

On his historical 1911 transcontinental flight across America, Calbraith Perry Rodgers also carried mail for the first time by air. Here, his widow recalls her days as the world's first airmail postmistress

First Airmail Flight

by MABEL RODGERS-WIGGIN

On an August afternoon in 1911, a frail wood and wire aircraft built by the Wright brothers bumped down to earth at the Chicago International Aviation Meet to win the biggest prize in the seven-and-a-half-year history of the airplane.

When my husband Calbraith Perry Rodgers climbed out of his 35 h.p. aircraft, he was the winner of the World's Grand Endurance Aviation Contest, and with it \$11,000 in prize money. For 27 hours, at intervals over the past nine days, he and his plane had, in his words, "stayed in the air."

It was Calbraith's success in this event that convinced him of his ability to do something he had been looking for an excuse to do for some time: to fly his plane from coast to coast, from New York to California, to cross America for the first time by airplane.

Not everyone at the time shared Calbraith's certainty. The airplane was still in its infancy, and the Wright brothers, who were the builders of my husband's plane, were unconvinced that it was capable of making the 4,000-mile flight. When they realized that Calbraith's mind was made up, however, they lent him their master me-

chanic, Charles Taylor. "Oh, God," Orville Wright said to my husband, "you will need him."

Calbraith had also had the idea for a long time of carrying mail in the air with him. We tried to get the Post Office Department in Washington to enter the airmail venture with us, but Postmaster General Hitchcock said that he had enough trouble getting the regular mail out via railroads and was not interested in any "air" mail idea.

Undaunted, Calbraith decided to create his own air mail system, appointing me the world's first airmail postmistress. "Get yourself a mail bag," he said, "and collect mail of any kind—envelopes, letters, and postal cards, and charge a quarter for its being the first mail carried by air. Then get me a bag," Calbraith added, "and tie it over my shoulder and I'll deliver mail by air all across America."

We decided to have some kind of rubber stamp made to show the mail had been "Carried by Rodgers' aeroplane 'Vin Fiz'."

I searched the shops and came up with a nice all-leather bag to hang over my shoulder. When I bought the bag, I told the salespeople what it was



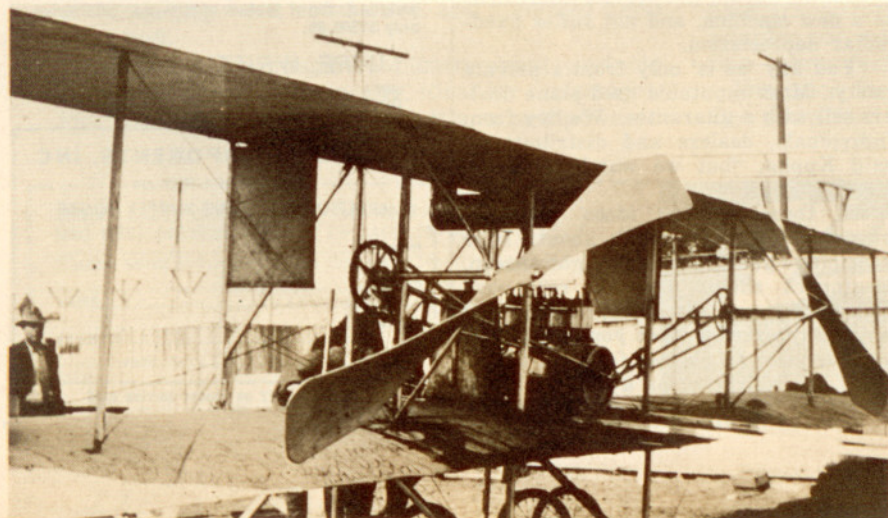
Calbraith Perry Rodgers learned to fly from the Wright brothers, was the first person outside the Wright Company to own one of their planes. On his historic transcontinental flight he often tucked mail under his shirt, next to the newspapers he stuffed there to ward off the cold

for and they bought seven of the first stamped envelopes which I took with me after they had been addressed.

Enthusiasm ran high. Everybody wanted to send a letter or card by air, and soon I had not only my bag full of airmail but a box full also. We felt our days of preparation were not wasted. Calbraith left New York on Sept. 17, 1911, in the "Vin Fiz" with 263 pieces of mail plus one small package of perfume for Carrie Jacobs Bond, a famous song composer of the day. Someone had even tied up a red bandana with a silver dollar inside as payment for its airmail postage.

Important names were in this mail. New York City's mayor and the governor of New York had sent letters to comparable officials in Los Angeles and Sacramento, as Calbraith was not sure where he would land in California. Fred Niblo, the actor, sent a letter and gave us \$5 for carrying it. The top price for letters in this first airmail was paid by an official of the Armour Company, who sponsored Calbraith's flight in return for the publicity they received from Calbraith's naming his plane for their new grape-flavored soft drink, Vin Fiz. The Armour official penned a check for \$100; his card read: "Via the first airmail pilot and the first airmail postmistress

The 'Vin Fiz,' 35-h.p. airplane built by the Wright brothers, in which Calbraith Perry Rodgers made the first transcontinental flight across America in 1911. On one occasion, the mail pouch was tied to the lower gasoline tank. Plane is now in Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.



of the world. Bless you both!"

On the second day of the flight, the mail ended up in a chicken-coop. My injured husband didn't pay much attention to the airmail; he was "k-o'ed" as they say in boxing circles and the plane had to undergo complete repairs for three days. I, however, took myself very seriously as the first airmail postmistress; in order to guard the mail closely, I would take the small batch to my bedroom every night, whether in a small hotel or my stateroom in the special train that followed the "Vin Fiz's" flight. I also hired two mailmen—Charles Hibbard and a youth of 17 called Allie—to sell the photographic cards for which we charged 25 cents.

The plane's continuous accidents which kept injuring my husband and spilling the contents of the little mail bag bore deeply into my fast-disappearing pounds of flesh—from 130 to 115 pounds. The mail bag, which was tied to the lower gasoline tank, somehow came loose and was lost over Indiana. The people were honest enough to bring back the contents to us, but they kept the bag. By this time, many of the letters had already been given a ride in the plane and deposited in the Post Office after the first 300 miles. We stuffed the remaining 70 letters, etc., in Calbraith's pockets. The "all-the-way" mail (New York to California) was securely tied and carried in two moisture-proof envelopes.

At Huntington, Ind., a terrible accident occurred to the plane, resulting in more repairs and more scattered mail. While we waited there for the repairs to be completed, the ladies of the Huntington Club took me in tow. They treated me as though I were visiting royalty, and I ate so much with the Huntington ladies I gained three pounds.

Chicago, at last! Here Calbraith was named by one of the newspapers' scribes as the "Aerial Forty-Niner." At this time I decided to dress my part: I bought boots, riding breeches, a full riding-habit, and another bag

to carry the mail.

Our airmail business was booming, but as a pioneer experiment there was no real profit to be made; the mail actually only helped to defray some of Calbraith's mounting expenses.

Considering the 16 bone-breaking crashes that happened on the transcontinental flight, it was only a stroke of good luck there were no fires. This thought must have occurred to at least one other person, for at Binghamton, N. Y., I recall vividly the chief of the fire department coming after me at our hotel.

"What's this—a civic parade?" I asked.

"Nope, Mrs. Rodgers," the chief replied, "I just want to give you a ride in a hook and ladder vehicle and to show you I've got nine firemen all dressed up in fire department regalia to put out the blaze in case your husband sets this town on fire."

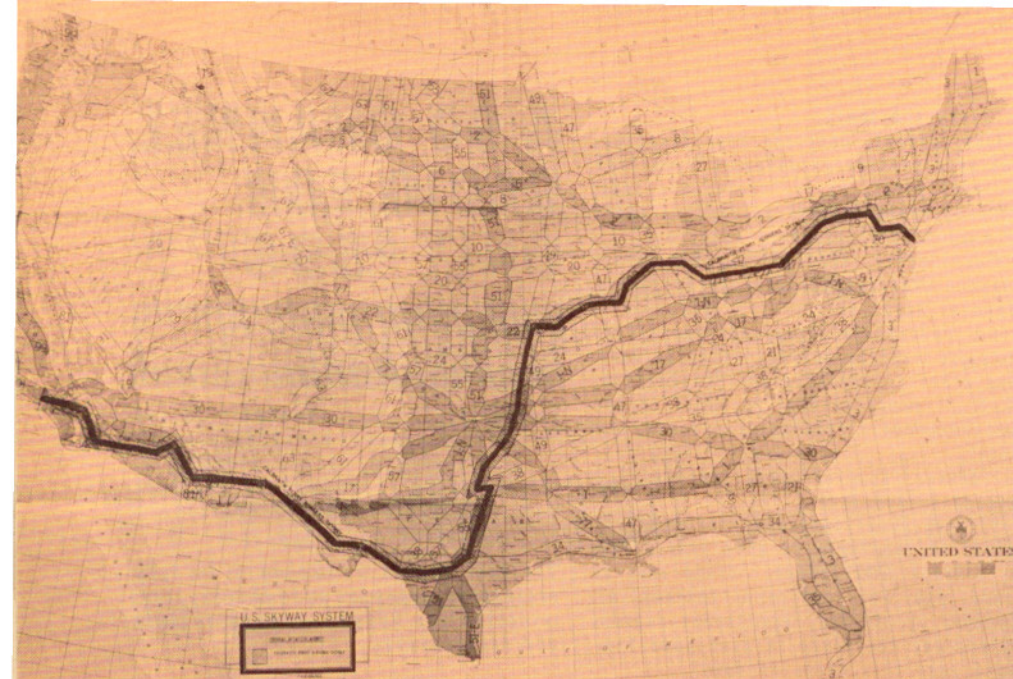
For all his back-of-steel determination, Calbraith's heart was tender. While checking over the landmarks on his route, his attention was drawn to the Illinois State Penitentiary. He told me to call the warden and ask that he have the convicts out in the yard. "I'll circle over the pen," Calbraith said, "and give them a glimpse of their first airplane." He gave them a magnificent demonstration of acrobatic flying, rolls and dives, while, he told me later, uttering a prayer for the imprisoned men.

October 8, 22 days after the flight began, found us in Springfield, Ill., which really unloaded on us: two full bags of mail. We pushed on to Kansas City which we had considered to be our half-way point. As it turned out it wasn't; the Armour Company, for publicity reasons, wanted Calbraith to depart from his intended, more direct route in order to hit the more populated spots further west.

At Overland Park, Kan., just outside Kansas City, Calbraith put on a hazardous exhibition to show the maneuverability of his little Wright-built plane. A forerunner of bad things to come, one of the transmission chains

A photocopy of one of the cards carried on Rodgers' first airmail flight. Regular postal mark appears at the top, special postal mark showing it had been carried on the "aerial Rodgers' post" appears below it. One of the original cards carried on this flight sold recently for \$4,000





Route of Rodgers' transcontinental flight across the United States, which took him from Sept. 17 to Nov. 5, 1911 to complete the 4,321-mile journey. In 1961, the 50th anniversary of his flight, the FAA designated this route as the Calbraith Perry Rodgers Skyway

broke as the result of the burning-out of several of the roller-bearings. The repairs were completed, but Charles Taylor, our talented Wright brothers' mechanic, was forced to leave us here due to the illness of his wife.

The farther we pushed into the sparsely populated West, the tougher the going got. Calbraith's sponsors began to haggle over paying the agreed \$5-per-mile, claiming that the Great American Desert didn't have many customers for their soft drink. "Listen, Rodgers," one of the company officials shouted at my husband, "even jack-rabbits three feet tall don't buy Vin Fiz."

We even encountered Indians. "Them's Indians at the windows," cried the porter one day while the train had come to a stop. The whole side of the car, a dozen or more windows, had the most grotesque faces I had ever seen, peeking through the windows. Some of the Indians wore war bonnets, and all their faces were daubed in color, predominantly red. In truth, I must confess I was terrified. They had come, I feared, to scalp us in retaliation for Calbraith and his "big bird" landing among them.

Very shortly the chief, complete with war regalia and painted head, came into our car and down the corridor. I had no gun and there was no place to run so I sat frozen in my seat and watched him approach. But the chief simply oggled me, showing his teeth which looked for the world like the fangs of a serpent. Finally he spoke.

"Me come to thank White Bird."

"What," I gasped, "You speak English?"

"Yes, m'am. I go to college; I speak good English. It's our language now. We use little Indian language, except for our names, like our fathers before us."

"Well thank you, Mr. Chief," I stammered. "We are happy to have you convey your thanks to our aviator. However, he has flown away, half an hour ago, and our train is scheduled to leave as soon as the California Limited passes by."

"I understand," replied the chief, "and I am giving this token of friendship to you, Mr. Rodgers' squaw. Lean over, please, so I can put it around your neck."

The chief brought out a beautiful Indian necklace. "I christen thee, squaw lady of Mr. Rodgers the human bird-man, with the name of 'White Wings.'" Then, abruptly, he took my hand: "I kiss your hand, White Wings, and I leave you White Father's peace." And with that he was gone.

That little mail bag that I carried on my shoulders, first on the left and then on the right, was my introduction to people all over the country whenever we would catch up with Calbraith after he had landed. Everyone seemed to want to have something carried by air. We had to be very careful not to overload the plane with mail. In the first place, there was no receptacle to hold very much mail. Many times I was obliged to stuff the letters and cards into poor Calbraith's pockets.

Calbraith was now putting newspapers between his shirt and sweater to ward off the extreme cold during his altitude flying. Because he had to sit exposed out in front of his plane, icy

pellets kept his face pock-marked as if he had been hit by buck-shot. The mechanics kept putting vaseline on the plane's wires to keep them from corroding, and I kept putting this same vaseline on my husband's pock-marked face.

Joking about this situation one time, Calbraith said "Why doesn't somebody provide a barrel to slide over me, with two eye-holes to see through? Why, I could even make my cigars last longer." Calbraith was a prodigious cigar smoker and the wind blowing in his face certainly speeded up the burning of his cigars. Once he confessed that he had smoked 19 cigars during the previous day's flying. He should have gotten a cigar maker to sponsor his flight, or at least pay for the cigars he used in the flight!

Our special train, "The Vin Fiz Flyer," followed Calbraith as closely as possible. We kept track of his progress from bulletin boards in railroad stations, which we read as the train slowed down as it passed through the towns. When the train was running full speed, we played it safe by having two boys read the bulletin boards. Little Allie would read the first half and Jimmy Dunn the lower half, which usually read about like this: "Plane with Mr. Rodgers in it arrived at 4:23 p.m. It was going west because the sun was shining in my eyes. God bless him! (Signed) The Agent."

The cooperation of all the railroads was wonderful. Their presidents had given the "go-go" signal. "Help that man Rodgers, flying across America. He will need it."

Calbraith had to land wherever "Bet-sy" (his pet name for the "Vin Fiz") wanted to roost, and in the extreme Far West the going got tougher by the mile. In getting to his plane, there were barbed-wire fences to clamber over and under, streams to ford. Often I got a ducking from a swift, obtruding stream where no bridge to cross it existed. I got across the Rio Grande the wet and rocky way, wearing my heavy boots as a protection against deadly rattlesnakes and water moccasins.

In the Far West, I encountered little black bears standing on their haunches, and once a mountain lion scared me so badly I ran pell-mell for half a mile. After the lion episode, I got myself a gun, a "32"; from then on, the biggest problem was that the gun often fell into the streams and I would get wet all over fishing for it.

Calbraith and the "Vin Fiz" were encountering a problem of another sort. Often when he would land, the crowds in their enthusiasm would literally attack Calbraith and the plane, writing names, addresses and even notes on the canvas-covered wing. Each time they did this, they pricked a hole in the rubberized-fabric, causing leakage of air out through the canvas. Then the oil would blast its way out of the engine and soak into the canvas. "I don't know which is wearing out faster," Calbraith would say, "the plane or me."

Truly, I don't believe the plane would



The world's first airmail postmistress—Mrs. Calbraith Perry Rodgers-Wiggin. She collected mail as her husband's flight progressed across country, often stuffing it into his pockets to be carried for a few miles by air. Here she boards the special train that followed Rodgers' with newspapers containing stories of the first transcontinental flight

ever have made it to California if we hadn't had the only hangar-repair-car in existence, enabling Calbraith to repair the plane after each of its numerous crashes. The hangar-car housed another complete airplane; a dozen sets of skids; half-a-dozen extra propellers; two Wright brothers' 30-h.p. engines; complete wings and center sections; a pile of struts; various other parts and a complete workshop. It even had a pretty fair first-aid station, which got its baptism very early in the flight. On Calbraith's second day out, he had fallen into a woman's chicken-coop and gouged a hole in his temple.

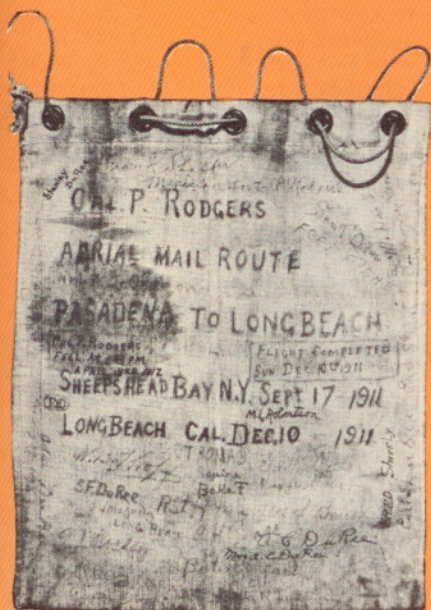
When we reached Arizona we were only 500 miles from our goal—the Pacific Coast. By then the "Vin Fiz" was a worn-down, bedraggled little airplane, fast falling apart and a pitiful sight. It looked as though its fighting heart was about ready to give out. The engine was belching double the amount of oil it was supposed to. The canvas was soaking wet with dirty oil after almost 4,000 miles of fighting varying weather that had ranged from 80° above to 40° below. The four longerons holding the tail surface together had been pieced with twine and glue. The wire, all corroded, had turned greenish; the chains had second-hand bearings. We prayed that both Cal and his tired machine would be able to hold out.

Our special train sped furiously on, churning up rocks, right smack into the great American desert. According to the Southern Pacific bulletins, Calbraith was far ahead; about, we figured, 60 miles from the finish. One bulletin we read about this time gave us a clue how close he must be: "Rodgers passed here, very high, heading over the great San Gorgonia and San Jacinto snow-capped mountains." We prayed as the train rushed on and on.

And then, on Nov. 5, as the train came into its next stop, I saw people rushing out toward our train. "Cal has landed at Pasadena," they yelled. "The flight is over."

Behind Calbraith and his valiant 35-h.p. "Vin Fiz" lay 4,321 miles, which they had covered in three days, 10 hours and four minutes of actual flying time. Although he had left New York 49 days earlier, on 25 days he had been unable to fly at all because of weather, repairs, or injuries. For the first time, a continent had been crossed by air; for the first time, mail had been carried by airplane.

My job as the world's first airmail postmistress was over. In the midst of all the celebration, tears came to my eyes. For all the terrific strain, this flight had opened up the age of air travel for generations yet to come. ●



The pouch in which the Rodgers' aerial post system carried the mail from New York to California. The extra postage required was 25 cents, which helped cover some of Rodgers' costs

Kitty Hawk Airport Opens

Powered flight returns to Kitty Hawk, N.C., the scene of its birth, with the opening of the First Flight Airport on Dec. 17.

The dedication of the new airport will coincide with the first flight of the Wright Brothers on Dec. 17, 1903. On hand for the dedication ceremonies will be North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford and FAA Administrator N. E. Halaby.

First Flight Airport, which has a 3,000-foot paved runway and parallel taxiway, was built under the joint co-operation of the FAA, the National Park Service, and the State of North Carolina.