

An Historic Flight & Aviator Nearly Forgotten...

The First Transcontinental Flight Across America in 1911 by Cal Rodgers

By Philip S. Dockter

100 years ago this September, Calbraith 'Cal' Perry Rodgers was a most unlikely person to achieve a feat that no other person was willing to try, fly across the country within a 30 day period in a modified Wright Bros. Model EX Flyer. Born into an illustrious Naval family, "he was destined for greatness," so his mother proclaimed shortly after Cal's birth in January of 1879, a young Cal had a lot to live up to.

In late 1911, Rodgers took up the challenge offered by newspaper publisher, William Randolph Hearst, of a \$50,000 prize to fly from coast-to-coast in a 30 day period. After taking several hours of flying lessons from the Wright Brothers in Dayton, Ohio, Cal purchased a Wright EX (Experimental) Flyer and quickly found a sponsor, the Armour Company of Chicago, makers of a popular grape soft drink of the day – "Vin Fiz". The Wright aeroplane would become a flying billboard, with the name 'VIN FIZ' painted on the wings and tail - Cal would be paid five dollars per mile. The Armour Company also paid for a special train to follow Cal on his journey, complete with a luxury Pullman Car for Cal's wife, Mabel, and Cal's mother, including executives of the Armour Co., the press, another train car full of spare parts, a spare Wright aeroplane, a Palmer-Singer automobile, several mechanics and a cook.

On a late Sunday afternoon on September 17th, 1911, the 6ft-4in Rodgers, with a cigar firmly clinched in his mouth and a bottle of Vin Fiz soda strapped to the forward strut of the flyer, was ready for his historic flight. Departing from a race track at Sheepshead Bay, New York, Cal flew off guided by the 'iron-compass' railroad tracks. After flying for 105 miles in one hour forty-three minutes, the Vin Fiz landed in Middletown, New York to a crowd of 9,000 - Cal remarked after his landing, "I don't knock the ashes off my cigar." Later that evening, the special Pullman train pulled into Middletown depot.

Early the next morning, a small crowd of 300 spectators gathered to watch the crew prepare the Vin Fiz Flyer for flight. The motor was tested and the crew pushed the machine to a field and pointed it northward. Cal stuck a cigar into his mouth, lit it and settled himself into his seat (pilots wore no set belts), the mechanics pulled through the two propellers, Cal called out, "Let her go, boys." The machine's wheels bounced along the field for about 150 feet, barely clearing the obstacles in its path. At about forty feet off the ground, the Vin Fiz was rapidly approaching telegraph wires. With quick maneuvering, he dipped the biplane, catching the tip of a hickory tree. Cal struggled with all of his control levers, but the craft dove earthward, smashing into a chicken coop, throwing Cal out of the flyer. Cal was hurt, but he still had his cigar clinched in his mouth! The Vin Fiz was in pieces and, after 4 days, the Vin Fiz Flyer would be repaired and ready for Calbraith Rodgers' epic journey across America!

Cal carried several letters that would be flown aloft from coast-to-coast, and Mabel had the honor of being named the first 'postmistress'. Along the way, she sold souvenir postcards and a special privately issued 'Rodgers Aerial Post' (Scott CL2) 25 cent postage stamps that would be affixed to these postcards with conventional postage. Then Cal would 'carry through the air' the postcards aboard the Vin Fiz Flyer, and they would be delivered at his next landing and mailed back to the addressee. These flown postcards and 'Rodgers Aerial Post' stamps have become great rarities in the philatelic world and are greatly sought after.

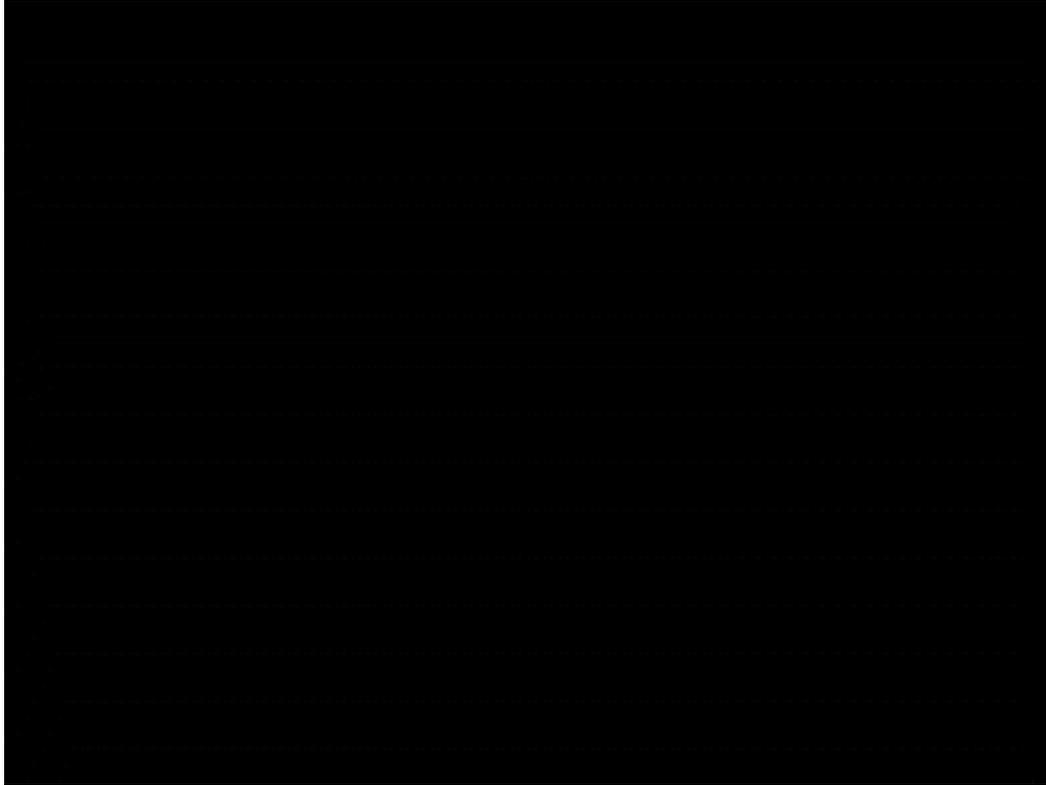
Only a precious few have ever surfaced!



This would be the first of 16 crashes that demolished his flying machine again and again, only to be rebuilt. Any of these crashes should have killed this fearless handsome aviator, but Cal pushed on through 75 cities, towns and villages, across 4,231 miles, finally landing in Pasadena, California at Tournament Park on November 5th. Cal had flown over 84 days of hazardous and glorious adventures to the cheers and prayers of a nation. Pasadena was the official terminus of this first transcontinental flight, but Cal wanted to dip the wheels of his flyer into the Pacific Ocean. He achieved this final leg at Long Beach, California on December 10th. Cal did not win the \$50,000 prize, but he would fly the Vin Fiz over the 1912 Rose Parade, dropping carnations over the thousands of cheering spectators below.

In the early spring of 1912, Cal flew an exhibition flight over Long Beach. The aeroplane flew into a flock of seagulls, jamming the controls, whereby the craft crashed into the shore waters killing Rodgers instantly. His historic flight would soon be forgotten. "I Endure, I Conquer" was carved into his six foot – four inch grave monument.

To mark this historic flight, many centennial events have been planned across the country. Four special pictorial postmarks have been approved by the United States Postal Service: Sheepshead Bay, NY, Middletown, NY, Pasadena, CA and Long Beach, CA.



In November 1961, on the 50th anniversary of Cal's flight, the City of Pasadena invited an elderly Mabel Rodgers-Wiggin to be their guest. Mabel had married one of Cal's mechanics, Charlie Wiggin who accompanied Cal on the 1911 flight. A two day celebration was held for Cal Rodgers and his milestone adventure. Mabel did not forget her role as the 'first postmistress' she made a special 50th anniversary air mail cover to honor her beloved husband, postmarked on the 50th anniversary in Pasadena, CA on November 5, 1961.



Much appreciation is given to E.P. Stein for his defining book and account of Cal's epic flight - "The Flight of the Vin Fiz" published in 1985. Any questions, please contact me: docaeronut@aol.com