

TRANSCONTINENTAL WITH THE VIN FIZ
BY
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Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome's period music, returning its time portal-channelled visitors to the barnstorming era, seemed faint, as if its sound waves originated from the turn of the 20th century and attempted to penetrate the humidity-saturated air more indicative of summer than late-September. Equally struggling to slice its way through the billowing white clouds and charcoal strata, the sun periodically succeeded in penetrating them before once again being camouflaged. Sandwiched between two wings on a tiny, corduroy-covered perch, Cal Rodgers must have negotiated skies such as these 100 years ago.

A hub for vintage aviation visitors, Old Rhinebeck draws its weekend population from surrounding northeastern states, but the rain-threatening weather had discouraged all but a handful from making the drive on September 17, 2011, as evidenced by the scatter of spectators occupying the wooden benches in front of the deep green field soon to serve as the Saturday, "History of Flight," air show's runway. It was not unlike the one Rodgers had used in Brooklyn, but his take off would not have returned him to the same location. Instead, it would have deposited him on the West Coast, clear across the country, and the current handful of spectators would have numbered in the thousands.

Despite the mild temperature, the multi-colored collage of gold-, auburn-, crimson-, and lemon-tinged, aerodrome perimeter trees indicated the fall of the year, but the date, adjusted for a century, would have signaled the dawn of transcontinental flight in a design whose lineage was visibly traceable to that of the original Wright Flyer. Ironically, that aircraft had only hopped 852 feet from the sands of Kill Devil Hill in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on the longest of its manned, powered, controlled, and sustained, heavier-than-air flights the day the Wright Brothers had hand-propped aviation's engine. Cal Rodgers was intent on covering the distance from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Parked, as always, on the other side of the white picked fence dividing the aerodrome's spectator and air operations sides were the three flyable airplanes, which represented its pioneer era: the Bleriot XI, the Hanriot, and the Curtiss Model D. The former had spanned the English Channel. The latter, in its Albany Flyer version, had aurally connected New York State's capitol with Manhattan. But the Wright Model EX employed by Cal Rodgers, represented by the replica in the Pioneer Hangar at the top of the hill, crossed the continent.

The aircraft, nevertheless, represented the beginning of transcontinental air service, a journey today routinely completed countless times in about five hours. But in 1911, without airframe or powerplant sophistication, nor navigation to guide it from one landing field to the next, what a beginning it was! It would have been a monumental achievement if it had been made in only five stops. However, the only "five" in its flight plan corresponded to the number of crashes—the **major** ones—and excluded the minor impacts, mishaps, tangles, weather delays and groundings, repairs, and complete aircraft rebuilds.

Born Calbraith Perry Rodgers on January 12, 1879, he kindled an interest in aviation and an intimacy with the predecessor of his intended airplane when he joined his cousin, Annapolis graduate and Navy pilot, John Rodgers, in Dayton, Ohio, in March of 1911. Chosen to fly a Wright

design, John Rodgers himself completed his flight training there, while other officials assessed competing Curtiss aircraft elsewhere.

Sliding into the pilot's seat in a dually controlled Wright Model B, Cal Rodgers, taught by Wright graduate Arthur Welsh, paid \$850 for his flight instruction.

Like a thoroughbred straining to be released from the starting gate, he needed to accomplish more than he had at the Chicago International Air Meet that August and the \$50,000 offer made by publisher William Randolph Hearst for the first person to fly from either coast to the other within a 30-day period—valid for one year from October 10, 1910—would transform him from budding novice to transcontinental crosser. Although the contestant could only use a single aircraft, it could be rebuilt as many times as deemed necessary and had to include Chicago as one of its enroute stops.

“To all intents and purposes,” according to the offer, “the contestant may rebuild the aeroplane on the way by substituting for damaged or broken parts good parts of other similar machines, but the prize winner must use the same machine throughout.”

Aside from ushering in a new era, the feat was seen as promoting the advancement of aerial science and navigation, putting the United States “at the head of all aviation activities, just as America was the first to perfect the art of flying.”

Augmenting the hitherto railroad-exclusive means of mail carriage, the higher-speed and longer-range airplanes developed as a result of the race were seen as the next step in air transportation progress.

Financial backing for the feat, secured from the Armour Meat Packing Company, stipulated that Rodgers' intended aircraft serve as a flying billboard, advertising its newly-introduced Vin Fiz grape soda on its rudder and wing underside, enabling all over whom it passed to view it. It also required that cards promoting the beverage be dropped whenever its flight path took it over large crowds. In exchange, Armour would provide a tri-car train following, initially to consist of two passenger coaches for enroute accommodation and a single “hangar car” for the tools, equipment, and parts needed for unexpected airplane repairs, as well as a Palmer-Singer touring car, so that mechanics could travel to remote landing sites.

Rodgers' monetary compensation varied according to population--\$5.00 per mile east of the Mississippi River, where it was higher, and \$4.00 west of it, where it was lower—but he was expected to pay for all fuel, oil, parts, spares, mechanic services, repairs, and the aircraft itself.

Because of his experience with Wright designs, he drew up its necessary specifications and performance requirements, in consultation with Naval Aviator John Rodgers, which included engine and fuel system access; a dual-purpose, footrest and spark plug advance lever; and a sufficient fuel supply for three-hour flights.

Despite Orville Wright's belief in his own design, he predicted, “You know, Cal, the damn plane will vibrate itself to pieces. It just can't tolerate a sustained flight of more than 100 miles.” Remedially, he doubled the number of otherwise standard bracing wires.

The airplane, a specialized derivative of the Model R, or “Baby Wright,” of 1910, was designated the Model EX, for “exhibition.”

Christened the “Vin Fiz Flyer” by Amelia Swift of Memphis—who poured a bottle of its namesaked soda on the skids--the Wright Model EX would serve as Cal Rodgers' transcontinental

carpet. Decked out in leather boots and a backward-worn cap, the 32-year-old, six-foot, four-inch, and cigar consuming daredevil presently mounted it at the flight's Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, origin on September 17, 1911. "I have a machine, which can fly 50 miles an hour in calm air," he proclaimed. "It's been tested under varying conditions and, if it is as good as it was there, there won't be a single thing to interfere with a perfect flight."

Amid the waning, autumn light, Rodgers adjusted his goggles and yelled, "Let 'er go!"

Unleashed into acceleration over the field by the airfoil-shaped propellers, the Wright Model EX surmounted the sky at 16:25, arcing into a climbing turn over the racetrack before setting course for the Pacific as the Atlantic receded behind it.

Passing over Coney Island and Flatbush at 800 feet, he overflew the Brooklyn Bridge and Lower Manhattan's 23rd Street toward the Hudson River and Jersey City, always in view of the ubiquitous crowds which had gathered along his flight path.

Intercepting the Erie Terminal and its course-outlined railroad tracks, he failed to locate his own baggage-, sleeper-, and hangar-car following, forced instead to navigate his first leg without it. Crossing the Ramapo Mountains at 2,000 feet, he subsequently landed at Middleton Pleasure Grounds at 18:18, or six minutes before the train itself had reached the station, in the midst of a 10,000-strong onslaught of people.

The flight, having covered 84 miles in 105 minutes, had been flawless, and Rodgers was soon intercepted by the hangar car-stored touring automobile.

But the flawless first day took a turn on the second. Executing its bumpy take off roll the following morning at 06:21, the Vin Fiz surrendered to the sky with sufficient height to clear the field's obstructing willow tree, but not its wires. Fearing both collision and electrocution, Rodgers cut his engine, causing his life- and lift-giving airspeed to diminish and the aircraft to impact the ground.

As the masses ran to the site, the Model EX's condition was reflected by Rodgers' repeated exclamation of "My beautiful airplane! My beautiful airplane!" as his still-dazed eyes attempted to absorb the splintered wood and torn fabric images projected on to them.

The event was to become all too characteristic of his transcontinental traverse.

The threshold between September and October was crossed, but the county had not been. Indeed, he was not even half way there.

Tossed by 40-mph gale winds and pelted by rain, he attempted to realize the previous day's failed goal of meeting the Midwestern milestone, whose windy city seemed barricaded by current conditions.

Reduced to a particle in the midst of an electrically-charged storm, he searched for a gap in the onslaught's approaching clouds, later claiming, "The first thing I knew I was riding through an electric gridiron," ignorant of its potential effects on the frail bird he piloted.

Riding the corkscrewing currents like an out-of-control roller coaster, he dove, spun, and spiraled until he could safely return to the ground near Geneva, 20 miles off course.

Although the odds could not have been stacked higher against him, the feared outcome did not materialize—or, more precisely, was delayed until the following morning's take off from Huntington.

Of the elapsed 18 days, only eight had been spent in the air, during which he had covered 1,173 miles.

The final sector, from Hammond to Chicago's Grant Park, was an effortless, 26-mile hop, but took three days to dare because of the Canadian winds which would otherwise have clenched their fists round the fabric-covered machine.

His ground time was brief. Embarking on the second—or far longer—portion of his transcontinental flight, he leaped skyward at 16:01. Although the October deadline was now just round the corner, California was not. Aware that he could no longer realistically expect to win the \$50,000 prize, he proclaimed, "I am bound for Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean. Prize or no prize, that's where I am bound and if canvas, steel, and wire, together with a little brawn, tendon, and brain, stick with me, I mean to get there."

Now pursuing a southerly flight plan, he traced his path through the Midwest, from Illinois to Texas. Other than the weather curves pitched by Mother Nature and the not unexpected maintenance glitches, the flights proceeded routinely. Extension of the Hearst prize's validity beyond the originally established October 10 deadline was, unsurprisingly, not granted.

The envisioned, but postponed quick sprint to Pasadena—and the journey's finishing line—occurred on November 5. A tiny streak in the sky over Pomona, spotted by a boy standing at the top of the Pasadena Grand Stand and excitedly blurting, "There it is," enlarged into a dual-propeller-pushing, grape-emblazoned biplane, which circled over the city before spiraling toward the white cloth marking the center of Tournament Park at 16:10, Pacific time, amidst a collected chorus of cheers expressing vicarious victory.

According to Otheman Stevens' coverage of the historical milestone in the November 6, 1911 edition of *New York American*, Rodgers, draped, toga-style, in the American flag and dubbed "the king of the air," was surrounded by "a maelstrom of fighting, screaming, out-of-their-minds-with-joy men, women, and children."

His first words, straining to penetrate the prevailing decibel level, emphasized a single fact. "One thing is sure," he stated. "A cross-country flight cannot be made in thirty days."

Although he had failed to earn the Hearst prize because of it, he had nevertheless established a world distance record and will forever be credited with the first aerial crossing of the United States, as attested by the subsequently signed register in Pasadena's Hotel Maryland. 'C. P. Rodgers—New York to Pasadena by air,' he wrote.

During the 49-day event, he had spent half the time in the air and the other half on the ground (24 and 25 days, respectively), having flown 4,231 miles in three days, ten hours, four minutes, at an average speed of 51.59 mph. He made 70 landings, of which 15 involved crashes and mishaps.

The Wright Model EX which ultimately touched down in Pasadena was, in essence, not the one which had departed from Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. Indeed, along the transcontinental flight path lay an \$18,000 trail of new engines, wings, fabric, wires, components, and parts, repackaged into a continually restored and resurrected airplane in the numerous roofless fields-turned-hangars across America. But perhaps it emphasized the fact that it had not been the muslin-covered wings which had carried Cal Rodgers from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Instead, it had been his determination, passion, stamina, and raw courage, which more than anything had.

In his mind, however, he could not consider a true ocean-to-ocean crossing to have been completed without dipping his wheels in the very Pacific toward which he had flown, and chose Long Beach, 23 miles from Pasadena, for that baptism. As the shortest distance to be covered, it ironically became the longest to complete.

Taking to the dusk-laden skies at 16:57 on November 12 after an earlier attempt had been aborted due to a severed gas tank line, he lapsed into an unexplainable state of dreamy unconsciousness, powerless to correct the airplane's groundward plunge from 1,500 feet. Thrown from its confines when it bored into a soft field, he lay face down, pinned by his engine, and sustained facial burns, sprained ankles, and a concussion, equally ironically requiring his only hospital stay during what was technically no longer part of his transcontinental crossing.

Although he would need weeks to convalesce, and it would also take significant time to once again transform the shattered pile of wreckage into an airworthy mechanism, it seemed to prove a fact that had been demonstrated and proclaimed throughout his 49-day feat—namely, the airplane was made of wood, but Cal was made of iron.

Hobbling to the repackaged Vin Fiz a month later, on December 10, Rodgers stored the crutches needed for his leg injuries on the lower wing. Having traced that final Pacific link in his mind countless times, he finally attempted the physical act, departing from Compton, current location of the aircraft, at 15:44 and maintaining a southerly heading on the almost-walkable, nine-mile stroll to Long Beach.

Crossing Signal Hill and Devil's Gate, he visually absorbed the endless blue of the Pacific sprawled in front of him. Now escorted by a Bleriot and a homebuilt airplane at 1,500 feet, the Model EX disengaged itself from its altitude and entourage, gliding over the boardwalk before gently alighting on the sand in what may have been an anticlimactic moment following the brief, 16-minute aerial leap, but served as confirmation of spiritual triumph over matter and completion of a life purpose which may have been conceived long before he had.

Fishing for a match, Rodgers lit a cigar, ending the journey exactly the way it had begun almost three months and a continent earlier. The roaring crowd, triumphing over the restraining rope, closed the gap to the biplane and gently pushed it toward the surf cascading up on the sand, fulfilling his long-time wish of dipping his wheels in the Pacific and symbolically consummating his "ocean-to-ocean" crossing. Still perched on the throne sandwiched between its two wings, the "king of the air" reigned over his continental kingdom.

Yet, inevitably—and perhaps ironically—once a person completes his life's mission, he leaves it—in Rodgers' case, at least, by doing exactly what he loved—flying. Equally ironically, the flight could not have been shorter or more mundane.

Preparing to take Mabel White, a champion winner of a sightseeing flight in his aircraft, Rodgers elected to do a dry-run in his Model B from the sands of Long Beach on April 3, 1912, a little less than four months after his historic journey. Climbing over the pier and surmounting the sprawl of sea, he subsequently returned to the shore, dipping over the roller coaster marking it, and then flying westerly at 200 feet. Banking to the east, he initiated his final approach to Long Beach—and eternity.

Attempting to avoid a flock of seagulls in what was possibly aviation's first recorded bird strike—pitting nature's winged creations against man's artificial ones—he dove at a 45-degree angle, unable, despite desperate attempts, to arrest and correct the maneuver.

Boring through two feet of water and sand, the aircraft flipped over and became the anvil which pounded the last breath from his body at a spot, which was only 100 yards from where he had ended his historic flight, releasing his soul toward the sky in which he had paved the first transcontinental highway.