



Air Crash Covers: Preserving the Legacy of Airmail Pioneers

Michael L. Wilson
Philatelic Gathering
September 20, 2025

Program

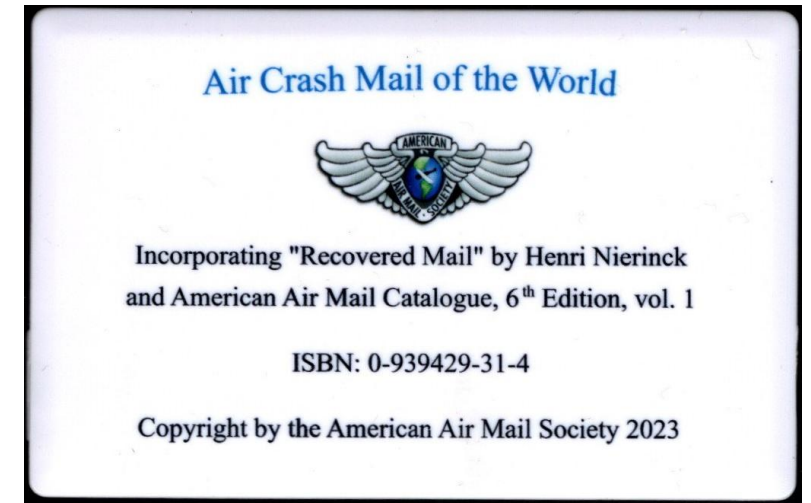
- Introduction
- An Overview in Ten Covers
- Deeper Dive on Three Covers
 - “This Was Airplane! Farmer Saves Flyer; Father Breaks Leg”
 - “The Tragic Flight of an Amusing Cover”
 - “An Airmail Plane Crash, John N. Luff, and Harry Houdini”
- Conclusion
- Bonus



Introduction

Air Crash Covers: Part of Airmail History

- Crash covers date back to earliest days of aviation
 - *Par Ballon Monte* during the Siege of Paris, Franco-Prussian War 1870-1871
 - First regularly scheduled airmail flight from Washington, D.C. May 15, 1918
- With a fatal accident rate in the 1920s and 1930s of one per million miles flown – versus one per 2 billion miles flown since 1997 – there are many crash covers to collect from the early days of air mail
- Why collect?
 - Postal history – Postal officials expressed concern about injuries & mourned deaths, but it was the mail that mattered
 - Stories are fascinating – often sober, but at times with a humorous or unexpected twist
 - Preserve legacy of airmail pioneers who risked life and limb



Nomenclature

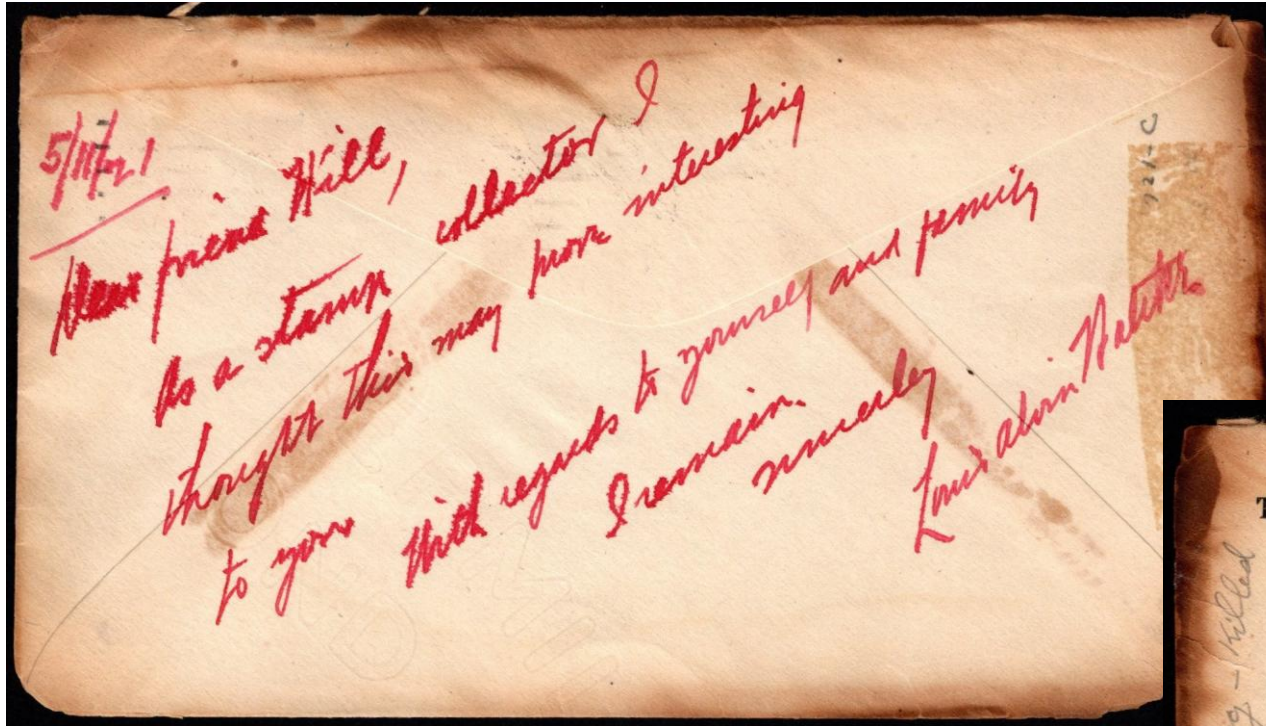
Crash - Flight interrupted by a crash causing the aircraft to be badly damaged, wrecked, or burned beyond immediate repair and resulting in a delay of the mail. Items usually bear some indication of a mishap – visible damage, cachet, label, ambulance cover.

Interruption - Flight was interrupted by an accident or other event causing slight damage to the plane or the aircraft could not continue and the mail was transferred to another aircraft, or alternative means of transport, resulting in a delay of the mail. Mail carried in these events may or may not show signs of damage or have cachets or other markings.



An Overview in Ten Covers

Collectability of Crash Covers Recognized Early On



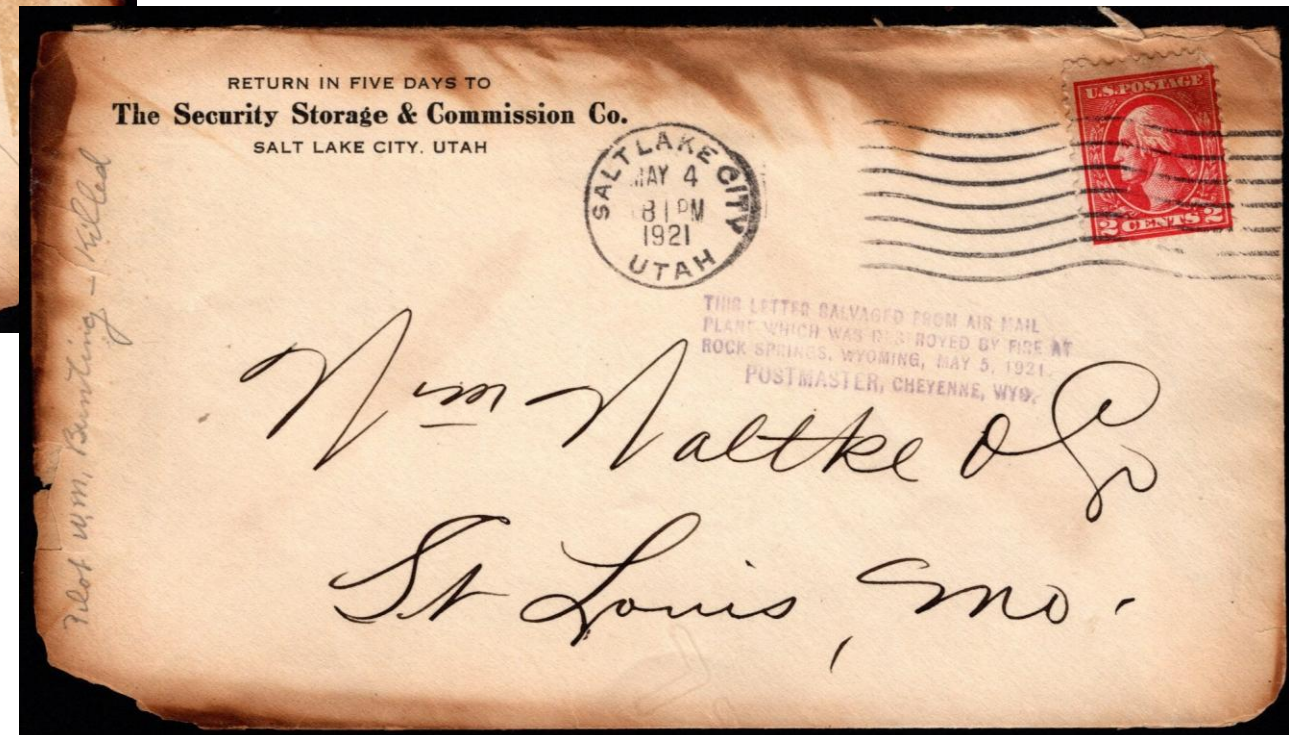
"5/11/21

Dear Friend Hill,

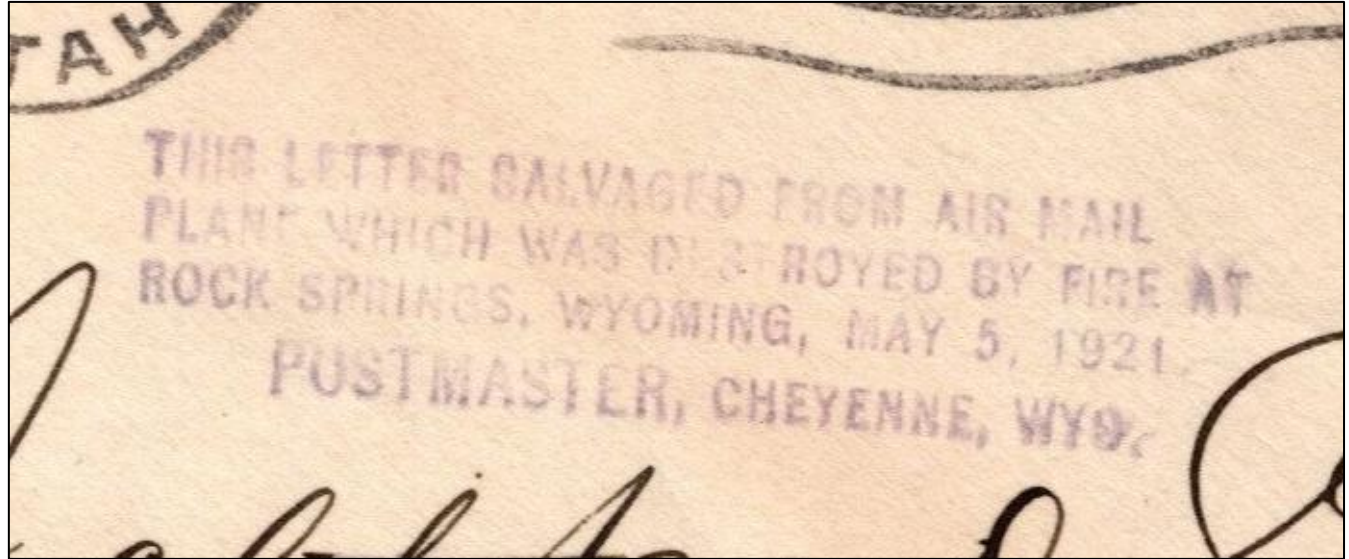
As a stamp collector, I thought this may prove interesting to you.

Kind regards to yourself and family, I remain sincerely,
Louis Alvin Waltke"

On May 5, 1921, a de Havilland DH-4 mail plane nose-dived, crashed and burned at Rock Springs, Wyoming killing pilot William M. Bunting. Of 292 pounds of mail, 227 pounds were salvaged. ACM 210505.

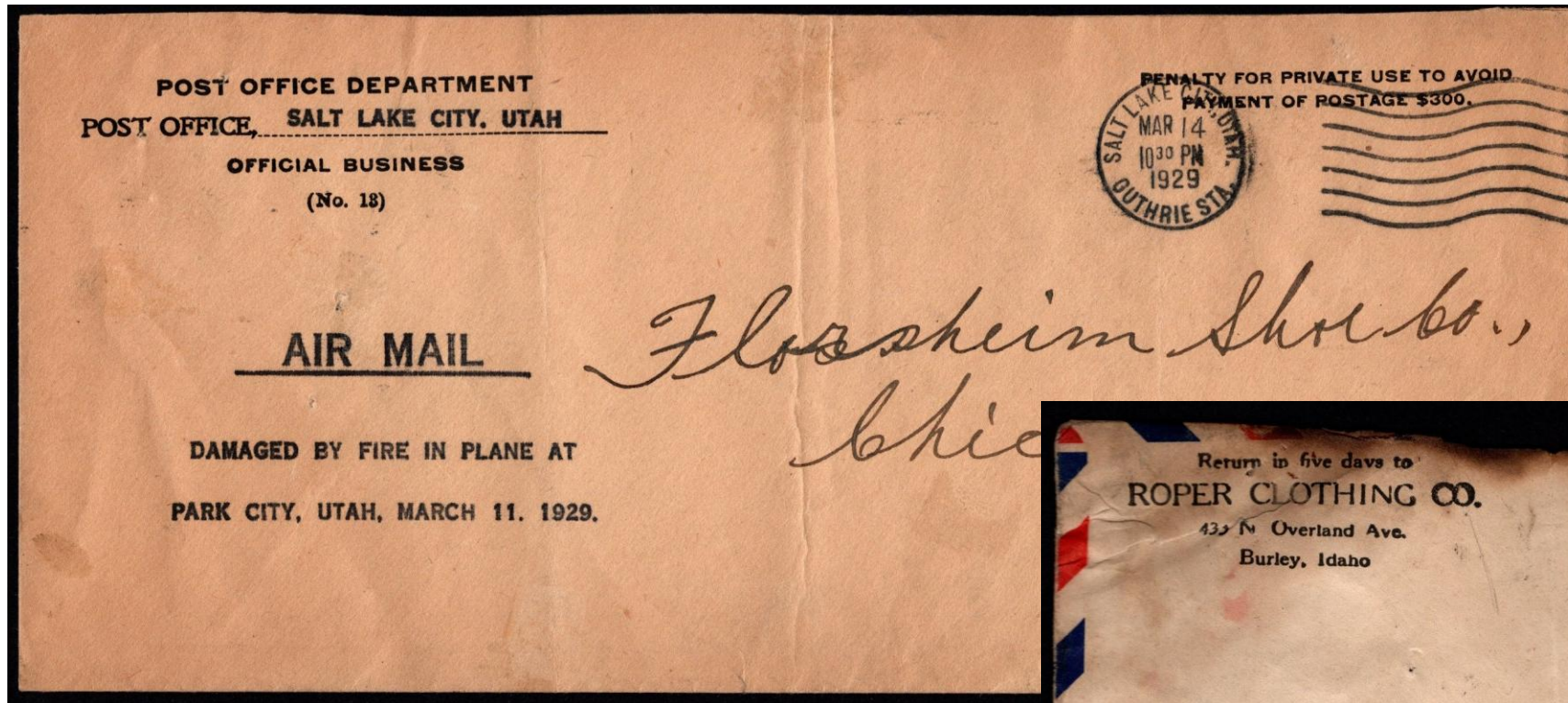


Airmail Pilot Bunting and 4-line Cachet On Rock Springs Cover



Bunting first flew air mail on November 15, 1920. He was one of more than 200 pilots hired between 1918 and 1926 to fly mail for the U.S. Post Office Department. Thirty-five were killed while on duty.

Some Mail Forwarded in “Ambulance Covers”



Boeing 40B crashed in a blinding snowstorm near Park City on March 11, 1929. Pilot and passenger were injured. 29 of 30 mail bags were salvaged, 6 badly burned.

Badly burned covers were forwarded in “ambulance covers” from the Salt Lake City Post Office on March 14. Cover arrived in Chicago on March 18. ACM 290311.

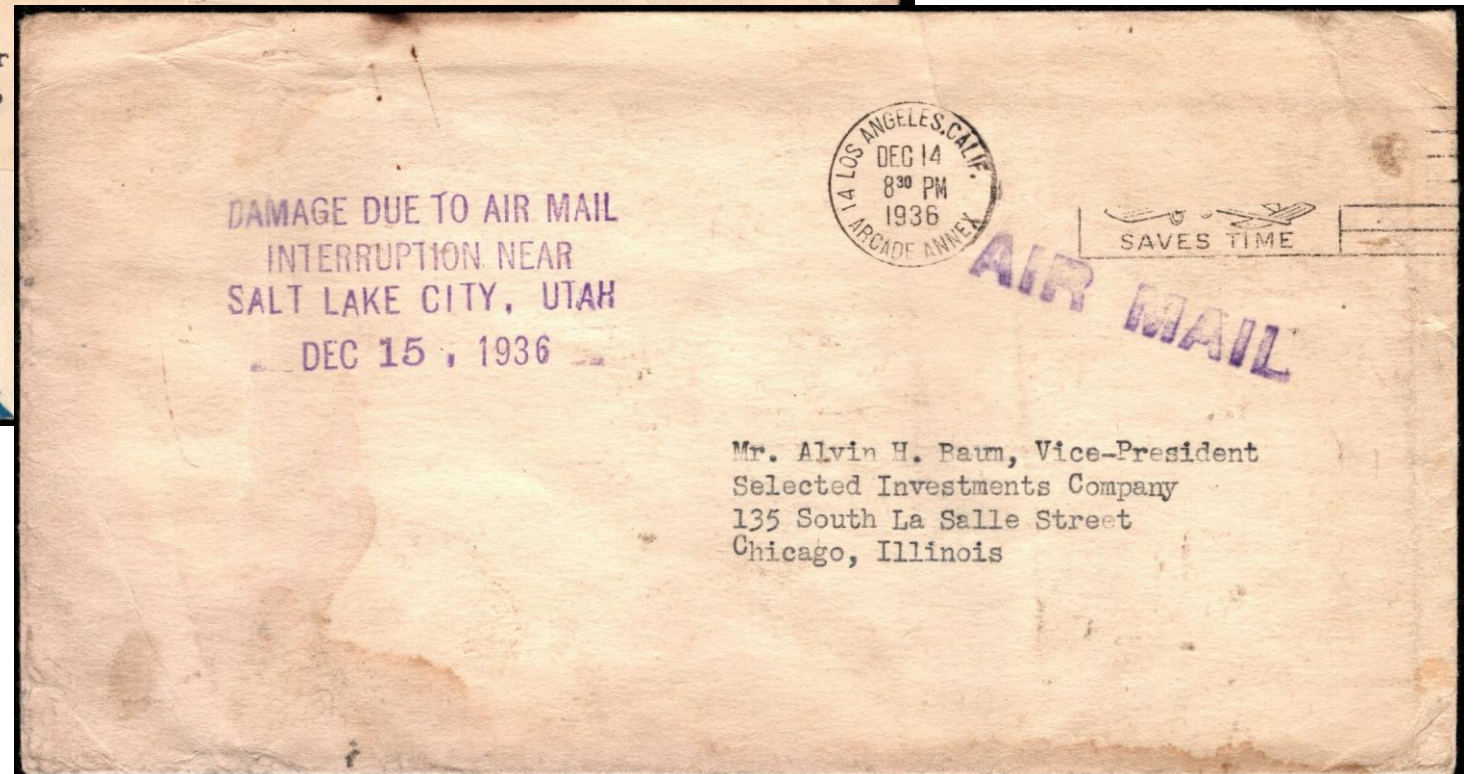


Unique Cachets for Each Crash...



A Boeing 40B-4 crashed into a mountain on January 22, 1931, killing the pilot. The wreck was found a week later. ACM 310122.

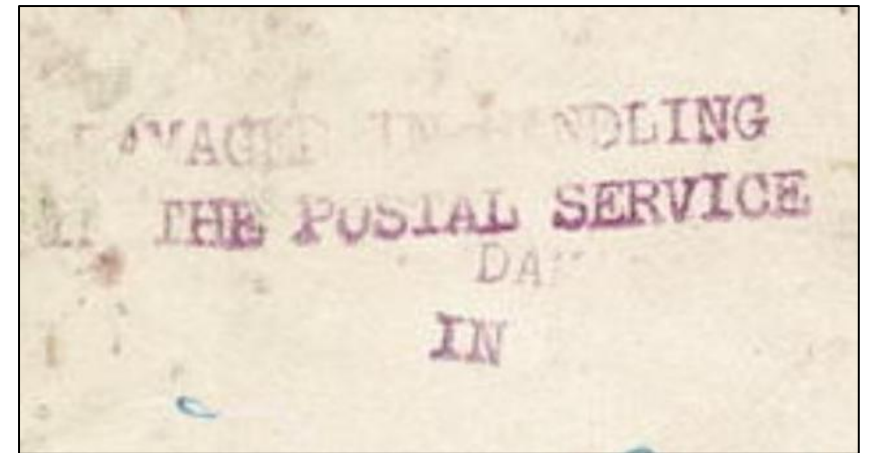
Boeing 247D crashed into a mountain December 15, 1936, killing 2 pilots & 5 passengers. Wreck not found until June 6, 1937. ACM 361215.



...Until USPOD Mandated a Standard in 1956



On March 1, 1962, a Boeing 707 with 87 passengers and 8 crew crashed into Jamaica Bay shortly after taking off from Idlewild Airport (now JFK International). All on board perished. All 500 pounds of mail onboard was damaged but salvaged. ACM 620301.



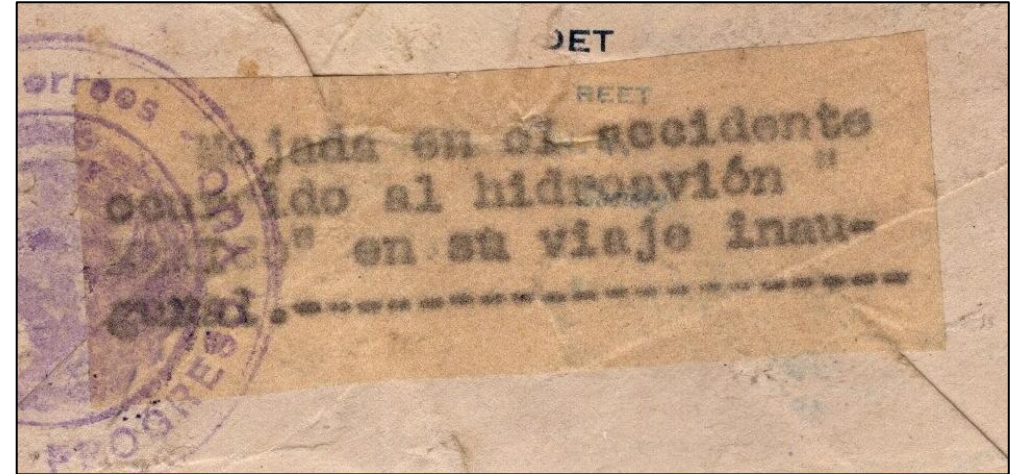
“Damaged In Handling / In The Postal Service”

Interrupted Flight Cover March 1, 1929



First flight on CAM 25 spur line Daytona Beach via Orlando to Tampa (25W6). After departing Daytona Beach, plane developed engine problems and the pilot, Charles "Jimmy" Faulkner made a forced landing in the bay. He was unhurt. The mail was retrieved and placed on another westbound flight arriving in Orlando same day. All covers show evidence of submersion. ACM 290301 & AAMC 25W6.

Crashes Occurred Elsewhere...Caribbean...

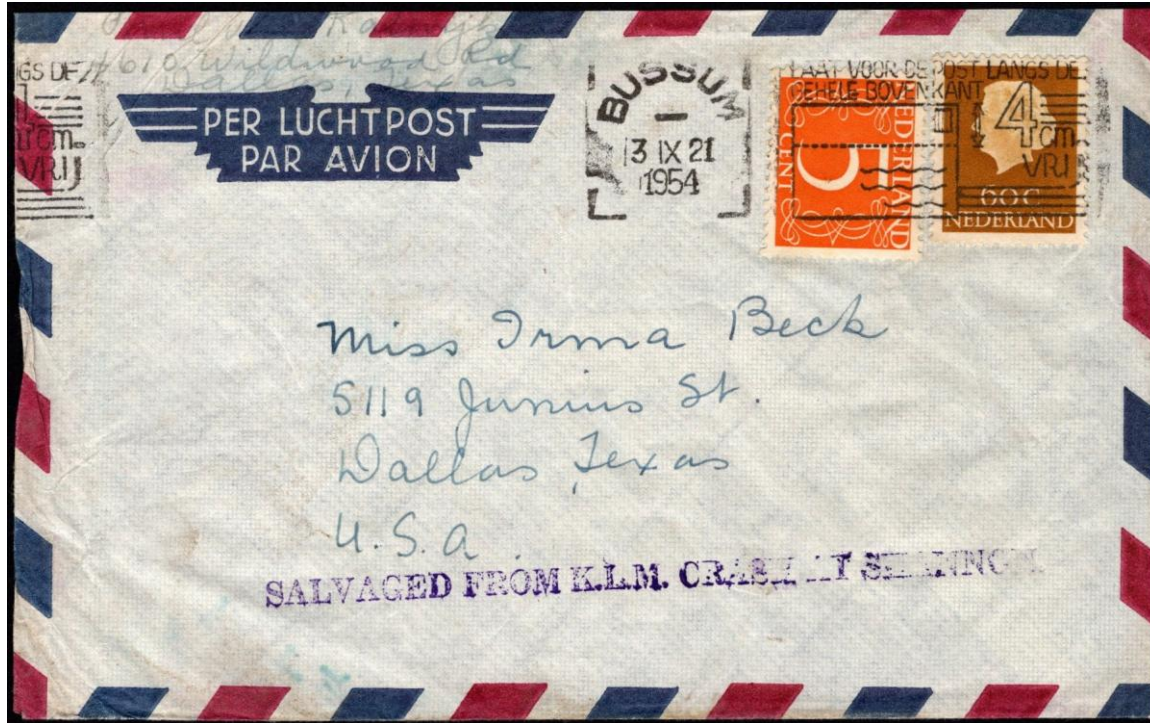


Label on back reads, "Wet from accident that occurred to the seaplane *Mexico* on its maiden voyage."

Inaugural flight between Mexico City & Havana w/stops in Veracruz & Progreso. Due to engine problems, plane went down in the Gulf of Mexico 2 miles from Progreso on January 20, 1931. All people on board were rescued.

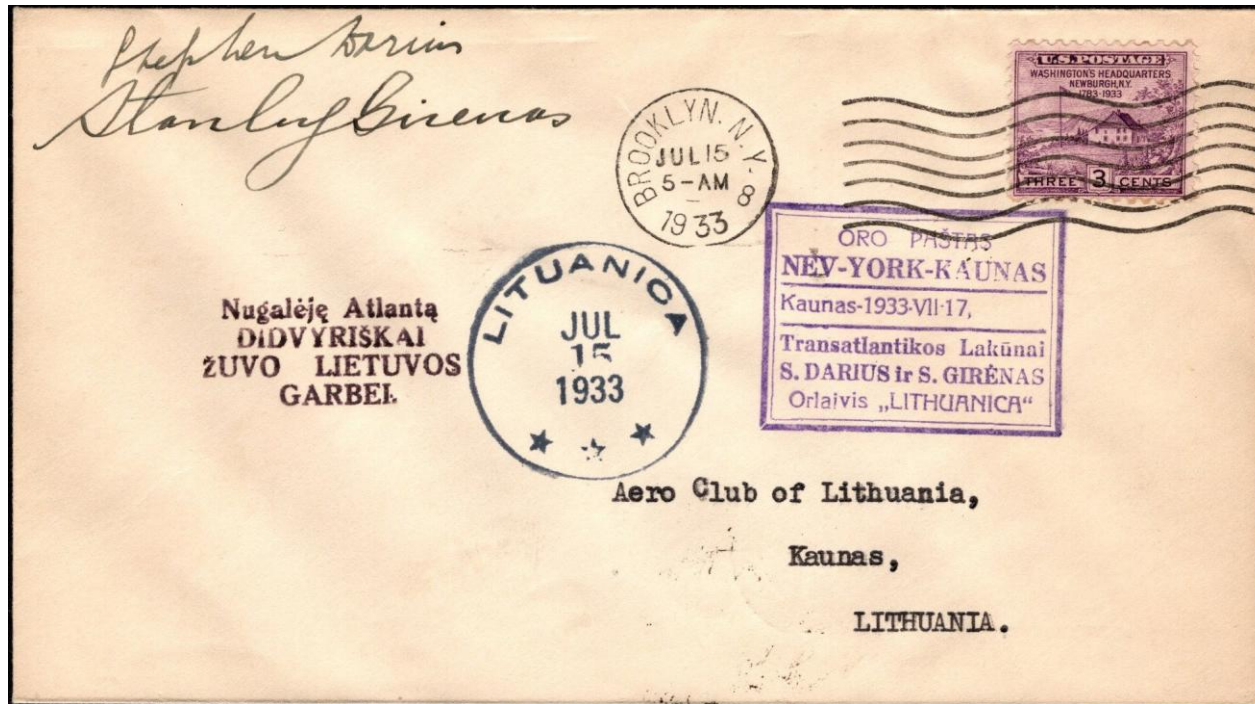
Cover postmarked Veracruz on January 19, 1931, and received in Havana January 26, 1931, after either hitching a ride on a PAA flight (AAMS) or being forwarded by boat (Kelleher 2012 auction). Listed as ACM 310121 but probably should be ACM 300120.

...And Europe



KLM Lockheed Constellation enroute from Amsterdam to New York stopped to refuel at Shannon Airport. A minute after taking off on September 5, 1954, the tail hit the water and the plane crashed killing 25 people, including the pilot, two crew members, and 22 passengers. Of the 26 mail bags on board, 20 were recovered. Cachet applied by Irish Post reads "SALVAGED FROM K.L.M. CRASH AT SHANNON." ACM 540905.

Some Crash Covers Show No Signs of Damage But Include a Marking...



Cachet to left of *Lituanica* postmark translates “Having conquered the Atlantic, died in honor of Lithuania.”

One of 983 letters flown by 2 Lithuanian-American pilots (Stephen Darius & Stanley Girenas) on a nonstop flight from New York to Lithuania.

Departed New York on July 15, 1933 & successfully crossed the Atlantic but crashed July 17 near Soldin, Germany (now Myślibórz, Poland), about 500 miles short of Kaunas, Lithuania, due to bad weather & engine defects.

Both pilots were killed but mail was undamaged & forwarded to Lithuania.

Cover backstamped Kaunas July 18, 1933. ACM 330717.

Lithuania Issued a Set of 6 Airmail Stamps in 1934 Memorializing Darius & Girenas

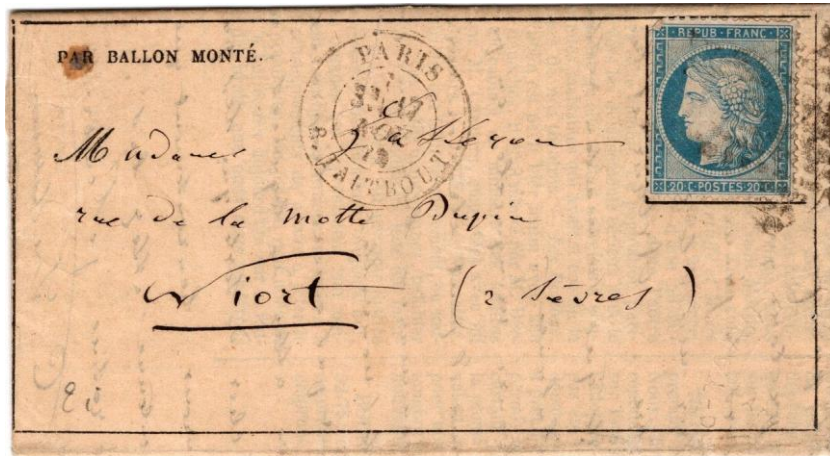


“In Memory of
Lithuanian
Heroes”



...While Others are Identified by Circumstances Like This

Ballon Monté Cover



Postmarked “Paris Rue Taitbout” November 17, 1870, and addressed to a “Rosine” (last name illegible) in Niort, France, about 250 miles southwest of Paris.

Explanation at right excerpted from “Air Crash Mail of the World” catalog. These covers are listed as #18701119.

The balloon *General Uhrich* departed Gare de Nord on November 18, 1870, at 11:15 p.m. carrying two bags of mail weighing 80 kilos and some carrier pigeons.

After nine hours of heavy rain that soaked the aeronaut and passengers, the aeronaut, Louis Lemoine, opened the air valve, but it was frozen. He could not close it, and the balloon made a wild descent, and the basket struck the ground violently. The aeronaut and passengers jumped out of the basket, and the aeronaut cut the balloon with a knife.

As there was no wind during the night, the balloon did not fly very far from Paris. Frenchmen helped to hide the balloon from the Germans who were in that area. Eventually, one bag of mail was turned over to the postmistress of Luzarches and the other bag was given to the postmistress of Viarmes. The letters were snuck out over some days to other towns, where they could be delivered to the addressees. Covers can be identified by Paris postmarks between November 15 and 18.



Deeper Dive on Three Covers

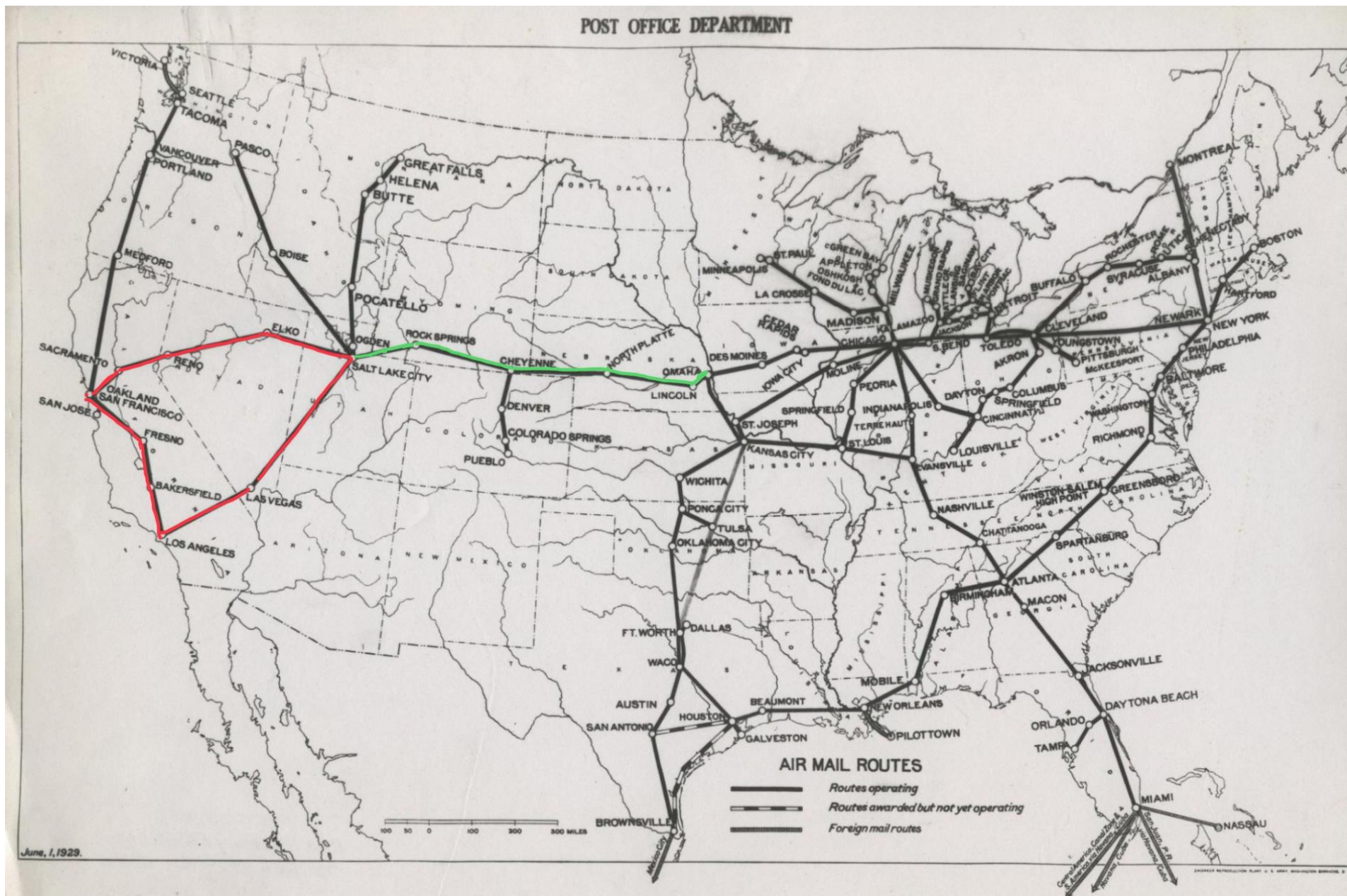
“This Was Airplane! Farmer Saves Flyer; Father Breaks Leg”



Early in the morning of January 6, 1929, a Boeing 40B piloted by Norman Potter struck a tree on landing near Fort Crook in Omaha and was destroyed by fire. About 200 pounds of the 800 pounds of mail on board were salvaged. ACM 290106.

Red lines:
Possible
route of
letter from
Los Angeles
to Salt Lake
City. Most
likely: CAM
4 LA-LV-
SLC. Other
is CAM 8-
CAM 18

Green line:
Portion of
CAM 18
flown by
Potter Jan
4-5, 1929



The
Omaha
Evening
Bee-
News,
January
7, 1929

This Was Airplane! Farmer Saves Flyer; Father Breaks Leg

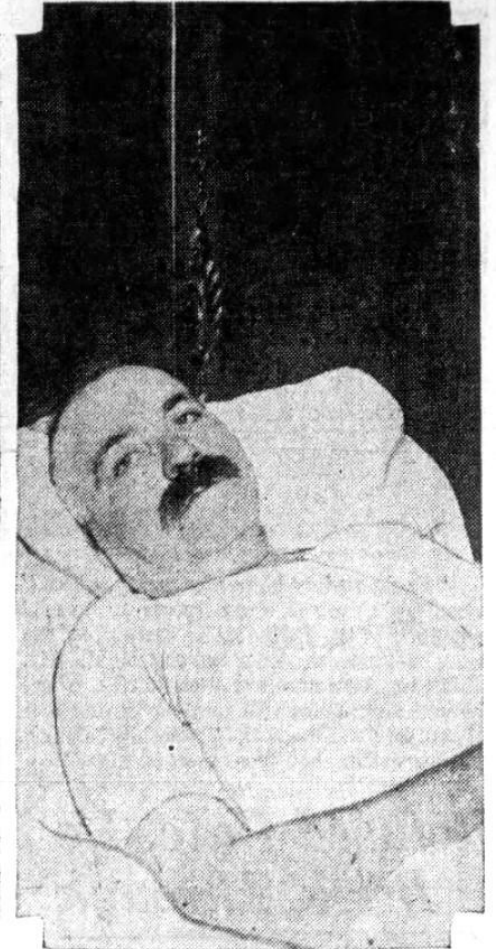


Lee Watson jr., is shown here beside the burned wreckage of an airmail plane which fell on his father's farm Sunday morning. Lee probably saved the life of Normal Potter, 28, the pilot, by dragging Potter away from the burning plane

after he fell dazed from the cockpit. The plane crashed on a cottonwood tree and fell with its tail resting on the Watson house. Lee had run outdoors in his bare feet to rescue the pilot, but said he didn't mind the cold.



Closeup of Lee Watson jr., who saved an airmail pilot after a plane crashed on the Watson farm, near Fort Crook flying field, early Sunday morning.



Victim of an airplane accident, although not in or touched by the plane. Lee Watson sr., shown here, feared a falling mail plane would hit his house, tried to get out of bed, and broke his leg.

Sadly, Potter's Luck Did Not Last



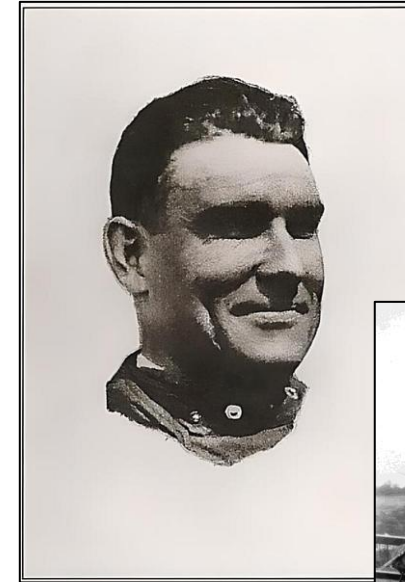
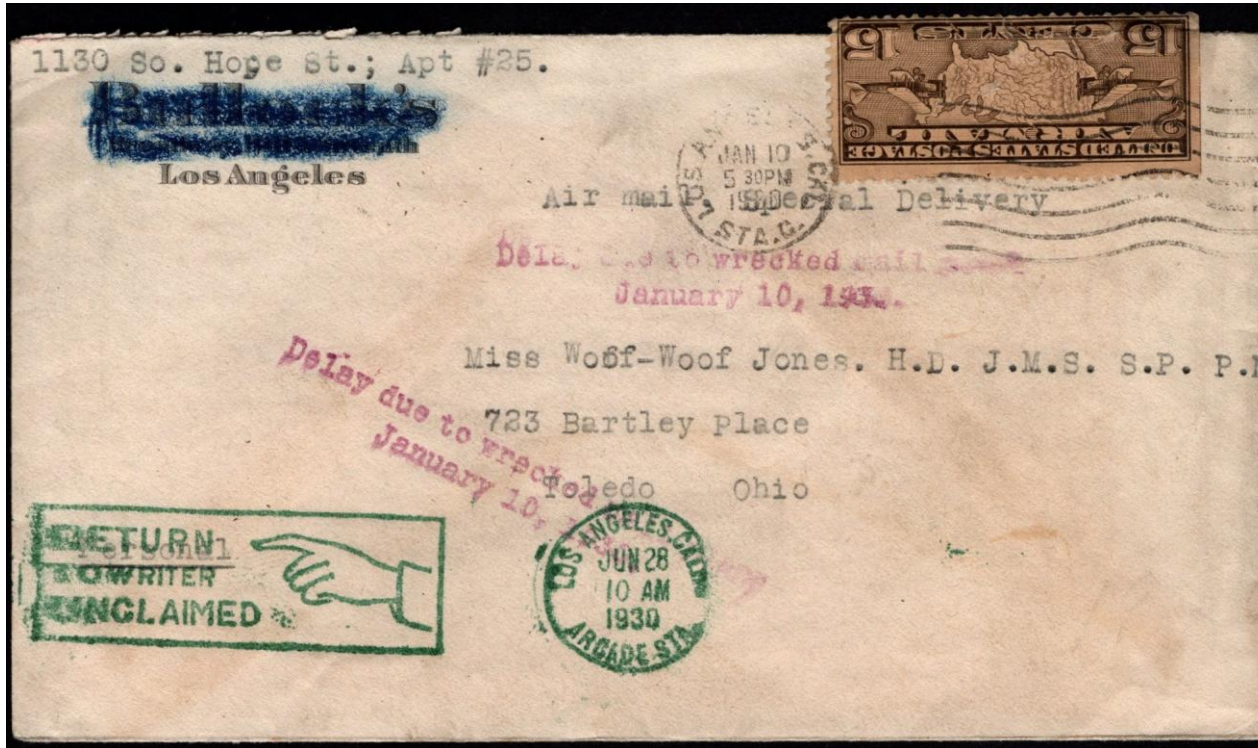
Norman Potter on the day of his marriage to Hazel McDonald, October 19, 1929.

On November 23, 1931, while flying a mail plane from Oakland to Salt Lake City, Potter encountered heavy snow and crashed. He was killed instantly.

He had flown more than 3,000 hours with just two accidents.

As for the mail he carried on his last flight: "The load of airmail was saved and was promptly forwarded today," per the November 24, 1931, edition of *The Daily Herald* of Salt Lake City.

“The Tragic Flight of an Amusing Cover”

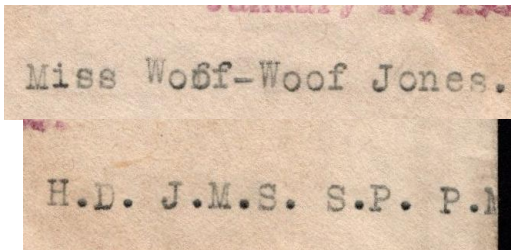


A Boeing 95 enroute from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City (CAM 4) piloted by Maurice Graham crashed about 250 miles south of Salt Lake City on January 11, 1930. His plane was not located until June 24. Graham died not in the crash but of exposure to extreme weather. All 648 pounds of mail were salvaged undamaged and returned to Los Angeles, where it received a “Return to the Writer / Unclaimed” machine cancel in green ink, dated June 28, 1930, 10:00 a.m. and a crash cachet. ACM 300111.

Cover Features



Grace E. Jones, circa 1929, aka



Bullock's Department Store Circa
1930



15-cent postage to cover airmail rate
and special delivery



Crash cachet and return postmark

“No more dramatic chapter has been written in the history of the air mail than this sacrifice on the part of a devoted pilot, who faced death in the storm to carry the mail through.” – *San Bernadino County Sun*, 7/18/1930



Kindergarten Class in Las Vegas Snow, January 10, 1930.



Remains of Maurice Graham's Crashed Plane

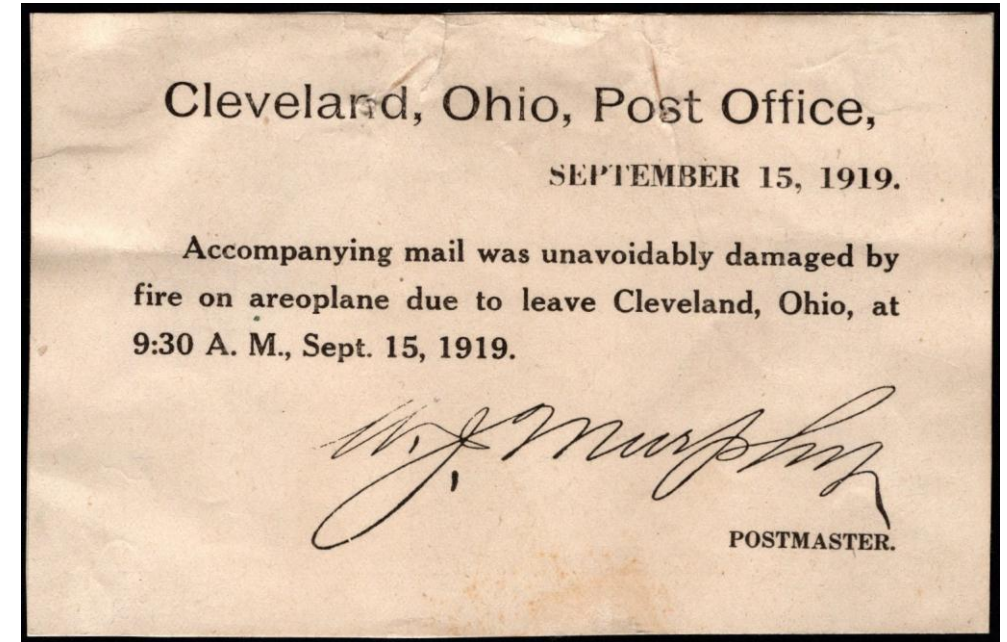
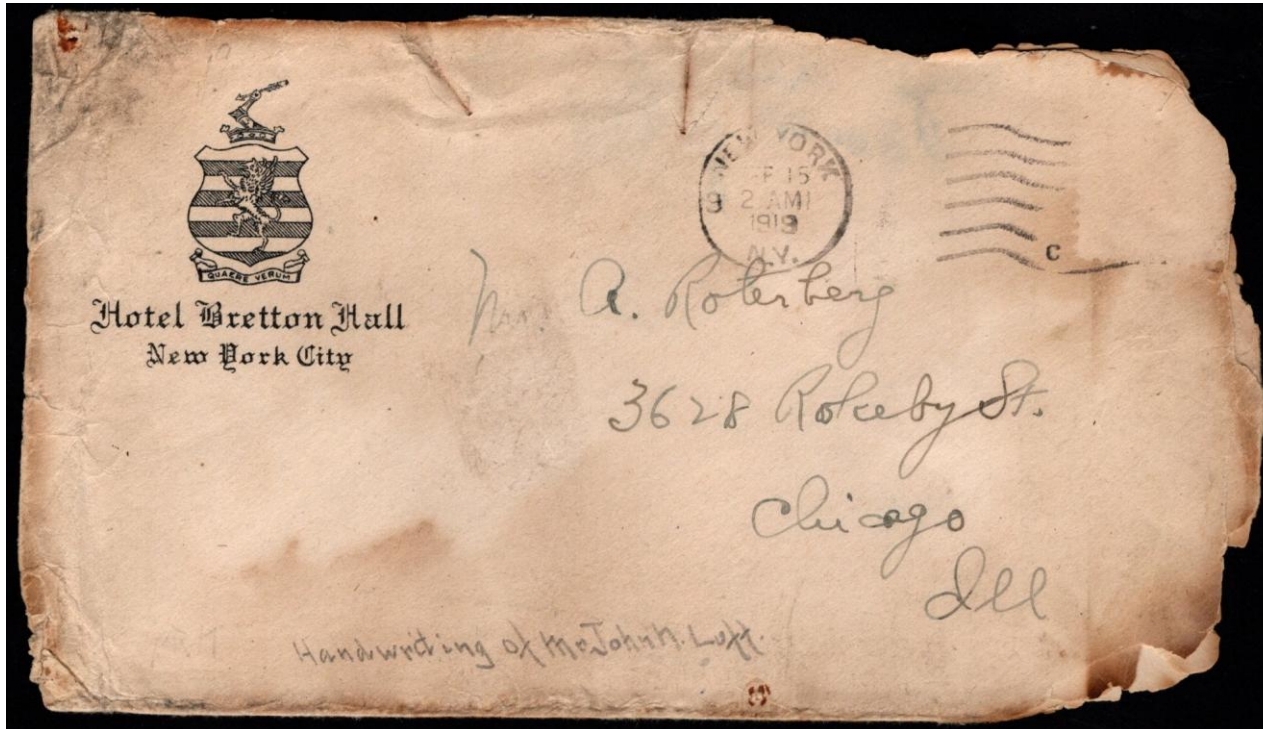


Mail bags from Graham's plane

Graham's plane was found June 24, 1930, but his body wasn't discovered until July 16 about 6 miles from the crash site. He had a slight skull fracture, which led to the conclusion that he died from exposure.

His last log entry: "January 11, 1930. 2:35 AM. No destination."

“An Airmail Plane Crash, John N. Luff, and Harry Houdini”



On September 15, 1919, a de Havilland DH-4 flown by Edward V. Gardner crashed shortly after takeoff from Cleveland enroute to Chicago. The plane crashed on the roofs of two homes and burned. A label was attached to the mail, and a relief plane took the salvaged and damaged mail to Chicago. This is one of three known surviving covers. ACM 190915.

Edward V. Gardner: 2nd Pilot Hired by USPOD in August 1918



Gardner sitting on engine of a Curtiss Jenny, August 1918



Aftermath of crash, *The Plain Dealer*, September 16, 1919

Gardner would leave the USPOD and become a barnstormer. He died in a crash at an air show in Nebraska in May 1921.

Handwriting of Mr. John H. Luff.

?



Luff's residence in in the late 1910s per NYC Directories

book

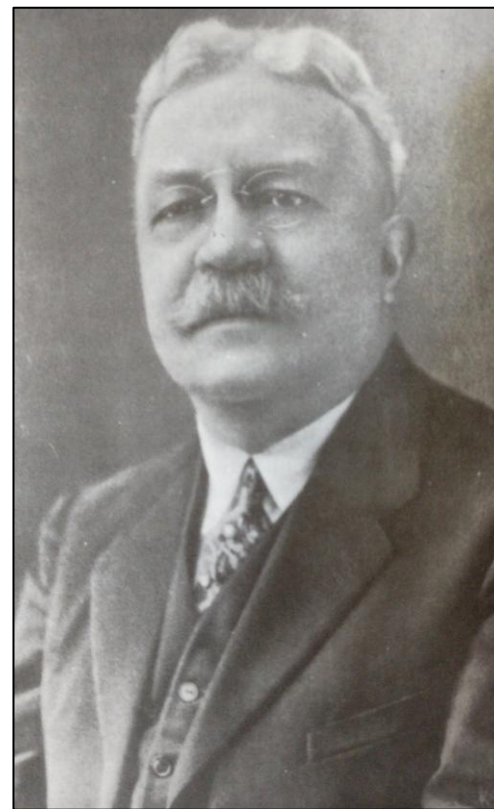
copy

Left: Luff's handwriting from an attestation on a New Hampshire Postmaster Provisional.

herp

Chu

Right: Handwriting from cover



John A. Luff – Founder CCNY, President of APS, Signed Roll of Distinguished Philatelists, APS Hall of Fame. Namesake of the APS “Luff Awards.”

Who Was “A. Roterberg”?



August Roterberg (right), Harry Houdini (left), Anna Roterberg (middle)

Manufacturer of magical equipment and author of magic books

Sold business around 1916 and devoted himself to collecting and selling stamps, especially of Mexico and Latin America



1921 Mexico 10 centavos “El Abrazo de Acatempan” with inverted center owned by August Roterberg.



Conclusion

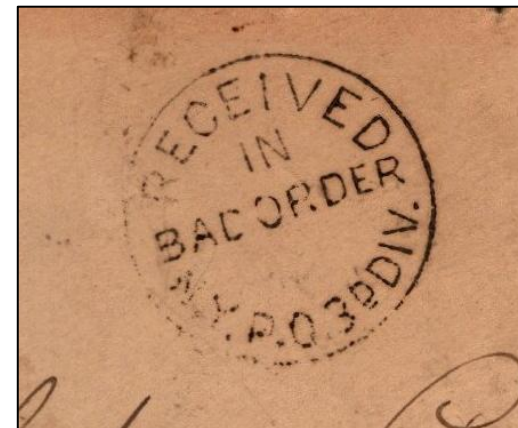
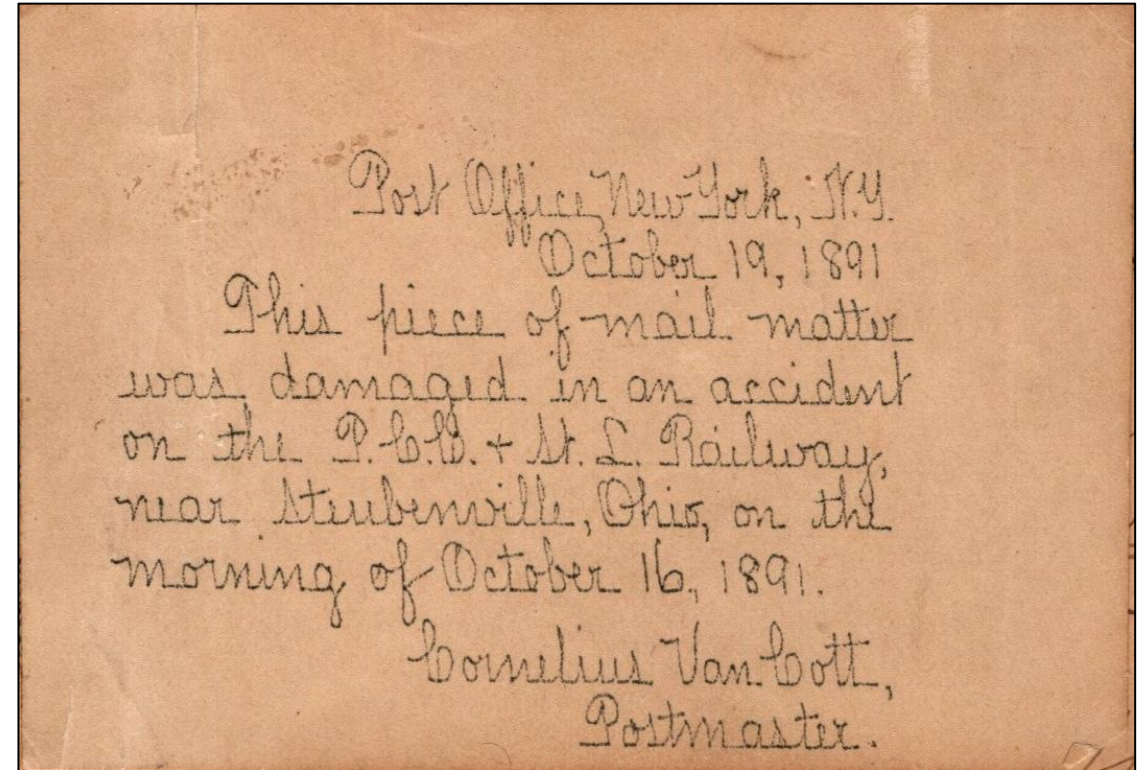
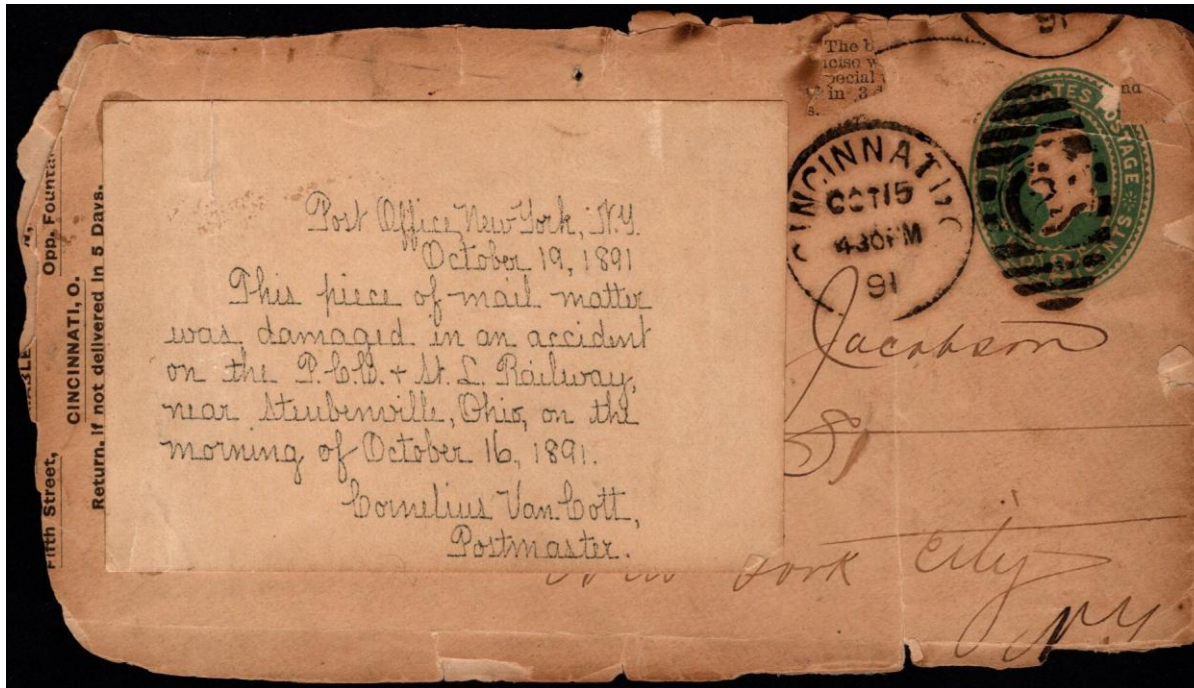
Conclusion

- Flying air mail was not for the fainthearted, especially in the early days when the life expectancy of an airmail pilot was as short as 900 hours
 - 35 of some 200 pilots hired by the USPOD between 1918 and 1926 died while flying mail
 - A fatality rate of ~17% far exceeds the most dangerous profession today – logging – with a fatality rate of 0.01%
- But those brave pilots persevered, proving that air transportation of mail, cargo and people was not only feasible but viable - we owe them a debt of gratitude
- Collecting and preserving air crash mail is one way to preserve and honor their legacy



Bonus

Bonus: Train Crash & Fire, 1891, Steubenville, Ohio



One of two known covers from this crash. Both have explanatory label and "Bad Order" marking.

Bonus: Shipwreck Off Southwest Coast of Africa, 1900



Cachet reads "From the / sunken steamer *Mexican* / carrying mail from Cape Town / Railway Post Office No. 15." Less than half of the mail bags were saved. This is one of the rarest German cachets.