

WILL ROGERS and WILEY POST

By Tricia Brown

America was in the throes of the Great Depression when another bout of tragic news streaked across the nation: two great men had been killed in an airplane accident in northern Alaska. Famed humorist Will Rogers and aviator Wiley Post, the first to fly solo around the world, were killed instantly on August 15, 1935, fifteen miles south of Barrow.

The news reports seemed too incredible to believe. Post was known as a skilled pilot. He has begun his career as a parachute jumper, barnstormer, and aerial racer, had broken world records, twice flying around the world in a single plane. He'd also made headlines for his inventiveness in experiments with autopilot and a high-altitude pressure suit that enabled pilots to reach the stratosphere without a pressurized cabin. His fans were familiar with his wide grin and signature eye patch, having lost an eye in an oil field accident during the 1920s.

Rogers' death came one year after he was voted the most popular actor in Hollywood. A slow-talking Oklahoman, he had gained regional popularity, then achieved national fame, starring in Wild West shows and later in vaudeville. His grass roots wit made his stand-up comedy routine seem more like a conversation, as Rogers chatted while casually performing a few lariat tricks. He was beloved nationwide.

Post and Rogers had been close friends. Both Oklahomans, the men met in 1925, when Post assisted Rogers by flying the humorist to a rodeo engagement. Their friendship had grown in the following ten years, and in the summer of 1935, Post invited Rogers to accompany him as he surveyed possible flight paths between Seattle and Russia. Rogers brought along his typewriter and planned to file trip reports for his syndicated newspaper column as they traveled. They were low on fuel when they stopped fifteen miles short of

Barrow, but it was a planned stop. They seemed to reconsider the idea of camping there when they were so close to Barrow, and decided to reboard and continue the flight. The decision cost them their lives.

Post was born on November 22, 1898, in Van Zandt County, Texas, and moved to Oklahoma as a boy. After losing his eye in an industrial accident, Post used the settlement money to buy his first airplane. Working as a personal pilot for a wealthy Oklahoman oilman named F. C. Hall, Post often flew his employer's Lockheed Vega named for Hall's daughter, Winnie Mae. When Hall sold the plane back to the manufacturer and purchased a newer model, a 5C, Hall once again named it the *Winnie Mae*. At some point, the second *Winnie Mae* came into Post's possession, whether through purchase or gifting.

The plane, a special Lockheed model 5C Vega, became as famous as the pilot himself. And he twice circled the globe with the *Winnie Mae*, once in 1931 with Australian navigator Harold Gatty and, two years later, doing it again, but solo. He was awarded Bendix Trophy for his history-making flying and later wrote about his incredible trip with Gatty as they flew around the world in 8 days and 16 hours. On Post's second attempt, in July 1933, Post circled the globe in 7 days, 19 hours. Then on March 15, 1935, mere months before his death, Post engaged in a long-distance, high-altitude experimental flight, flying from Burbank, California, to Cleveland, Ohio, in 7 hours, 19 minutes. Post caught a ride on the jet stream, attaining ground speeds of 340 mph.

Post was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1932, and posthumously named to the National Aviation Hall of Fame in 1969. He was 36 years old at his death.

Rogers and his wife, Betty, had married in 1908 and had four children, one of whom died of diphtheria at age 2. By 1918, Rogers was in demand in Hollywood, and starred in many feature films and short features, and would even serve as mayor of Beverly Hills.

When the two men landed in Fairbanks on their ill-fated flight, they received a celebrity welcome, and the last photos of them alive were taken there as they prepared to fly Post's red Lockheed Orion Sirius Explorer further north. Within hours, they had gone down in a lagoon after the floatplane went into a fatal spin during take-off. The hybrid airship was equipped with exceptionally large floats, which some later speculated were hazardous. Another guess had to do with whether Post had forgotten to check which fuel tanks he was using. Apparently the floatplane had risen sharply, banked right, then slammed downward in two feet of water.

An Inupiat man named Clare Okpeaha witnessed the plane wreck and ran the fifteen miles to Barrow. He reported the fatal crash to a U.S. Army soldier, Sgt. Stanley Moran, who immediately radioed the War Department. Okpeaha then recovered the fifteen miles, leading Moran and the recovery party to the lagoon.

In a strange coincidence, the day of the crash also marked another important occasion in Alaska aviation history: the merger of Northern Air Transport and Wien Airways. Company founder and pilot Noel Wien was intent on being the first to obtain crash photos and fly them to Seattle for the International News Service, racing against the representatives of Hearst International, which was rumored to have a faster plane and a head start. Wien pilot Chet Brown flew the photos from Barrow to Fairbanks, handing them off to Noel Wien himself. A vastly experienced pilot, Wien had filled the tanks of his Bellanca to the brim and carried extra gas cans. His plane was not outfitted with floats, so he kept to a land route on his southbound flight. Wien made gains when his competition encountered poor weather, while he avoided the storm on his flight path. At Whitehorse, Wien landed as dark fell, believing he'd have to wait until daybreak before he could take off from the 2,000-foot runway. However, the Whitehorse station manager assisted by parking his car at the far end of the runway and turning on his headlights. Wien took off successfully and managed to reach Seattle first with the Wiley Post-Will Rogers plane wreck photos, arriving at Boeing Field at 12:30 p.m. on August 18.

Once national readers saw the photos in print, the reality of the grim news set in. The country mourned with Oklahoma when its sons were returned for burial. Post was

interred at Memorial Park in Edmond, Oklahoma; Rogers was buried in California's Forest Lawn Cemetery and later reinterred at the Will Rogers Memorial Museum in Claremore, Oklahoma.

A year after the accident, Post's widow, Mae Laine, sold the *Winnie Mae* to the Smithsonian Institution. The National Air and Space Museum collection also includes Post's pressure suit, which was the prototype for suits used in future stratospheric flights and even space voyage.

Today, the airport at Barrow, some 725 air miles north of Anchorage, is named for the famous pair: the Wiley Post-Will Rogers Memorial Airport. Nearby a monument honoring the men was dedicated in 1982. Two other monuments were erected near the crash site; both have been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1979 the United States Postal Service released a U.S. airmail stamp honoring Wiley Post.

LINKS:

Wiley Post biography:

<http://www.acepilots.com/post.html>

Will Rogers homepage:

<http://www.willrogers.org/>

Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum, on the *Winnie Mae*:

http://www.nasm.si.edu/research/aero/aircraft/lockheed_5c.htm

About *Winnie Mae* Navigator Harold Gatty:

http://www.dmairfield.com/people/gatty_ha/index.htm

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about Will Rogers and Wiley Post, and other early adventurers in Alaska. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.

Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **WILEY POST** or **WILL ROGERS** or **ALASKA AVIATION HISTORY**.

MORE READING:

Bryan, Sterling B. and Sterling N. Frances. *Will Rogers & Wiley Post: Death at Barrow*. New York: M. Evans and Co., 1993.

Bryan, Sterling B. and Sterling N. Frances. *Forgotten Eagle: Wiley Post, America's Heroic Aviation Pioneer*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001.

Collins, Reba Neighbors. *Will Rogers & Wiley Post in Alaska*. Claremore, OK: Will Rogers Heritage Press, 1984.

Gunston, Bill. *Aviation: The First 100 Years*. Hauppauge, N.Y.: Barron's, 2002.

Mohler, Stanley R. and Bobby H. Johnson. *Wiley Post, his Winnie Mae, and the World's First Pressure Suit*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971.

Post, Wiley and Harold Gatty. *Around the World in Eight Days: The Flight of the Winnie Mae*. New York: Rand McNally & Co., 1931.

For Juvenile Readers:

Hayman, LeRoy. *Aces, Heroes, and Daredevils of the Air*. New York: J. Messner, 1981.

Taylor, Richard L. *The First Solo Flight around the World: The Story of Wiley Post and His Airplane, the Winnie Mae*. New York: F. Watts: 1993.

VIDEO / FILM:

On Wings of Courage. VHS (52 min.) Santa Monica, Calif.: Ferde Grofe Films, 1960-1987. Part 1: The Remarkable Howard Hughes; Part 2: Reaching for the Stars—Unique archival coverage of great planes including the Vega, Electra, Hudson, Flying Forts, F-80s, F-104s, U2 and SR-71 “Blackbird.” Features Carl Lindbergh, Amelia Earhardt, Wiley Post, Kingsford-Smith, Howard Hughes, and Glenn O'Dekerk.

Will Rogers and Wiley Post in Fairbanks, August 1935. This 68-second black-and-white film clip is silent. It depicts the famous men with a group of unidentified people in Fairbanks.

Alaska Film Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks:
<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdmgl1/image/3154.mov>

Will Rogers-Wiley Post Memorial, 1964-1968. Title frame reads: "Aerial View of the Will Rogers-Wiley Post Memorial Marker." The 34-second film clip is silent, in color, and shot at Barrow.

Alaska Film Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks:
<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdmg11/image/7137.mov>

AUDIO:

Will Rogers' U.S.A. James Whitmore as Will Rogers. Two sound cassettes (100 minutes). Auburn, Calif.: Audio Partners. New York: Manufactured by CBS Records, 1990-1991.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL:

Alaska Transportation Museum Photograph Collection, John W. Klingbeil, 1905-1970. Alaska State Library. About 725 black-and-white photographs, including images of pilots, airplanes, airplane accidents, airports, airlines and railroads. The collection contains an image of Irene Ryan, first woman to solo in Alaska. Approximately 125 images are mounted on museum boards, as they were received, and are not numbered. Many images are not Alaskan. John W. Klingbeil photographed some of the images.

Lyman Brewster Photograph Collection, 1932-1934. Alaska State Library. This photograph collection of 241 black-and-white photographs includes an index of people, which also cross-references the Brewster letters, MS 53. The photographs show life around Nome and various Arctic communities, Eskimos, mining, whaling airplanes and transportation, including views of Will Rogers and Wiley Post and their fatal plane crash.

Del Sheriff Photograph Collection, 1921-1928. Alaska State Library. The collection contains approximately 1,600 black-and-white photographs including 350 small (13 x 34 cm.) panoramas. Scenics from Fairbanks to Petersburg during the 1920s make up the bulk of the collection. Other subjects include the Douglas fire, airplanes, including the Detroit Arctic Expedition (Fokker), Wiley Post, the Fairbanks fire, Hotel Nordale (Fairbanks), Alaska Agricultural College, Mount Eckles. Many individuals from Juneau and other Alaska communities are identified. Locations include: Anchorage, Cordova, Douglas, Eklutna, Fairbanks, Haines, Ketchikan, LaTouche, Petersburg, Seward, Sitka, Skagway, Valdez, Wrangell.

J.C.P. Skottowe Photograph Collection, 1935-1936. Alaska State Library. Among the 90 black-and-white photoprints in this collection are images of Wiley Post and Will Rogers.

Lennie Robert Thompson Photograph Collection, 1938-1939. Alaska State Library. This small collection of 35 original black-and-white photographs primarily show of Dutch Harbor and the Unalaska region. Contained in the collection are photographs of whale butchering, St. Lawrence Islanders in Savoonga and Gambell, King Island and King Islanders, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter, Shosco, in Juneau and a few photo postcards including the Post-Rogers airplane crash. Lennie Thompson was head of a Coast Guard

Station, place unknown. He came to Alaska in 1938-1939 on the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter, *Shosco*, possibly to investigate the crash of the Wiley Post-Will Rogers airplane in 1935. Thompson died in 1976 at age 70.

"Uncle Matt's" Photograph Album, 1940s. Alaska State Library. The album includes 133 black-and-white photographs of Fairbanks and Nenana areas, Eskimos, Will Rogers-Wiley Post plane wreck, Mary Hansen's Siberian dog team, bears, and Army camps for road building. Also includes bridges in Alaska, Northwest Territory, and the Yukon. The album may have been assembled by an "Uncle Matt," who is mentioned in poems inside the front and back covers of the album. No other provenance is available.