

SIEGEL AUCTION GALLERIES CENSUS OF VIN FIZ AIR POST (SCOTT CL2)

THE FIRST UNITED STATES TRANSCONTINENTAL FLIGHT BY CALBRAITH RODGERS ABOARD *THE VIN FIZ FLYER*

Flight of the *Vin Fiz*

In 1911, at a time when women could not vote and the Wright brothers' historic flight at Kitty Hawk was a recent memory, the concept of flying between coasts was widely regarded as futuristic fantasy. Aviation was a sport with little practical value. Pilots risked (and lost) their lives for the thrill of being airborne, and flights were held at fairgrounds for the amusement of crowds. However, within a few years, the airplane would gain



Cal Rodgers seated in the Vin Fiz Flyer

respect as a practical means of transport and warfare, and pilots would be transformed from popular daredevils to highly-respected flyers. Calbraith Perry Rodgers, a descendant of Matthew Calbraith Perry and Oliver Hazard Perry, was a significant force behind aviation's progress.

Although Rodgers is less famous than other American pilots, such as Earl Ovington, Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart or Jimmy Doolittle, he was in fact the first person to fly from one coast to the other. Cal Rodgers was one of four contestants in a race sponsored by William Randolph Hearst, who offered \$50,000 to the first person to fly coast to coast in 30 days or less. Rodgers completed the journey first, flying from Sheepshead Bay, New York, on September 17, 1911, and arriving at Pasadena, California, on November 5; the last leg to Long Beach was completed on December 10. Because Rodgers took 49 days to reach the California coast, he lost the prize. Another

pilot in the race, Bob Fowler, dropped out, but tried again with success, becoming the second person to complete the transcontinental journey by air, flying west to east.

Cal Rodgers's flight was nothing less than a spectacle. The erratic path of his 4,231-mile journey followed transcontinental railroad lines. Adopting a novel form of product endorsement, his Wright Model EX aircraft was emblazoned with the name of a new grape soda, Vin Fiz, and the trip was sponsored and heavily promoted by the beverage-maker, the Armour Meat-Packing Company. A bottle of Vin Fiz was strapped to the plane during flight and fared much better than the machine or pilot.

The airborne Rodgers was followed on land by a three-car train, the *Vin Fiz Special*, which transported his rather large entourage. On board was Cal's scheming wife, Mabel, and she was joined for a time by her two young strapping male-mail assistants. Cal's overbearing mother, Mrs. Harry Sweitzer, rode for much of the journey, watching over Cal and making Mabel ever more insecure. There were mechanics, including Charles Wiggin, who married Mabel a few years after Cal died in a plane crash. Also in attendance were the chauffeur, representatives of the Armour and Vin Fiz companies, and a changing cast of family, guests and reporters.

At each of the 75 stops along the route, Rodgers and the *Vin Fiz* were met by cheering spectators and treated as visiting dignitaries. An exception was one farmer whose property became an unintended airfield and was less enamored with his guest. With each take-off and landing, a crowd gathered around Rodgers and his flying machine, and Mabel and her assistants would circulate, hawking souvenir cards and "air post" service for 25 cents per card or letter.

Along the way, Rodgers suffered twelve serious crashes and another four breakdowns. By the time he reached California, the Model EX was an almost entirely rebuilt machine. Rodgers escaped with relatively minor injuries until the final leg of his trip, which occurred after reaching the west coast. On his flight from Pasadena to Long Beach, on November 12, 1911, he crashed at Compton and was seriously injured with a brain concussion and trauma to the spine. After a month of convalescing and replacement of his aircraft, Rodgers resumed the last leg of his flight on December 10, flying from Compton to Long Beach with casts supporting both ankles.

The completion of the first transcontinental journey by air was heralded as a great achievement, and Cal Rodgers became a popular hero. At the 23rd Tournament of Roses parade on January 1, 1912, Rodgers flew over the parade, dropping 10,000 carnations on the crowd 700 feet below. At an evening gala held by the Aero Club of America in honor of President Howard Taft, Rodgers was presented with a gold medal for aeronautics and congratulated by President Taft. In April 1912, while performing aerial acrobatics over the water off the shore of Long Beach, Rodgers lost control of his machine and crashed, dying instantly from the impact.



The Vin Fiz aloft above crowds and telephone poles

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Rodgers Aerial Post

Between 1910 and 1916, there were 94 U.S. flights that carried mail, most of which operated with Post Office Department sanction. The earliest flights in 1910 were not officially authorized to handle mail, and the Rodgers flight has never been fully documented as an official route. Conflicting accounts and lack of source documentation leave the Vin Fiz question, official versus unofficial, without a definite answer. Its status is now semi-official, a compromise in the absence of evidence.



Cal Rodgers in wheelchair after Compton crash with wife Mabel at right and his mother, Mrs. Sweitzer, at left

It seems certain that prior to October 9, 1911, the Rodgers Aerial Post operated without authorization from the Post Office Department, despite Mabel Rodgers's effort to obtain the official title "postmistress" and sanction for the air mail route. By one account, on Monday, October 9, upon returning to the Springfield Hotel in Illinois, Mabel received a telegram from Postmaster General Hitchcock, confirming her as the official "aerial postmistress" (reference: *Flight of the Vin Fiz*, p. 180); however, a copy of this telegram has never been located. Coincidentally — or perhaps as a consequence of Mabel's new authority — the one recorded example of the straightline "RODGERS AERIAL ROUTE" (an official post-office designation) is postmarked at Springfield on October 9 at 11:00 p.m. This marking may indicate the first official mail carried by the *Vin Fiz* (see lot 233).

Another undocumented account states that Calbraith Rodgers was sworn in as an official United States postman by W. H. Hoffman, the postmaster at Waco, on October 19 (reference: *Flight of the Vin Fiz*, p. 217).

The Rodgers Handstamp Types

There are four handstamped markings associated with the *Vin Fiz* flights. They are identified as follows:

Type 1	Circle with 5 lines "1911/Aerial/Rodgers/Post/1911 in black	1 known (see also Type 1A) Salamanca NY 9/25 7:30 AM (lot 232)
Type 1A	Same as above with additional straightline "RODGERS AERIAL ROUTE" in black	1 known Springfield IL 10/9 11:00 PM (lot 233)
Type 2	3 lines "Carried by RODGERS/AEROPLANE VIN FIZ/ Oct. 11t 11" (color unknown).....	1 known Kansas City MO 10/11 4:00 PM
Type 3	5 lines "Via air ship from Pasadena to Long Beach, Cal./ Nov. 12, 1911 by Cal. P. Rodgers, first aviator/ to cross the continent in an air ship. Leaving/ Sheepshead Bay, N.Y., Sept. 17, 1911, and/ arriving at Long Beach, Cal. Nov. 12, 1911." and separate 3 lines "Machine wrecked/at Compton/ Aviator Injured", both in purple	7 known All Long Beach CA 11/16 (lot 235)

The Vin Fiz 25c Adhesive Stamp

The 25c lithographed adhesive stamp (Scott CL2) sold by Mabel Rodgers for use on *Vin Fiz* mail was lithographed in black. It was certainly not authorized by the Post Office Department, and the 25c for each stamp sold went to Rodgers to defray expenses, not to the government. It is considered by the Scott Catalogue editors to be a semi-official airpost issue, similar in concept to semi-official carrier stamps.

Robert S. Rodgers, Calbraith's uncle and an attorney in Kansas City, Missouri, as well as an amateur philatelist, was given the task of procuring a supply of stamps for use on *Vin Fiz* mail. On October 10, approximately two weeks after receiving a letter requesting his assistance, the elder Rodgers joined his nephew in Marshall, Missouri, for an overnight stay and remarked that delivery of the stamps was imminent (reference: *Flight of the Vin Fiz*, p. 121, 185).

The existence of one CL2 postmarked at Vinita, Oklahoma, on October 15, 1911, lends support to the prevailing theory that the stamps were first made available at Kansas City, Missouri, to be used for the October 14th flight to Vinita. The mail would necessarily be stamped at Kansas City on October 14 prior to the flight, and upon arrival at Vinita it would be removed from the mail bag and put into the post office — the one day lapse is not unusual.

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The Vinita card raises some question about the veracity of another account that places the arrival and first sale of the Vin Fiz stamps on October 16 at McAlester, Texas (reference: *Flight of the Vin Fiz*, p. 205):

“On board the Pullman for the leg to Denison was Mr. Jasper Allen, the eminent editor and publisher of the Hartshome [Oklahoma] Sun. Mabel promptly charmed him into purchasing a Vin Fiz stamp, her first such sale. The sheets of Vin Fiz stamps sent by Robert Rodgers from Kansas City had arrived the night before [Oct. 16] at the McFarland Hotel. Twenty-five cents entitled the purchaser to an oversize label, an uninspired drawing of the Model EX in an oval frame. A letter or card with the stamp affixed would be carried on the succeeding leg of the transcontinental passage and then (with conventional postage) deposited in the U.S. mail system. The recipient would, Mabel pointed out, retain the privately issued stamp as a souvenir and as proof that the letter had indeed been delivered through the air.* *Allen placed his stamp on a postcard addressed to his wife in Hartshorne. The card was flown from Fort Worth to Dallas and canceled Oct. 19, 7:30 p.m. A second card and Vin Fiz stamp was purchased by Allen and delivered to his mother in Hartshorne.”

The Jasper Allen card is known to collectors (the stamp and card have been separated), but whether he obtained his stamp(s) on the first day seems doubtful, given the existence of the Vinita October 14-15 example.

To date, a total of eleven different examples of the Vin Fiz stamp have been recorded. There are seven pieces of mail with the stamp properly used, postmarked as listed below (all 1911 dates) and photographed in the Appendix on pages 141-142. Each flight that presumably carried the mail to its post-office entry point is shown in parentheses.

- Oct. 15** at Vinita Ok. (10/14 flight from Kansas City Mo.)
- Oct. 20** at Waco Tex. (10/19 flight from Dallas)
- Oct. 20** at Waco Tex. (10/19 flight from Dallas)
- Oct. 22** at San Antonio Tex. (10/22 flight from Waco, Granger, Austin or Kyle Tex.)
- Nov. 4** at Imperial Junction Cal. (10/30 flight from Deming N.M.), an envelope
- Nov. 4** at Imperial Junction (11/1 flight from Tucson to Phoenix)
- Nov. 8** at Pasadena Cal. (11/1 flight from Willcox Ariz.), a U.S. postal card to Germany (lot 234)

A souvenir card with a Vin Fiz stamp affixed to the back was sold in the F. W. Kessler sale of the Dr. Philip G. Cole collection, held October 26-27, 1939. The card, postmarked at Dallas Tex. on October 19, was mailed by Jasper Allan. Reference to this card is made above. However, at one point after the Cole sale, the stamp and card were separated. The card has since been sold at auction (our Sale 785, lot 512), but the current location of the stamp is not known. As such it is listed below as one of four off-cover examples.

- CL2 uncanceled** and affixed to piece, discovered April 1969, ex Aurea (Christie's Sep. 25, 1991, lot 55)
- CL2 with gum**, discovered in 1968, ex Atherton (Ivy, Shreve & Mader, Jul. 10-13, 1991, lot 2623)
- CL2 uncanceled**, ex Lettick and Zoellner (our Sale 804, lot 728)
- CL2 uncanceled**, removed from card postmarked Dallas Oct. 19 (ex P. G. Cole), whereabouts unknown

The collection of Vin Fiz cards and collateral offered in the following lots represents the most comprehensive group of material related to the Rodgers flight ever assembled. Included is a Middletown picture postcard depicting the crash that occurred on the morning of September 18, and it is postmarked at Middletown in the afternoon of the same day. There are the only known examples of the Type 1 and 1A handstamps, the latter postmarked at Springfield on October 9, the day Mabel is said to have received her official appointment telegram from Postmaster General Hitchcock. The fourth and certainly most significant item is the Vin Fiz stamp on a card sent from Willcox, Arizona Territory, to Germany. This remarkable card was carried all the way to Pasadena (postmarked there on November 8, three days after landing). It is the only U.S. postal card with a Vin Fiz stamp and the only Vin Fiz addressed to a foreign country. In addition to mail, there are examples of the promotional slips thrown overboard and one lot of photographs and ephemera, including one of the slivers of wood from the plane.

This group presents collectors with a remarkable opportunity to acquire items from this pivotal event in aviation history — the first successful crossing of the American continent by air.

We extend our appreciation to Stephen Reinhard for providing information on the Vin Fiz stamp.

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CL2-PC-VINITA 10/15/1911
 Start: 10/14 Kansas City Mo.
 Stops: Moran and Russell Creek Ok.
 Finish: 10/14 Vinita Ok.
 Postmark: Vinita Ok. mc 10/15/11 8AM(?)
 Message: "I am mailing this by aeroplane. E. Nin"
 From/To: E. Nin to Nettie Strawn, Wakefield Kans.
 Note: Earliest known use of Vin Fiz CL2



CL2-PC-WACO 10/20/1911
 Start: 10/19 Dallas Tex.
 Stops: None
 Finish: 10/19 Waco Tex.
 Postmark: Waco Tex. mc 10/20/11 1:30PM
 Message: "Fond Birthday Greetings Via Aerial Post. 'Zach' Dallas, Texas Oct. 17th 1911"
 From/To: "Zach", to Marghretta L. Pierce, NYC
 Note: ex Matthews, Shrady, Aurea



CL2-PC-WACO 10/20/1911
 Start: 10/19 Dallas Tex.
 Stops: None
 Finish: 10/19 Waco Tex.
 Postmark: Waco Tex. mc 10/20/11 1:30PM
 Message: "10/19/11" [illegible name]
 From/To: Sender's name illegible, to Mrs. Seilla(?) Karkpatrick, Chilton Tex.
 Note: Siegel 1984 Rarities sale



CL2-PC-SAN ANTONIO 10/22/1911
 Start: Either Waco, Granger, Austin or Kyle Tex.
 Stops: 10/22 Kyle and San Marcos Tex.
 Finish: 10/22 San Antonio Tex.
 Postmark: San Antonio Tex. mc 10/22/11 8:00PM
 Message: "McGinly and Estes Aviators To Be Mailed From San Antonio"
 From/To: Sender reported to be Mrs. Mabel Rodgers; to Dallas News
 Note: Stamp folded over edge, ex McCoy, Goodkind, Lettick, O'Sullivan (Siegel sale 785)



CL2-COV-IMPERIAL JUNCTION 11/4/1911
 Start: 10/30 El Paso Tex.
 Stops: 10/30 Deming and Lordsburg NM, 10/31 Wilcox Ariz., 11/1 Tucson and Maricopa Ariz., 11/2 Phoenix and Stoval Ariz.
 Finish: 11/3 Imperial Junction Cal.
 Postmark: Imperial Junction Cal. cds 11/4/11 AM
 Message: letter enclosed
 From/To: "Aunt Sallie" to Miss Rosa Benicia Stone, Oakland Cal.
 THE ONLY RECORDED VIN FIZ ON A COVER
 Realized \$115,500 in Siegel Sale 844, the William C. Mack Collection



CL2-COV-IMPERIAL JUNCTION 11/4/1911
 Start: 11/1 Tucson Ariz.
 Stops: Maricopa Ariz., 11/2 Phoenix and Stoval Ariz.
 Finish: 11/3 Imperial Junction Cal.
 Postmark: Imperial Junction Cal. cds 11/4/11 AM
 Message: "Carried by Calbraith Rodgers in his Wright Model Ex racing aeroplane from Tucson to Phoenix. Keep it as a souvenir."
 From/To: Mrs. H. Sweitzer (Calbraith's mother) at Los Angeles hotel, evidently redirected to Pasadena
 Note: Additional L.A. and Pasadena machine cancels

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CL2-COV-IMPERIAL JUNCTION 11/4/1911
 Start: 11/1 Tucson Ariz.
 Stops: Maricopa Ariz.
 11/2 Phoenix and Stoval Ariz.
 Finish: 11/3 Imperial Junction Cal.
 Postmark: Imperial Junction Cal. cds 11/4/11 AM
 Message: "Carried by Calbraith Rodgers in his
 Wright Model Ex racing aeroplane from Tucson to
 Phoenix. Keep it as a souvenir."
 Note: Sent by same person as example above.
 Discovered in 2001.
 Lot 1499 in Siegel Sale 841



CL2-USPC-PASADENA 11/8/1911
 Start: 11/1 Willcox Ariz.
 Stops: 11/1 Tucson and Maricopa Ariz.
 11/2 Phoenix and Stoval Ariz.
 11/3 Imperial Junction Cal.
 11/4 Banning Cal.
 11/5 Beaumont and Pomona Cal.
 Finish: 11/5 Pasadena Cal.
 Postmark: Pasadena Cal. 11/8 8:00PM
 Message: "Willcox Ariz. Dear Otto, As the first
 Transcontinental Rogers Aeroplane (Atlantic to
 Pacific Coast) passes through here today, I'll use
 these means of conveyance to air route to send you a
 few lines which please attach to your stamp
 collection. With kind regards to all, You're a.b.i.l.
 C.F. Threle"
 From/To: C.F. Threle to Otto Hunter, Umbrella
 Factory at Coln, Germany
 Note: Only recorded use of CL2 on U.S. Postal Card.
 Realized \$88,000 in Siegel 1999 Rarities sale (lot 234)

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CENSUS OF VIN FIZ AIR POST (SCOTT CL2)



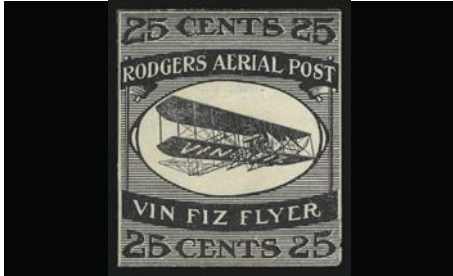
CL2-PCE-01

Small tear in top right corner, affixed to piece of post card
Discovered in April 1969
Signed Heiman
Ex Aurea



CL2-UNC-02

With gum, corner crease bottom right
Discovered in 1968
Ex Atherton



CL2-UNC-03

Small faults
Ex Matthews, Lettick
Zoellner (Siegel sale 804, lot 728 - Realized \$33,000)
Hoffman, RAS Sale 956, 5/8/2008, lot 547 - \$47,500