

Colorado Mail Takes Wings

EMERSON N. BARKER*

When the long-awaited transcontinental airmail service was announced in 1920, residents of the Centennial State learned they were not to be upon the main line of communication between the East and West. As in the days of the "Pike's Peakers," when the important through mails were carried over the Central Route, the new mail line was routed north of Colorado. In fact, the airplane was charted over a route that approximated—west of the Missouri River—that of the great overland mail and the pony express of sixty years before.

Transcontinental airmail service was inaugurated September 7, 1920, over a route that began in New York, crossed the Missouri at Omaha, touched Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, Elko and Reno, and ended at San Francisco.¹

*Mr. Barker, member of the State Historical Society and the Denver Stamp Club, has interested himself in the postal history of Colorado.—Ed.
¹The American Airmail Catalogue (1940 edition), 86.



UPPER: SCENE AT THE COLORADO AIRWAYS FIELD, DENVER, MAY 31, 1926.
LOWER: POSTMASTER FRANK L. DODGE OF DENVER ADMINISTERING THE OATH TO THE PILOTS. Left to right: Dodge, J. H. Cordon, Capt. Clarence Braukman, John M. Patterson, W. M. Calhoun, Fisk Stubbins, E. L. Curtis, Mrs. Anthony Joseph, Anthony Joseph and Floyd Pace.

Civic-minded citizens of Colorado and business interests, animated by the same spirit that had built a railroad to Cheyenne when the transcontinental railroad had passed them by, again determined that the state should keep abreast of progress. Their perseverance was rewarded, for Washington officials announced, some years later, that Colorado would be placed upon the airmail map. Contact again would be made with the main line at Cheyenne.

Cheyenne to Denver, to Colorado Springs, to Pueblo—linking the three leading cities of the state—this was to be Contract Air-mail Route No. 12.²

The announcement of the Postoffice Department was greeted with enthusiasm by the three favored localities, and the press was eloquent. Pilots selected to open the new airmail line were referred to as "modern Davy Crocketts, Kit Carsons and Buffalo Bills of the air."³

On the last day of May, 1926, "on the crest of a zipping tailwind, a black-and-silver sky ship swung over Denver . . . circled in a rapid sweep over Park Hill and skimmed to a perfect landing at the Don Hogan airdrome, East Twenty-sixth Avenue and Oneida Street. The 'maiden flight' of Colorado's own airmail fleet was history.

"It was just 8:30 o'clock (a. m.) when watchers at the airdrome sighted the speck on the northern horizon that at 8:35 swung down as plane No. 14 of the Colorado Airways, Inc., fleet."⁴

Captain E. L. Curtis, who had brought the first airmail from Cheyenne, stepped from his plane to accept the congratulations of Postmaster Frank L. Dodge, members of the Denver postoffice staff, and A. E. Peterson, official Washington representative.

"Captain Curtis had made the ninety-seven-mile hop from Cheyenne in the record-breaking time of fifty-five minutes, after whisking his mail from the transcontinental plane from Omaha. The Omaha airplane dropped down at the Wyoming landing field just three hours late, after bucking a stiff headwind over the plains."⁵

The mail, however, was paramount. One sack was thrown into a waiting postoffice truck to be rushed downtown, to be distributed to Denver addresses. Other mailbags, bound for Colorado Springs and Pueblo, were quickly transferred to plane No. 7, which had been warming up for a quick start on the second lap of the flight.

It was an unlucky day for No. 7 and its pilot, Floyd Pace. The motor warmup had been too long, due to the late arrival of the

²Ibid., page 144.

³Denver Post, May 31, 1926.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

plane from Cheyenne. The motor wheezed and died, and could not be revived.

The southbound mail was hastily transferred to plane No. 10, and its pilot, Eddie Brooks, was on his way to Colorado Springs seconds before nine o'clock. The City of Sunshine was reached, the mail was left, and Pilot J. H. Cordner was on his way to Pueblo.

Pilot Cordner reached Pueblo at 11:05 a. m. "Thousands attended the initial ceremonies at the airport. An auto parade, complete with band, started from Mineral Palace Park to the field at 2 p. m. There was a brief stop at the postoffice, where the first shipment of airmail was loaded on government trucks.

"In connection with the inauguration . . . of the airmail service, C. W. Pfaffenberger, postoffice inspector, commended Frank S. Hoag and P. A. Gray, Pueblo Commerce Club members, for securing the service for Pueblo."⁶

With an eye on the schedule,⁷ Pilot Cordner headed his plane northward for the return flight.

At Colorado Springs, Pilot Cordner was given an ovation by fifteen thousand persons, "doubtless the largest gathering ever assembled in the Pike's Peak region."⁸

The mail plane had been preceded into the airport by an escort bearing Major Dayton, commander of the air force of the Colorado National Guard; Secretary of State Carl S. Milliken and aviation enthusiasts. Included in the throng were "leading Chamber of Commerce and other civic personages," but "formal speeches were forgotten as enthusiastic officials and exuberant aviators gripped hands and shouted in each other's ears."⁹

Little time for ceremony was allowed the airmail aviator, operating on schedule, and his plane left the ground five minutes after it landed. Mail bags had been loaded into the plane during the ceremonies, and with Pilot Cordner on the flight to Denver was Postmaster E. E. Ewing.

The northbound plane landed at the Colorado capital at 6:01

⁶Pueblo Star-Journal, May 31, 1926, quoted in a letter from Bessie Epps to the writer.

⁷Associated Press dispatch from Washington, published in the *Rocky Mountain News*, May 31, 1926:

OFFICIAL SCHEDULE

Southbound

Leave Cheyenne	5:30 a. m.
Leave Denver	6:55 a. m.
Leave Colorado Springs	7:50 a. m.
Arrive Pueblo	8:30 a. m.

Northbound

Leave Pueblo	4:15 p. m.
Leave Colorado Springs	5:05 p. m.
Leave Denver	6:00 p. m.
Arrive Cheyenne	7:15 p. m.

⁸Colorado Springs Gazette, June 1, 1926.

⁹Ibid.

p. m., and a tremendous crowd was on hand, variously estimated at ten to forty thousand. "It was an epoch-making landing and hardly a person in the gigantic crowd but realized they were seeing a new page written in Colorado history."¹⁰

Denver folks, however, were at the airfield to have fun with their history, and they were not disappointed. "The crowd was entertained . . . by a pageant of the evolution of the mail service, in which cowboy riders carried the mail just as did the pony express riders of old, transferring it to a stagecoach which in turn carried it across the prairie to the waiting plane.

"Unique air stunts in which Diavolo Steiner defied the power of gravity with feats of wing-walking and trapeze stunts followed; later he dropped from the plane in a parachute. . . . Members of four Indian tribes, the Denver & Rio Grande Western band and the G. A. R. fife and drum corps added further entertainment."¹¹

Among the thousands were Governor Morley, Mayor Stapleton, Frank Crane, president of the Denver Chamber of Commerce; J. E. Loiseau, chairman of the airmail committee of the Chamber, and many other civic leaders.

Before the fanfare had subsided, Pilots E. L. Curtis, who had flown the first lap from Cheyenne to Denver in the morning, and Clarence Braukman took off on the last link to complete Colorado's first airmail chain. Two planes were required to handle the large volume of mail that had accumulated.

Pilots Curtis and Braukman were given a rousing welcome when they arrived in Cheyenne at 7:20 p. m.

According to Postoffice Department records, revenue collected on the southbound planes amounted to \$774, while that of the northbound trips totaled \$1,294. Colorado Airways collected 80 per cent, in accordance with the contract.¹²