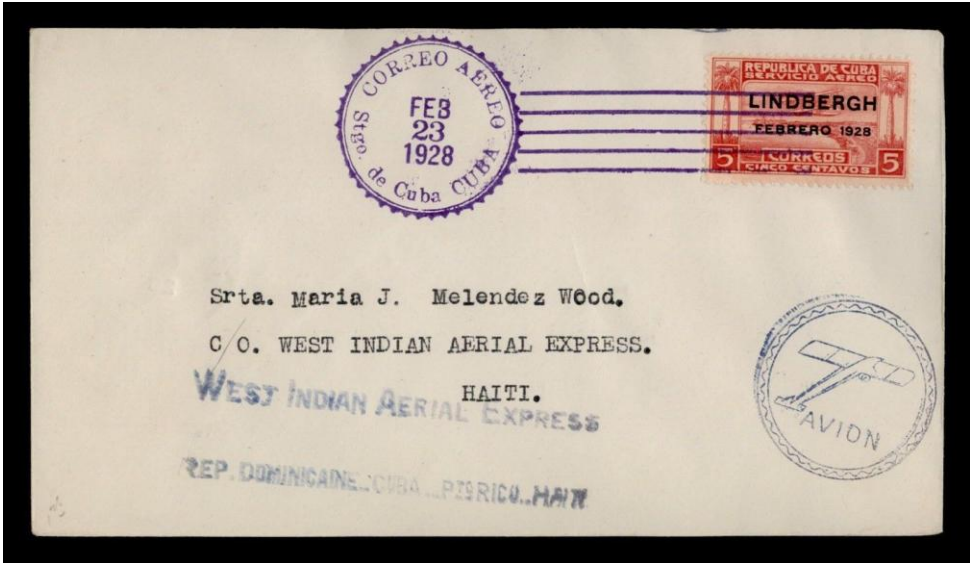
**1928 LINDBERGH FIRST FLIGHT WEST INDIAN AERIAL EXPRESS TO HAITI**



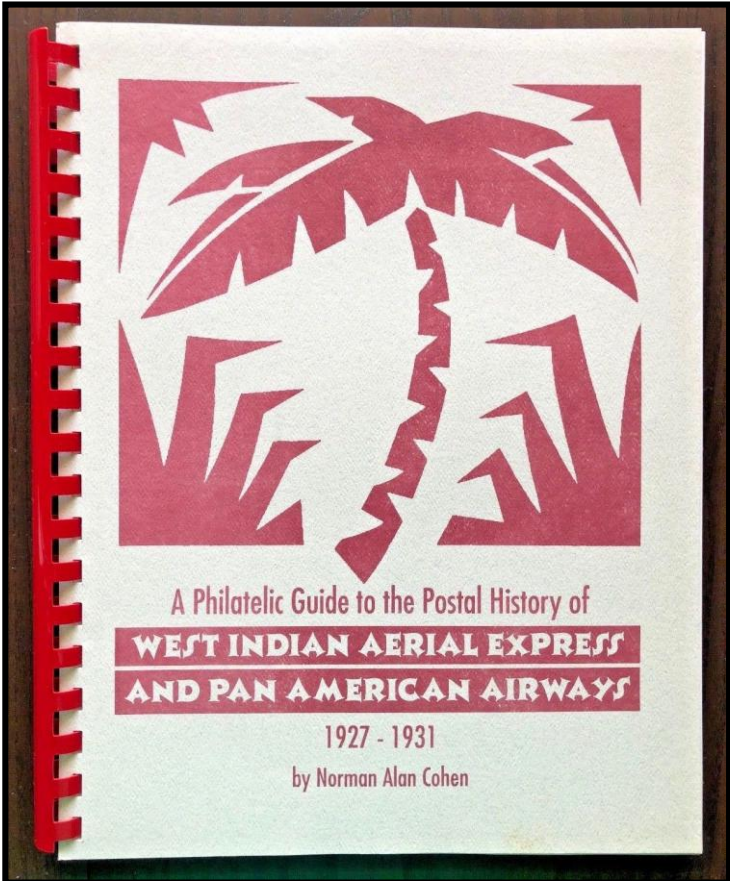
**Cover from Santo Domingo to Havana, Cuba with similar cancel described below**

There was a scheduled service in early February that had to be postponed to the 21<sup>st</sup> of February due to Charles Lindbergh's "Good Will" tour. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February Lindbergh left Santo Domingo flying the "Spirit of San Louis" and arrived in Port-Au-Prince. He was escorted by Basil, who was flying the "Santa Maria to Port-Au-Prince with WIAE mail from Santo Domingo. A special "BOX" hand stamp was applied reading, "Correo Aero Especial Por Lindbergh", "ESPIRITU DE SAN LUIS". In his book, "A Philatelic Guide to the Postal History of WEST INDIAN AERIAL EXPRESS and PAN AMERICAN AIRWAYS" BY Norman Alan Cohen a black and white copy of such a cover is shown (as well as most covers to various destinations and all recorded items from the collection of George W. Bowman.

Lindbergh used his fame to promote air mail service. For example, at the request of the owner of West Indian Aerial Express (and later Pan Am's chief pilot), in February 1928 he carried some 3,000 pieces of special souvenir mail between Santo Domingo, RD, Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, and Havana, Cuba.



Cover from Santiago de Cuba to Haiti canceled Feb 23, 1928



Marti Postal History Library

## Other than Carabean Destinations



SOLD for  
\$200.00 Feb  
03, 2019  
San Juan,  
P.R. to New  
York



Haiti West Indian  
Aerial Express  
Registered Airmail  
Flight to Paris,  
France, asking  
**\$300.00**  
(Sold for  
unknown) on Jan  
24, 2019

In conclusion the West Indian Aerial Express (WIAE) was short lived, just under one year, Some of the material is quite scarce with just anywhere from 12 covers know. A search on the Internet at the time of this article just came up with between 4 to 5 covers, ranging from a few dollars to asking price of \$\$\$.

This writer acknowledges the references: National Air and Space Museum - Smithsonian Institution, A Philatelic Guide to the Postal History of WEST INDIAN AERIAL EXPRESS and PAN AMERICAN AIRWAYS by Norman Alan Cohen -1997, Personal Collection, and GOOGLE Search Engine, and others.