

# *Yesterday in STAMPS:*

## The Romance of Aerophilately, Pt. 4

By an Unknown Author

(From STAMPS Magazine, May 16 & May 23, 1942, with images added)

*(Many of the photos used in this article come from a wonderful history site. Because of the length you will need to copy and paste this url: [http://www.wright-brothers.org/History\\_Wing/History\\_of\\_the\\_Airplane/Doers\\_and\\_Dreamers/Cal\\_Rodgers](http://www.wright-brothers.org/History_Wing/History_of_the_Airplane/Doers_and_Dreamers/Cal_Rodgers)*

*The covers shown here were offered in a 2006 Shreves "Pioneers of Flight" auction. JFD.)*

Early in July, 1911, Calbraith P. Rodgers, a great-great grandson of Commodore Perry and a cousin of the late Commander John Rodgers famous Navy pilot, made up his mind that he would learn to fly. How well he succeeded is shown by the fact that in August he won first place in an endurance contest at the Chicago Aviation Meet.

A month later, during the night of September 16th, Rodgers and a mechanic were engaged in putting the finishing touches to a new Wright machine, and just before dawn it was pronounced ready. Rodgers had already announced that on September 17th he would start on a transcontinental flight from Sheepshead Bay, N.Y. to the Pacific Coast.

Certainly, no ordinary man could have achieved his goal in so short a time, and in fact, Rodgers was no ordinary man. Six feet four inches in height, a football star at Columbia and the University of Virginia, he was well equipped for the task he had set himself. He was also a member of the New York Yacht Club, and had once driven a motorcycle from Buffalo to New York in one day. He was daring, but unlike Beachey, he was never reckless; one of the few pilots of the serious school, who saw in aviation something far more important than a box-office attraction.

The idea of a transcontinental flight was not entirely Rodgers' own, for on October 10, 1910, William Randolph Hearst



had offered a prize of \$50,000 for a transcontinental flight, to be made in 30 days, provided it was completed within one year from that date. Rodgers was the third pilot to enter the contest, but the only one who finished, although he did not win the prize.

Earl Ovington, of Garden City fame, had announced that he would attempt the flight, and had planned to start during the first week of October, but a faulty motor forced him to give up the flight after he had started, and he abandoned the project.

The other entrants were Robert G. Fowler and James Ward. Fowler left San Francisco on September 11th and met Rodgers at Tucson, Arizona, on November 1st, but was forced later to abandon his flight due to lack of funds. Ward started from Governors Island on September 14th, but gave up the attempt when he crashed at Elmira on September 23rd.

After working most of the night of September 16th on his plane, Rodgers returned to his hotel for a few hours rest and did not reappear at Sheepshead Bay until 3:30 that afternoon.

In the meantime 2,000 persons had assembled on the field. The throng pressed curiously about the new Wright machine which the Wright factory had built specially for



*Cal Rodgers (middle) with Vin Fiz Bottling Co. President Charles Davidson (right) at the initial take-off ceremonies.*

Rodgers' flight. Just before Rodgers arrived, the plane was christened the "Vin Fiz" after a soft drink concern who had helped to finance the flight. At the end of the ceremony, the crowd made a rush forward and it seemed for a moment that the plane would be wrecked, but the combined efforts of a dozen special policemen managed to hold the crowd back.

At last Rodgers came pushing through the crowd, which had greatly increased in numbers by this time. Rodgers spent half an hour in a final inspection of his plane, and after posing for photographers, climbed into his seat and was ready to start.

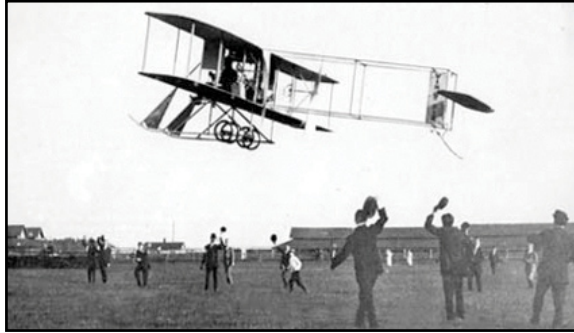
Then trouble began anew with the throng, which would not move back. Rodgers' mechanics ran the machine up and down the field, but the crowd pursued it. These maneuvers lasted for another half hour, until Rodgers, tired and disgusted started

his motor. The whirring of the blades had an immediate effect. The crowd fell back, and Rodgers, picking up speed, left the ground after a run of 300 feet. He circled the field once, and setting his course to the west, flew rapidly toward Brooklyn. He sailed majestically over the housetops of Brooklyn and lower Manhattan and then he headed for the Erie railroad tracks in Jersey City, where a special train carrying his mechanics and a few friends started after him.

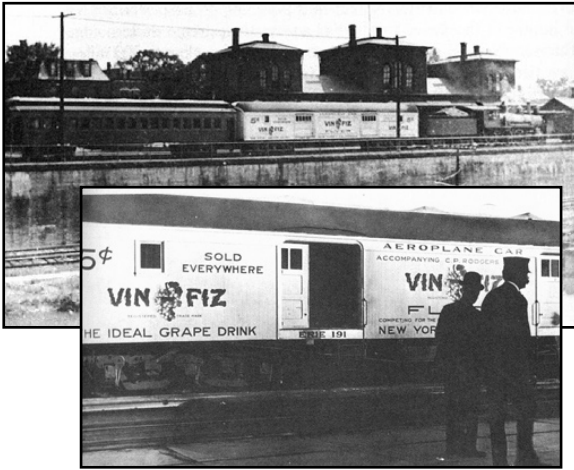
Just before leaving he had told newspaper reporters that he expected to reach Middletown, N.Y., his first stop, at 6:30. As a matter of fact, he bettered that time by 12 minutes.

Rodgers passed over Paterson at 5:10, flying at an altitude of about 2,000 feet, and five minutes later was seen over Ridgewood. Rodgers planned to follow the tracks of the Erie railroad all the way to Chicago, and along part of the route, for a distance of twenty-five miles from Jersey City, the railroad ties were whitewashed at intervals to show him the way.

Rodgers landed at Middletown at 6:18, after having been in the air for one hour and 53 minutes, during which time he had covered eighty miles. He might have made better time had he not mistaken the Erie and Jersey Line at Greycourt, for the Erie, and followed them for some distance. When he discovered that he was off his course, he turned his plane to the left and followed the tracks of the Ontario & Western from Crystal Run to Middletown, which he recognized its church steeples. He



*The Vin Fiz Flyer finally takes off on September 17, 1911.*



*The train carrying Vin Fiz Flyer mechanics and parts*

entered the city from the north and circled around it several times at a high altitude, so that everyone had a good view of his plane in flight.

Ten thousand persons had gathered in an open field on the outskirts of the city, and they gave the aviator a tumultuous welcome. In spite of his detour, Rodgers beat his special train into the city by two minutes.

Rodgers was up early on the following morning, intent upon making the longest one-day flight on record, but he met with his first accident, when at a height of twenty feet, one of his wings struck a tree, which threw him out of his course, and he crashed into another tree beyond. The branches partially broke his fall but the plane was completely wrecked. The next three days were spent in making extensive repairs, and he was able to resume his flight on September 21st.



*A photographic post card showing Rodgers and his mechanics rummaging through the wreckage of his Wright Model EX after having crashed in Middletown, N.Y., address side franked with 1¢ Franklin stamp tied by “Middletown, N.Y./Sep 18, 1911” wavy line machine cancel—the only recorded card postmarked on the day of the Middletown crash.*

With a favorable wind he left Middletown and after having made ninety-six miles, was forced to descend at Hancock, because of engine trouble. On the following day, storms forced him to remain on the ground, but he had better luck on the 22nd, reaching Elmira, after having covered 172 miles during the day. On the 23rd he was again forced to land because of engine trouble, at Canisteo, fifty miles beyond Elmira. He guided his machine toward what he took to be a field, but it turned out to be a swamp, and the landing gear of his plane was badly damaged.

He was able to continue his flight on the 24th, but again met with an accident at Red House, near Salamanca, after a ninety-nine-mile flight. He alighted near Red House to repair a spark-plug which bothered him, and after tuning up, he took his seat for a fresh start. The uneven surface of the ground and a strong wind which blew across the field, caused him to lose control of the machine temporarily, so that he crashed into a barbed wire fence. Both propeller blades were shattered and one wing was torn to ribbons, but Rodgers escaped without a scratch.

*Photographic post card illustrating the wrecked "Vin Fiz", noted by the mechanic, "Part of wrecked machine" and "C.L. Wiggin" with arrow drawn pointing out himself and other mechanics examining the wreckage. The 1¢ Franklin is tied to the card by "Salamanca, N.Y./Sep 25, 1911" waving flag machine cancel. The card is addressed by Wiggin to L.A. Wiggin in Atlanta, with his brief message "Salamanca, N.Y. Sept 24th, C.L.W..".*



*This card bears the only Type 1 "1911 Aerial Rodgers Post 1911" circular handstamp used by itself from this transcontinental flight.*

Repairs and a storm prevented further flying for the next three days, but on the 28th he reached Kent, Ohio, with a flight of twenty-four miles. Another storm on the 29th kept the machine on the ground, but on the 30th he flew ninety-five miles to Rivarre, Ind. On October 1st, he battled with three violent rainstorms, which he managed to outride, and he arrived at Huntington, Ind., after a flight which took nearly three hours. The actual distance covered was only thirty-six miles.

Rodgers came to grief on October 2nd, while making a test flight preparatory to continuing his trip. As he rose from the ground at the end of a short field, he realized that he would not be able to clear some telephone wires ahead of him. Accordingly, he dove under them, but struck a sharp rise in the

ground just beyond. Again he escaped without injury, but he was forced to spend two days in repairing his plane. On the 5th, he was again on his way, reaching Hammond, Ind., which brought him 123 miles nearer to Chicago.

Rodgers had hoped to reach Chicago the next day, but weather conditions forced him to postpone the attempt, and it was not until the 8th that he completed the journey, which brought him 1,199 miles from his starting point in New York. His actual flying time for this distance was 21 hours and 53 minutes.

He was able to reach Springfield on October 9th, with stops at Joliet, Streator, Peoria, and Middletown. As he flew over Springfield, he circled the prison for the benefit of the prisoners who were assembled

in the yard.



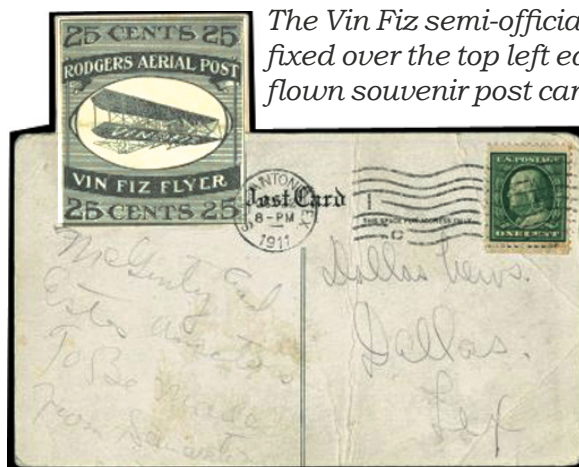
Another example of the Type 1A circular handstamp (see page 2), this one used in conjunction

with straight line “RODGERS AERIAL ROUTE” handstamp in matching ink on the reverse of a lithographic picture post card of Rodgers at one of his wreck scenes, with a 1¢ Franklin tied by “Springfield, Ill./Oct 9, 1911” machine cancel. Per the Shreves auction lot description, “...actually an important day in the history of the ‘Vin Fiz’ stamps created by Rodgers’ wife, Mabel, who on that day reportedly received a telegram from the Postmaster General Hitchcock appointing her an official postmistress — giving her stamps potentially more of an ‘official’ status.”

He reached Marshall, Mo., on October 10th, after a flight of 214 miles. On this flight he broke the world’s record for a cross-country aeroplane flight, by 133 miles. The previous record of 1,265 miles had been made by Harry Atwood in a flight from St. Louis to New York. Rodgers’s total mileage at this time was 1,398 miles.

A flight of eighty-four miles brought him to Kansas City on the following day, the half-way mark in his flight to the coast. A heavy fog prevented a flight until October 14th when he reached Vanita, Okla., 230 miles beyond Kansas City, leaving 1,300 miles still to be covered. Bad weather again held him back on the 15th, and on the 16th he was forced to land at McAlester Okla., owing to engine trouble, after having covered 125 miles. A flight of 191 miles on the following day brought him to Fort Worth, but he added thirty miles to this by continuing on to Dallas, where he gave an exhibition at the Texas State Fair.

On the 19th he reported an exciting race with a large eagle, which followed below the plane for twenty-five miles and then rose directly at the plane, but when within a few feet of him, the eagle apparently decided that the plane was more than he could handle, and departed. At Waco the timely discovery of a damaged rudder wire delayed him, but possibly saved his life. He reached Austin, Tex., on the 20th, and after being delayed for a day by bad weather, he reached San Antonio on the 22nd, 1,789 miles from New York.



*The Vin Fiz semi-official airmail stamp, Sc. CL2, affixed over the top left edge of the address side of a flown souvenir post card. (The stamp was originally folded over on to the back side of the post card.) It is tied a "San Antonio, Tex./ Oct 22, 1911/8 PM" wavy line machine cancel, which also ties the 1¢ Franklin. It is addressed to the Dallas News. The message on the card (reported to have been written by Rodgers' wife Mabel) reads "McGin-*

*ley and Estes Aviators To Be Mailed From San Antonio." The card was placed on board on a previous stop in Texas. On arrival in San Antonio, it was forwarded by ground transportation to Dallas. This is one of only eight recorded flown covers bearing the "Vin Fiz" stamp.*

By this time there was very little left of the original plane, and Rodgers decided to spend the 23rd in overhauling and rewiring. He reached Spofford on the 24th, and Sanderson on the 26th, bringing him 300 miles nearer his goal. High winds delayed him on the 27th, but he made an early start on the following day, hoping to reach El Paso. However, at the very

start he crashed into a fence, and was delayed for three hours, but managed to fly to Sierra Blanca, a distance of 222 miles, before darkness set in. More engine trouble delayed him the following day and he just managed to reach El Paso after a flight of ninety miles. He reached Willcox, Ariz., on the 31st, making stops at Deming and Lordsburg, where his arrival broke up a circus performance.

On November 1st he stopped at Tucson long enough to exchange greetings with Robert Fowler, the other transcontinental aviator who was making the flight from west to east, and continued his journey to Maricopa, having covered 177 miles during the day. He had difficulty in landing at Phoenix, due to the large crowds who insisted upon swarming over the landing field where he was expected. Eventually he was forced to land outside the city, where he took on gasoline and oil, and continued on to Stoval. Stoval was simply a tank station, but it proved to be the best landing field he had encountered since leaving New York, for it was the first time that he had been able to land without having to avoid hitting someone.

Motor trouble brought him down at Imperial Junction,

Calif., on November 3rd, and on the 4th he covered 100 miles to Banning, which is but sixty-seven miles from Los Angeles.



The Vin Fiz stamp affixed to the top left portion of the address side of a picture post card depicting the "Vin Fiz" Flyer, along with an inset photo of Rodgers, used in conjunction with a 1¢ Franklin that is tied by an "Imperial Junction, Cal./Nov

4, 1911/A.M." c.d.s. The message on the card reads "Calbraith [Cal] carried this in his Wright model Ex racing aeroplane from Tucson to Phoenix. Keep it as a souvenir." The card began its journey in Tucson, Ariz., on November 1, 1911, before finally arriving in Imperial Junction, Cal. on November 3. From there it was forwarded by ground transportation to Pennsylvania. In addition to the eight recorded covers, there are only four off cover "Vin Fiz" stamps known.



An instant after his landing, and almost before his machine came to rest, the enormous crowd broke through the police guards and swept over the field, almost mobbing the aviator.

When the police were finally able to clear a space about the aviator, the chairman of the Reception Committee ran out into the middle of the field with a telephone in his hand, which had been connected with the central station, and Rodgers telephoned the news of his safe arrival to Los Angeles.



*Left, Rodgers calls the Associated Press wire service moments after landing in Pasadena. Right, with an American flag draped around him, the Rose Queen presents him with chrysanthemums.*

In the meantime, the crowd was cheering and yelling wildly. Hundreds of caps were thrown into the air and trampled into the dirt where they fell. During the confusion, a huge bunch of chrysanthemums was presented to Rodgers and the Queen of the Carnival of Roses welcomed him in the name of the city. This little ceremony over, Rodgers was wrapped in a large American flag and escorted to an automobile, in which were Mayor Thum and other city officials. The car then proceeded to make the circuit of the field, while special police tried in vain to keep the crowds off of the running board. Rodgers tried to stand up once or twice, but he was so completely wound up in flags that he could not get out of his seat.

Rodgers went directly from the field to the room which had been reserved for him at the Hotel Maryland. There he asked for a glass of milk and discussed his flight with newspapermen and officials who swarmed into his room.

“I don’t feel much tired,” he said, “the trip was not a hard one, all things considered. Indeed, I believe that in a short time we will see it done in thirty days, and perhaps less. I knew I’d get through, if only to laugh at the fellows who said I was crazy.”

Instead of retiring, Rodgers waited in his room until the



Vin Fiz stamp affixed to a 1¢ McKinley postal card, additionally franked with a 1¢ Franklin that is tied by a “Pasadena, Cal./Nov 8, 1911/8-PM” machine cancel with a Panama-Pacific slogan, addressed to Cologne, Germany. On the reverse is a message from C.F. Threle to his brother-in-law in Germany that reads “Willcox, Arz. Nov. 1, 1911. Dear Otto, As the first Transcontinental Rogers Aeroplane (Atlantic to Pacific Coast) passes through here to-day, I’ll use these means of conveyance by air route to send you a few lines which please attach to your stamp collection. With kind regards to all, Your a. b. i. l [affectionate brother-in-law] C.F. Threle.” This card was carried on the Vin Fiz beginning in Willcox on November 1, 1911 and making numerous intermediate stops before arriving in Pasadena on November 5. This is the only stamp known on a flown card that reached the intended west coast destination of Pasadena, the only one used on a United States postal card, and the only one used on mail to a foreign destination.

automobile bearing his wife and mother reached the hotel. He heard them coming and came downstairs just as his wife left the desk and turned towards the elevator. There was a glad cry and his wife, who had followed him across the country, flew straight into his arms.

“I’m so glad,” was all she said. The difficulties and hazards which Rodgers faced in making a flight of this kind in 1911 were at least as great as those connected with a transatlantic flight of a later day, and Rodger’s achievement justifiably ranks with the greatest flights of modern times.

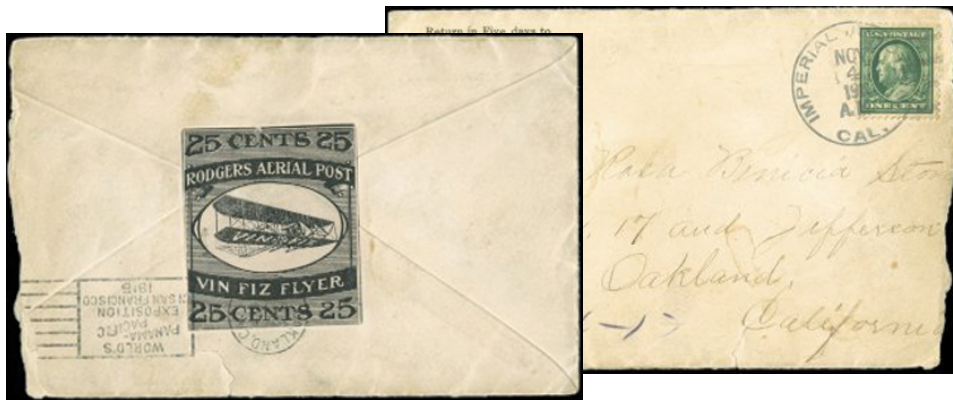
Rodgers flew the “Vin Fiz” to Los Angeles, a short distance away, thus technically completing the flight, and was again nearly mobbed when he landed. His reward was the Gold Medal of the Aero Club of America. He had earned it.

A few weeks after his triumphal entry into Los Angeles, Rodgers crashed and was killed on the very spot where thousands had acclaimed him a short time before.



*On April 3, 1912, Rodgers and his Wright Model B—not the plane he flew coast-to-coast—tangled with a flock of seagulls just 100 yards from where he had completed his flight across America. He lost control, crashed into the surf, and was killed.*

Of special interest to air mail collectors is the mail carried by Rodgers on this flight. The time limit on the Hearst Prize expired on October 10th, when Rodgers was at Marshall, Mo. In spite of this, however, he determined to complete the flight, and in order to partially defray expenses, he inaugurated a private air mail service and issued a private air mail stamp, universally known today as the “Vin Fiz” stamp. Mrs. Rodgers assisted in the role of Postmistress, thus relieving her husband who was generally occupied in repairing his motor or in rebuilding his plane. The Vin Fiz stamp was sold for 25¢, and was affixed to envelopes or cards, which also bore the ordinary postage stamps. The mail

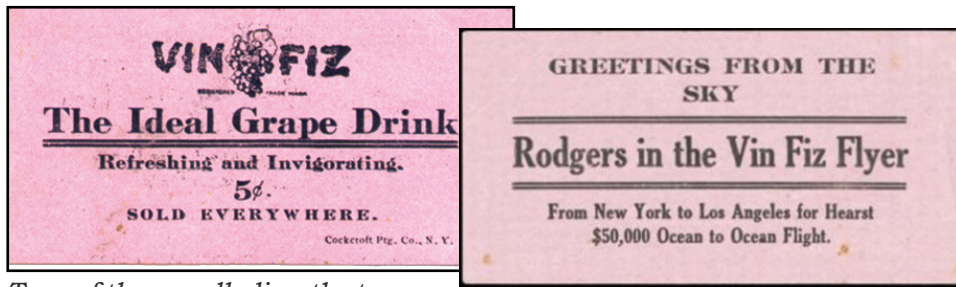


*The Vin Fiz stamp tied by “Oakland Cal. Nov. 6 8:30AM Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco 1915” receiving machine cancel on the reverse of a cover with a 1¢ (Sc. 374) tied by “Imperial Junction Cal. Nov. 4, 1911 A.M.” circular datestamp—the only known example of the Vin Fiz stamp on an envelope. The original letter reads “Deming, New Mexico, October 30, 1911, My Dear Benicia: I have hurried in from the lightning place of the Vin Fiz to mail this letter to you. I am somewhat nervous, but the airship is not at all so. It came in at 12:30 and after circling the city, settled on the show ground.... Lovingly, Aunt Sallie”.*

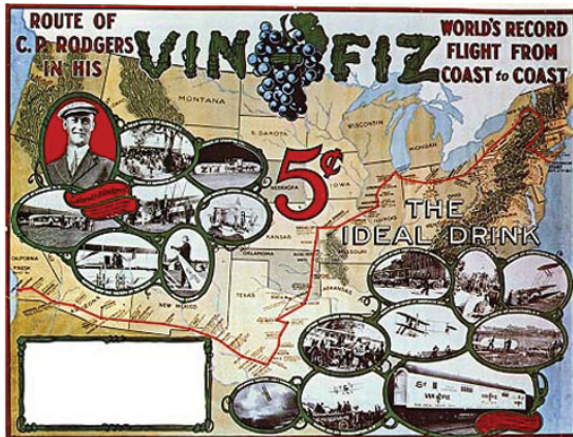
was then placed aboard the plane and carried to the next stop, where it was delivered to the nearest post office.

This mail was entirely unofficial, of course, and except for the fact that it was carried more than 30 years ago, and under such unique circumstances, specimens would have no aerophilatelic value today. It is impossible to say how many covers and cards Rodgers carried, for apparently very little was known of this air mail service, even at the time. But three Vin Fiz cards are known today, one of which is in a European collection, and few collectors in this country have ever seen a copy. [As noted above, there are eight stamps known on cover and four off cover examples. Further, the stamp was subsequently recognized as a semi-official issue and listed in Scott as CL2. Scott notes four off cover, eight on card and one on cover, and in the 2014 *Specialized* values the stamp at \$55,000 unused, \$75,000 on card, and \$115,000 on cover. JFD.]

A pamphlet, written and circulated by Rodgers at each stopping point, gives a summary of this air mail service.



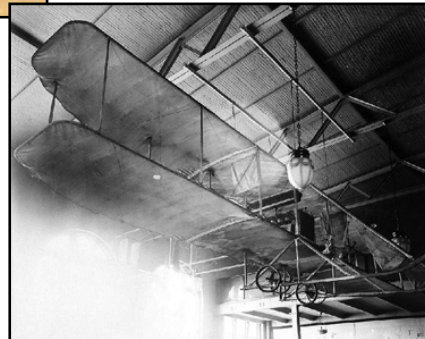
Two of the small slips that were dropped from the Vin Fiz Flyer during its promotional flights.



A poster picturing Cal Rodgers and the Vin Fiz Flyer at various stops as it made its way across the country.



At the website cited on page 1, you can trace the Vin Fiz flight (blue line) or the flight plan that would be used today.



*Above, an illustration of the Vin Fiz Flyer that made the remarkable journey across the United States. Right, although no one is quite sure how it got there, a copy of the Vin Fiz made from parts that had been discarded along its transcontinental flight showed up at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburg, Pa., around 1917. This was given to the Smithsonian in 1934 and—shown below—fully restored in 1960. It is now on display at the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution.*



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