

## You've Got Mailplanes

Square-tail Stearmans, straight-wing Wacos, and Hiss Jennies top the roster of antique airplanes at a captivating grass strip in Iowa.

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***A Curtiss Jenny, de Havilland DH-4, and Boeing 40C stand in formation while a Sikorsky S-39 surveys the annual fly-in at altitude. (CAROLINE SHEEN)***

We message. We yak. We text. We chat. We send our love online, but when was the last time you got a real letter? You know, paper, envelope, canceled stamp? Once there were love letters in bad handwriting, rambling accounts of Uncle Bob's bladder surgery, and pleas for additional funds from penniless sophomores.

I grumble but I am as bad as anyone. I had a perfectly good chance late last August to write you a letter from the Iowa City airport, where I'd just dropped by in a 1927 Ford Tri-motor. We'd come to deliver the airmail to Iowa City from the town of Blakesburg, 75 miles to the southwest. The occasion was the 90th anniversary of the U.S. Air Mail Service.

I say "we," although I was only a passenger (seated in a wicker armchair bolted to the floor) and the guest of Greg Herrick, the owner and restorer of the Tri-motor. Herrick had been sworn in that morning by Susan Pierson, the Blakesburg postmistress, as a contract "pilot mail messenger." Herrick, his copilot Nathan Rounds, and a dozen or so other fliers who would be flying the mail that day repeated the oath to "pay over any money belonging to the United States which may come into my possession or control."

Suddenly we were on government business, taking oaths and mailbags at the Antique Airfield, just outside Blakesburg. It is home to a five-day fly-in that features some of the nation's finest privately owned vintage aircraft and some of the rarest as well.

Today's motley squadron was a veritable airmail museum. We had Frank Schelling's Curtiss JN-4H Jenny, trucked in from the Schellville Airport in Sonoma, California. The Jenny represented the first government airmail aircraft, which took off from a polo field in Washington, D.C. on May 15, 1918, carrying a letter handed over by President Woodrow Wilson. The Jenny was bound for a relay field in Philadelphia and a second jump to Long Island, New York. Unfortunately, the inexperienced Army pilot promptly got lost and, descending to ask directions, cracked up in a farmer's field in Maryland 24 miles away. President Wilson's letter quietly reached New York by train late that night.

For the Contract Air Mail (CAM) era that came in with airmail privatization in 1925, we had a Boeing 40C, a single-engine monster biplane with impeccable airmail credentials. Flying the CAM 8 route between Seattle and Los Angeles, it crashed on an Oregon mountaintop in 1928, an accident that killed its passenger, severely injured the pilot, and scattered its mail to the winds. Eighty years later, Spokane aircraft resurrectionist Addison Pemberton had reassembled the pieces into the only flying Boeing 40C and flown it to Blakesburg to reenact the original transcontinental airmail route. (For a photographic record of his progress across the country last September, visit [www.airspacemag.com/specialsections/airmail-odyssey.html](http://www.airspacemag.com/specialsections/airmail-odyssey.html).)

At any moment, we were expecting a de Havilland DH-4, the ex-Army bomber that served as airmail's workhorse for a decade. Our DH-4M2 had been forced down en route from its home base at Al Stix' Historic Aircraft Restoration Museum near St. Louis, Missouri, by a historically appropriate ignition problem. Problem solved, pilot and restorer Glenn Peck would chug into Blakesburg later in the day, with the V-12 Liberty engine sounding, as Peck put it, "like a Peterbilt tractor heading down the highway." Greg Herrick's Ford Tri-motor (and another Herrick-owned tri-motor, a 1931 high-wing Stinson in American Airlines livery) represented the beginnings of the airline era, when CAM contracts were used to support the spread of passenger service. Filling out our airmail heritage were various small contract haulers: a Stearman 4DM Speedmail, a Waco ASO, and even a Sikorsky S-39 flying boat. Today we would all fly to Ottumwa, Iowa, where the Jenny, the Boeing 40C, and those with other plans would turn back. Five of us, including Herrick's Ford Tri-motor, would go all the way to Iowa City.

Postmistress Pierson handed out United States Postal Service canvas bags, one per aircraft. As Tri-motor crew, I helped stow our scrawny sack in the Ford's baggage compartment.

Our air armada was carrying commemorative "covers," blank envelopes with colorful pictures and imprints made by a rubber "cachet" to mark the occasion, making them suitable for collectors. The covers were also suitable for real letters, as we discovered in Iowa City, where postmaster Doug Curtiss and two clerks had set up an office at the airport. Their job was to "back stamp" the covers: mark them as officially received so we could fly them back to

Blakesburg. But Curtiss had his own supply of 90th anniversary airmail covers for sale, plus first-class postage at 42 cents. There were no airmail stamps—there has not been a domestic airmail class since 1977, when the Postal Service said that most first-class mail was flying, airmail stamp or not. Today, the USPS flies 316 million pieces of first-class mail a day, mostly on the aircraft of Federal Express, the postal service's biggest air contractor. Personal letters, or what the postal service calls household-to-household correspondence, make up less than one percent of first-class mail.

I meant to write a letter, honest. But our time in Iowa City was limited, and I calculated the Tri-motor would need an hour for the return flight. The Ford 4-AT-B is authentic right down to the 1927 toilet with authentic direct-to-the-outside discharge. The Iowa City airport offered less daunting facilities.

If I had written, I would have told you that it was exhilarating to fly at 1,500 feet over Iowa's golden ocean of corn, watching the Tri-motor's big shadow skim the green waves below. I would have filled you in about Blakesburg, which is short for the annual meeting of the Antique Aircraft Association and its associated Air Power Museum. Bob Taylor started the association in August 1953 with a \$12 classified ad in an aviation magazine. "I got 12 members at a dollar apiece, so I broke even," Taylor recalls. "It's been about the same ever since."

The first fly-in, held in 1954 at the Ottumwa airport where Taylor was the operator, attracted five aircraft. The fly-in has been at Blakesburg since 1971, after Taylor bought a 147-acre farm, filled in a ravine to create a 2,200-foot grass strip, and threw up a row of hangars. The 2008 gathering drew more than 325 aircraft and about 1,600 members. The Blakesburg fly-in is not an airshow. Blakesburg is a meeting for AAA/APM members only, Taylor says, because airshows are a pain in the neck. They draw people who know nothing about airplane safety or etiquette, people who walk into off-limits areas and into spinning props.

Blakesburg is the Un-Oshkosh. (As airplane fans know, Oshkosh is short for the Experimental Aircraft Association's annual Wisconsin fly-in, which last summer drew 540,000 attendees and 10,000 aircraft.) Blakesburg is low-key and intimate. If you don't know most of the Blakesburg crowd by the end of the weekend, they'll probably know you, at least by sight. In fact, Blakesburg is not open to the public. To attend, you'll need to pay \$35 to join AAA/AMP as an associate member.

Local caterers serve home-cooked food in industrial quantities. A lively aerial flea market offers ancient altimeters, retro aviator shades, and conversational scraps like "I wanted to give him my propeller, but no, he went out and spent two grand on a new one." Ride offers came at me from every side, including from one gentleman who, after explaining, panel by panel, how he'd assembled his retro acrobatic kitplane, offered me the keys to take it up solo. (Unlicensed, I declined.) At night, old aviation movies aired in the museum hangar. Saturday night was 1932's *Air Mail*, with Pat O'Brien and Ralph Bellamy.

The U.S. Air Mail Service was the orphan child of technology, politics, and patronage. Otto Praeger was the Washington correspondent for the Dallas Morning News in 1914 when Postmaster General Albert Burleson, an old friend, Texas hunting buddy, and fellow Democrat, named him postmaster of Washington, D.C. The next year, Burleson named Praeger his Second Assistant and mandated the newsman to modernize all post office transport. Even consider airplanes, Burleson said.

The idea of flying the mail had been around since the hot-air balloon (during the 1870 German siege of Paris, Parisians sporadically flew mail across German lines with balloons). But it was the bona fide airplane and America's 1917 entry into the Great War that gave the Post Office big ideas. With Burleson's support, Praeger pushed airmail past a Congress leery of the cost. When the 1920 elections sent a solidly Republican House and President-Elect Warren Harding to Washington to cut the size of government, the airmail service looked especially vulnerable. Praeger was now a patronage lame duck, but in February 1921 he ordered a last-ditch demonstration of a coast-to-coast, day-and-night relay. Jack Knight carried the eastbound mail by night from North Platte, Nebraska, to Omaha, where bad weather convinced the next pilot it would be suicide to try for Chicago. Volunteering for a second relay, Knight climbed back into the cockpit and flew on to drop out of the soup near a Chicago airport. The final transit time for getting the mail from San Francisco to New York was 33 hours and 21 minutes, 75 hours less than the best train time. That kind of time savings suddenly made economic sense to business customers. Congress was sufficiently impressed to keep the U.S. airmail going until commercial air carriers could build the capital and experience to take over CAM routes.

The U.S. Air Mail Service is usually depicted as a black comedy of regular crashes, occasional deaths, and steady red ink. William M. Leary, author of *Aerial Pioneers*, says that during the Air Mail Service years, 34 pilots were killed. Leary also calculated that in the government-run era, the service cost \$14.4 million and, when revenues and remaining assets are subtracted, it still lost between \$10 million and \$12 million. But the Air Mail Service left a national airway system, connecting the coasts with a route lit by beacons for night flying. It virtually invented cross-country navigation, aerial charting, and systematic aircraft maintenance. To relay real-time weather reports, it set up the first nationwide radio network. It brought the east and west coasts a day closer in business time. Most of all, the Air Mail Service figured out in the 1920s how to transform a bunch of airplanes into a functioning transportation system. Modern commercial aviation is still working out the details.

At Blakesburg, I learned there are two communities devoted to airmail days. The antique airplane fliers were impossible to miss, as they taxied their brightly colored machines on the grass and circled overhead. The other community was keeping watch, as they always do, from far away: the stamp collectors.

Airplane devotees and stamp collectors have been together from the beginning. Indeed, some collectors don't even wait for the Wright brothers: They collect balloon and airship mail.

Others pursue only “pioneer” covers, the term for any postmarked letter or card flown as a stunt or a promotion. But real airmail stamp collecting begins on May 15, 1918, with the real U.S. Air Mail Service and a Jenny JN-4H, which appeared on the first U.S. airmail stamp—eventually the most valuable stamp in U.S. postal history. W.T. Robey, a Washington attorney and collector who bought a sheet of 100 at the post office, realized that the blue airplane had been printed upside down on the red and white stamp. He recalled: “My heart stood still.” The hearts of collectors have stood still ever since. One inverted Jenny, originally 24 cents, sold at auction in 2007 for nearly \$1 million.

And then there are “crash covers.” The American Air Mail Society has offered these since 1923, when in its first catalog it included a section on “Interrupted Flight Covers, familiarly know as Crash Covers”—postmarked envelopes recovered from aircraft that have crashed, caught fire, or otherwise not made the swift completion of their appointed rounds.

Addison Pemberton’s Boeing 40C is listed in the AAMS book under 1928: “October 2. ROSEBURG, OREGON PAT—CAM 8. Pilot Harry G. Donaldson crashed his plane because of fog. Mail carried 22 lbs. A few loose covers salvaged in damaged condition but forwarded without special markings. One cover known.”

For another example, I might have taken a closer look at the DH-4 that flew into Blakesburg from St. Louis in the maroon and silver livery of Robertson Aircraft Corporation, the outfit that hired Charles Lindbergh to fly an airmail route. Lindbergh crashed two Robertson DH-4s in 1926, bailing out when he was out of fuel. A Lindbergh crash cover from the second wreck, in November 1926, is in the collection of Philip McCarty, a renowned collector of U.S. domestic crash covers. But McCarty says that the community is abuzz with the news that a cover from Lindbergh’s first bailout has surfaced.

McCarty, who has examined the cover, which has markings indicating that it had been delayed by a wreck, says it spent the last 82 years framed on a wall, the prized possession of the man who received it. (Now in the hands of a dealer, the cover could fetch \$6,000 when it comes to auction.) The letter crashed to earth near Ottawa, Illinois, on September 16, 1926, after Lindbergh jumped from his fuel-exhausted DH-4 into fog. As the airplane nosed down, the last ounces of fuel trickled into the carburetor and the engine revived, leaving Lindbergh floating down while listening to his own airplane circling in the fog.

The story was a favorite at Blakesburg. Next year, there will be others. Each night the sun will set into the western corn. When the Pilot’s Pub opens, a boisterous crowd will spill out of the hangar. Off in the dusk, campers will unfold their gear under parked aircraft. Waving a balsa glider and a flashlight, a boy will roar down the wet grass runway. Overhead, a jet-black Iowa sky will be ablaze with stars.