



Parkman Historical Society Presents

1929 - Parkman Air Field – Geauga County's First Air Mail

Presented by Parkman Postmaster - Cheryl Smith



1929 AIRPORT

Geauga County's first airport was located at Parkman as the above picture shows. It was located just north of Parkman on Rt. 88. Planes would fly in carrying mail and Middlefield received their first airmail at this airport.



Airmail From Parkman

From time to time we have shown you pictures of the first airport in Geauga County located in Parkman but this picture shows the pilot loading the mail in to be taken to Cleveland from our local post office. The airport was located on 608 about across from the Parkman school.

Although homing pigeons had long been used to send messages (an activity known as pigeon mail), the first mail to be carried by an air vehicle was on 7 January 1785, on a balloon flight from Dover to France near Calais. During the first balloon flight in North America in 1793, from Philadelphia to Deptford, New Jersey, Jean-Pierre Blanchard carried a personal letter from George Washington to be delivered to the owner of whatever property Blanchard happened to land on, making the flight the first delivery of air mail in the United States. The first official air mail delivery in the United States took place on August 17, 1859, when John Wise piloted a balloon starting in Lafayette, Indiana with a destination of New York. Weather issues forced him to land in Crawfordsville, Indiana and the mail reached its final destination via train. In 1959 the U.S. Postal Service issued a 7 cent stamp commemorating the event.

The United States government had been slow to recognize the potential of the airplane. In 1905, the War Department refused three separate offers by the Wright brothers to share their scientific discoveries on air flights. Even after the brothers had satisfied many European nations in 1908 that air flight was feasible, America owned only one dilapidated plane.

The Post Office Department, however, was intrigued with the possibility of carrying mail through the skies and authorized its first experimental mail flight in 1911 at an aviation meet on Long Island in New York. Earle Ovington, sworn in as a mail carrier by Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock, made daily flights between Garden City and Mineola, New York, dropping his mail bags from the plane to the ground where they were picked up by the Mineola postmaster.

Later, in 1911 and 1912, the Department authorized 52 experimental flights at fairs, carnivals, and air meets in more than 25 states. These flights convinced the Department that the airplane could carry a payload of mail, and officials repeatedly urged Congress after 1912 to appropriate money to launch airmail service. Congress finally authorized use of \$50,000 from steam-and-powerboat service appropriations for airmail experiments in 1916. The first nighttime airmail flight was made in 1921 from Omaha, Nebraska to Chicago, by aviator James Knight. On February 22, 1921, mail was flown both day and night for the first time over the entire distance from San Francisco to New York.

Regularly scheduled transcontinental service began on July 1, 1924, using pilots leaving from both the East and West coasts. The pilots also began regular night flights. They were guided by a lighted transcontinental airway with rotating beacons and brightly lit emergency landing fields along the way, and they timed their night flying so as to reach the end of the lighted airway by daybreak. They tested the new gyroscopic needle to indicate whether aircraft wings were level and altimeters to show if the aircraft was climbing or descending. The Post Office resumed using special airmail postage, which it had discontinued in 1919. Airmail now cost eight cents to travel in any of the three zones comprising the transcontinental route and could travel all across the country for 24 cents. The public was reluctant to use this more expensive service, and, during the first year, airmail bags contained as much regular mail as airmail. By the end of 1924, airmail planes were routinely completing the New York to San Francisco route within 34 hours.

It was the Post Office and airmail delivery that gave the commercial airlines their true start. In the early part of the 20th century, the Post Office had used mostly railroads to transport mail between cities. By 1925, only seven years after the first official airmail flight, U.S. Post Office airplanes were delivering 14 million letters and packages a year and were maintaining regular flight schedules. Airmail appealed particularly to bankers and other businessmen who regularly began to use it to move checks and financial documents more quickly, reducing the "float" on checks and the length of time that funds were idle and unavailable for use.

Once airmail became accepted, the government transferred airmail service to private companies. Representative Clyde Kelly of Pennsylvania sponsored the Contract Air Mail Act of 1925, commonly referred to as the Kelly Act. This was the first major step toward the creation of a private and profitable U.S. airline industry.

After the Kelly Act passed, private companies bid on feeder routes that supplemented the transcontinental air route. This airway had expanded during the nine years that the Post Office had transported mail by air. Now the Post Office awarded contracts to private companies, and these companies would later become transportation giants.

Henry Ford had purchased the Stout Metal Airplane Company in 1925 and formed the Ford Air Transport Service, he was awarded the Chicago-Detroit and Cleveland-Detroit routes. He also produced the all-metal Ford Trimotor, called the "Tin Goose." After three years carrying the mail, Ford returned to manufacturing.

The Ford Trimotor 5-AT was used by almost all the U.S. airlines. Introduced in 1928, these planes could carry 14 or 15 passengers in its corrugated fuselage. It was produced through 1932, but these planes stayed in use much longer. One Trimotor 5-AT, built in 1929, was still being used in Las Vegas for sightseeing in 1991.

In 1926, President Calvin Coolidge appointed a board to develop a national aviation policy, selecting Dwight Morrow as chairman. Morrow was a senior partner in J.P. Morgan's bank and later would become the father-in-law of Charles Lindbergh. Morrow counseled that airlines should not be directly subsidized, but rather supported by federal funding of a national air transportation system. Congress adopted these recommendations in the Air Commerce Act of 1926, which authorized the Secretary of Commerce to designate air routes, develop air navigation systems, license pilots and aircraft, and investigate accidents. Congress also adopted the board's recommendation for airmail contracting by amending the Kelly Act. With this change, the government began paying carriers according to the weight of the mail. This was a tremendous financial boost to the airlines.

The first commercial airmail flight in the United States occurred on February 15, 1926. As commercial airlines took over, the Post Office Department transferred its lights, airways, and radio service to the Department of Commerce, including 17 fully equipped stations, 89 emergency landing fields, and 405 beacons.

Night flights became a necessity when the first transcontinental airmail route (2,629 miles between San Francisco and New York City) was begun in 1924. The reason: flight distance limitations of the early planes. To ensure the safety and success of night flight, the Post Office Department mounted beacon lights along the route to guide pilots to emergency and regular landing fields. In summer 1924, enough beacons had been placed along the western route to light the 1,912 miles between Cleveland, Ohio, and Rock Springs, Wyoming. The airmail service had 18 terminal fields, 89 emergency fields and more than 500 beacon lights in operation that year.

The ground navigation support system beacons were 5,000 candlepower acetylene-gas powered lights which were installed at 3-mile intervals along western segments of the route on high ground for optimum visibility. They were visible from about 10 miles out. Because of the density of towns and cities in the east, beacons could be further apart. Before beacons were completed along that route, night flights were regulated to the comparatively flat 885 miles between Chicago and Cleveland.

The Parkman Air Field was chosen due to its location at one of the highest points in NE Ohio and was in the route from New York to Cleveland. Emergency landing fields like Parkman were set up every 25 miles and were equipped with rotating 18-inch incandescent electric beacon lights mounted on 50-foot towers. These lights were set to sweep the horizon approximately six times per minute, at .05-degrees above the horizon. On clear nights, emergency field beacons were visible 60-75 miles away from the field. Parkman hosted its first Air Mail pickup on August 3, 1929. This was the first mail to leave by air out of Geauga County. The airmail continued to be delivered for the Middlefield, Parkman and surrounding communities on a regular schedule. A passenger pickup was also commenced during this year.

By the end of the 1920s, travelers could still cross the country faster by train than by air. Airplanes had to fly around mountains, could not fly safely at night, and had to land frequently to refuel. Flying by air was uncomfortable and some passengers wore overalls, helmets, and goggles. The airplanes were uninsulated thin sheets of metal, rattling in the wind, and passengers stuck cotton in their ears to stop the noise. Cabins were unpressurized—passengers chewed gum to equalize the air pressure. Nevertheless, more and more people were flying. The number of airline passengers in the United States grew from less than 6,000 in 1926 to approximately 173,000 in 1929. Businessmen comprised most of the passengers, and more and more companies would pay for their employees to travel by air.

In the late 1930s, a hollow rubber canister was used in to provide airmail service to areas without adequate airport facilities. The right design was critical as the canister, filled with mail, would be tossed out of the airplane to be retrieved and processed by the local postmaster. Because a regular mail sack would be easily blown about by the wind, a weighted holder was needed. However, too heavy a canister might cause significant damage if it hit something when it fell. In addition, the canister had to be able to survive repeated drops. Various different styles of receptacles were tested. The proponents of the service ultimately selected a design resembling the nose cone of a rocket. The service was not operated by the Post Office Department but by an independently operated aviation company, All American Airways (AAA). The first airmail pick-up mail exchange was made on May 12, 1939. The service never moved out of the experimental stage. It was used on airmail routes in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia. In all, more than 150 post offices were served. The experimental routes covered 1,040 miles. During the first year of operation, more than 23,000 pick-ups were made, amounting to 75,000 pounds of mail. The service was used in those areas for about ten years.

On the ground, the postmaster loaded the town's mail into a container, which was then placed on top of a contraption resembling a goal post. The airplane's crew consisted of the pilot and a flight officer who worked the pick-up mechanism, making the mail exchange. As the pilot guided the airplane down, the flight officer lowered a grappling hook to snag the container. At the same time, mail destined for the community was dropped from the plane onto the airfield. The technique was modeled on the Railway Mail Service's 'mail-on-the-fly' pickups.

Although a low-flying airplane could easily dump a sack of mail onto the ground, the difficult part was getting ground mail into the moving airplane. The Railway Mail Service's successful 'on-the-fly' mail exchange system provided the inspiration for an aviation experiment. Mail would be 'caught' by an airplane flying overhead and reeled up into the airplane. Of course, catching the mail was not going to be easy. An airplane outfitted with a hook flew over the posts and successfully hooked the mail and reeled it in. At the top of each pole was a small direction flag, which showed the pilot the prevailing wind direction, and a pincer, which was used to keep the sixty-foot-long noose attached to the mail canister in place.

The Parkman Historical Society continues to research facts about the Parkman Air Field and Airmail Services in Geauga County. If you have any information that is not in this presentation, we would enjoy hearing from you. We meet at the Parkman Community House on the third Thursday of each "odd numbered" month. We meet at 7pm. If you cannot make it to any of our meetings, then please feel welcome to send an e-mail to the Parkman Paragraphs website at ParkmanOhio@gmail.com.



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