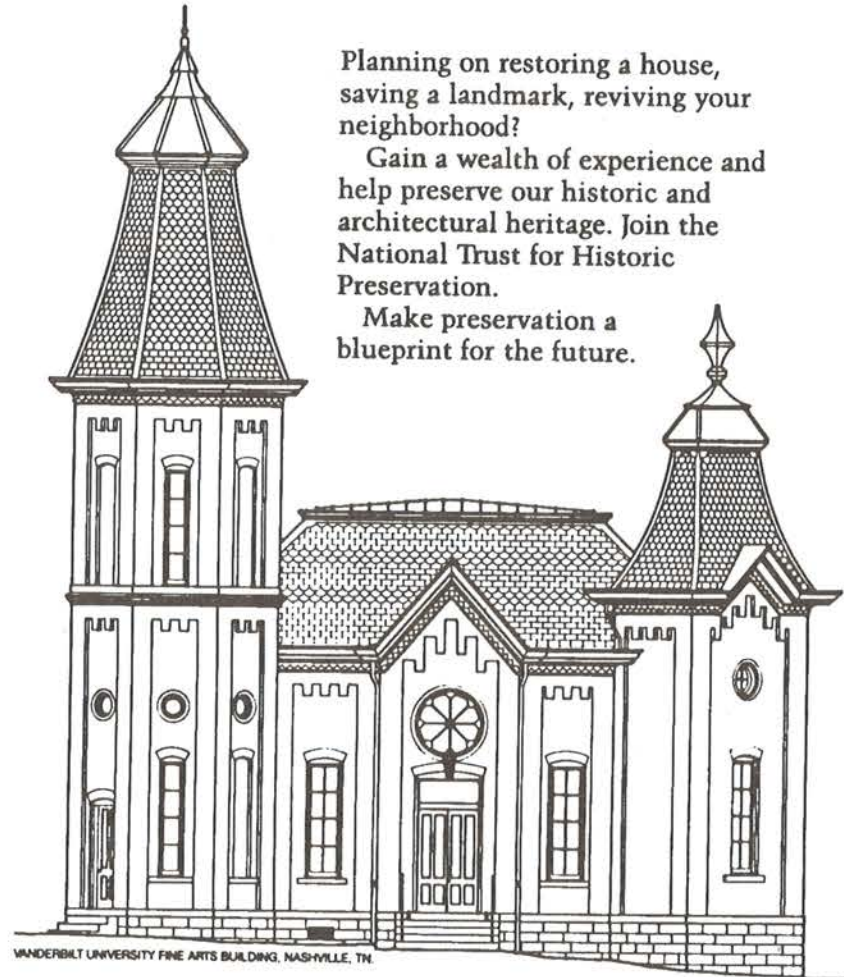


September Program at the Catlin House

The Lackawanna Historical Society will open its fall program season on September 13, 1989, at 7:30 PM, with a slide lecture entitled *The History of the Gravity Railroads*, featuring guest speaker John V. Buberniak. Mr. Buberniak serves as President and National Director of the Delaware & Hudson Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society and is affiliated with the Carbondale Historical Society.

The lecture, supported in part by a grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, is presented free of charge to the public. Following the program, light refreshments will be served in the Catlin House dining room.

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First Flight to Scranton: Calbraith Perry Rodgers and the Vin Fiz

On Saturday, September 23, 1911, the *Scranton Republican* newspaper ran an article with the subtitle:

Aviator Who Lost His Way and Thereby Paid Visit to Scranton, With Subsequent Great Entertainment to Populace, Makes Record Flight West, Covering Two hundred Miles In All.

The aviator was Calbraith (Cal) Perry Rodgers and the event was part of the achievement of the first transcontinental airplane flight in the United States, as the following story recounts.

In 1903, the Wright Brothers achieved the first successful airplane flight, and by 1911, flight in a heavier-than-air craft was the most exciting adventure one might undertake in the U. S. Everyone was interested in the new flight phenomenon, from those who wanted to rush right out and do it to those who continued to say that it would never become popular, it was too dangerous, it defied the laws of nature, and so on. But the subject of airplane flight was on the lips of most Americans.

Among those who flew the early planes, all types of competitions were conceived, and just as with modern-day space flight, there was that special American pioneering spirit which rose to the challenge to "go where no man has gone before," to fly longer and to travel further than others had done previously.

In 1911, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst offered a prize of \$50,000 to the first individual who could pilot an airplane across the United States continent within a thirty day period. A \$50,000 prize was a huge amount of money at that time, and many adventuresome pilots accepted the challenge. Unfortunately, no one was able to achieve the transcontinental flight in thirty days, and few pilots even completed the course. However, Cal Rodgers did complete the flight from New York to California, coming in first after 84 days, 75 stops, and 12 crashes.

As is true today, most private individuals simply did not own their own airplanes in 1911, and most pilots who accepted Hearst's challenge had to find sponsors willing to finance the purchase of their planes and to absorb the expenses of their cross-country flights. Cal Rodgers' sponsor was a soft drink company which produced a soda pop called "Vin Fiz," and so the Wright model EX plane which he piloted was also named the *Vin Fiz*.

The Wright EX had a wing spread of thirty-five feet and a four feet wide aluminum body. Its ninety horsepower engine drove two propellers. The *Vin Fiz* was a biplane, a machine with the appearance of having double wings, one above the other.

Actually, a biplane had only two wings, one on each side, but each wing had a double surface, separated by about four feet and held together by metal struts. At the time that the biplane was popular, each wing surface was called a "plane," and Rodgers' machine's planes were described by a *Scranton Republican* reporter in the following way:

"[T]he planes were covered with a cloth that looked as if it might be a composition of white rubber and silk. It was of a tough fibre. . ."

Calbraith Perry Rodgers was a grandson of Commodore Calbraith Perry, the U. S. Naval officer who was responsible for opening Japan's seaports to the West, and a descendent of Commodore Hazard Perry who defeated the British on Lake Erie.

An athletic man, six feet, two inches tall and weighing 195 pounds, Rodgers was a graduate of Columbia University and the University of Virginia, having been a football star at both schools. He was described in an article in the *Scranton Republican* in the following manner:

"Rodgers, himself, is a man of rather timid disposition, in strange contrast to his daring as a sky man. He is silent and reticent, talking but little. The aviator is slightly deaf as the result of an attack of scarlet fever when he was six years old."

He was a member of the New York Yacht Club, and was the first motorcyclist to travel between Buffalo and New York in one day. He became a race car driver (one of the first) but gave up auto racing to take up "the flying game as more interesting and exciting."

In 1911, Rodgers was thirty-two years old. He held the world's record at the time for learning to fly in the shortest time:

"On June 6, last [1910], he made his first trip into the air as a passenger with his cousin Lieutenant Rodgers in a model B Wright machine. Before the two had been in the air for two minutes, Rodgers wanted to take the levers and run the machine himself. Within an hour and a half, he had mastered the rudiments of flying and was guiding the machine alone above the aviation field. The shortest previous other records for learning to sail an aeroplane is four hours."

Obviously, Rodgers' record learning time was accomplished prior to the date when achievement of one's pilot's license required formal training and a set number of flying hours.

Cal's *Vin Fiz* took off from Sheepshead Bay, New York, on September 17, 1911. Flight was a new form of transportation. Since early airplanes flew rather close to the ground and flights were usually short, navigational maps were scarce or nonexistent at that time. Therefore, Rogers used a type of aeronautical navigation which was commonly known in the early flight era as the "iron compass" method: the pilot flew by sight, following the railroad tracks which crisscrossed the country.

Week-end Museum Tours!

Saturdays & Sundays: 11 AM to 4 PM

(August 5 through September 2, 1989)

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No appointment necessary for week-end tours.

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Museum & research library also open week-days

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The Catlin House

Historical Society Launches Fund-Drive

The Lackawanna Historical Society launched its 1989 Fund-Drive on May 15, 1989, with the purpose of raising funds for the Society's "Handicapped Access and Library Renovation Project" at the Catlin House Museum.

The vast paper artifact collections at the Lackawanna Historical Society, collected for over a century, have long ago exceeded the available space in the Catlin House Library and Archives rooms, with many interesting and historically important papers and books remaining in storage rooms on the third floor and not easily accessible to researchers. The Catlin House Library itself has also presented a barrier to certain individuals with physical handicap since both front and rear doors are reached by stairs from street level.

For 1989, the Society has received approval from Scranton's Office of Economic and Community Development and Scranton City Council for a small matching grant which, if given final approval by the Federal agency of Housing and Urban Development, will begin the Handicapped Access and Library Renovation Project. However, construction projects, particularly those carried out in historic structures, are expensive, and the Society is asking for the support of the public to help fund this important project. The Society's Fund-Raising Committee has launched the 1989 Fund-Drive, which will run throughout the year, with a goal of raising \$26,000 to be earmarked for this project.

We are asking for your support because we know that you value the important contribution the Society and the Catlin House make to the cultural development of this area. Your generous support will help to assure the Society's obligations toward the matching grant and the completion of our proposed handicapped access and library renovation construction project in the near future. Donations and pledges may be sent to The Lackawanna Historical Society, The Catlin House, 232 Monroe Avenue, Scranton, PA 18510; phone 344-3841. The Catlin House is open Tuesday through Friday, from 10 AM to 5 PM.

Calbraith Perry Rodgers' life ended tragically a few months after his transcontinental flight. The *Vin Fiz* crashed before a crowd of spectators at a Long Beach, California, air show, killing the famous pilot.

Unfortunately, Cal Rodgers and the *Vin Fiz* were soon forgotten. However, as time went on scholars began to reassess the importance of the transcontinental flight of 1911 in aviation history. In the opinion of E. P. Stein, "So extraordinary was Cal Rodgers' flight that no further attempts at cross-country air passage occurred until the technical advancements of World War I were incorporated into aircraft design." The second transcontinental flight occurred in 1919.

Cal Rodgers' widow Mabel remarried after his death and as Mabel Rodgers Wiggin she spent the next sixty years of her life striving unsuccessfully to promote the importance of Cal's achievement. She even approached the U. S. Post Office with a proposal of printing a Rodgers commemorative stamp, but the idea was not accepted. Living to the age of eighty-nine, her last years were spent "in a Miami, Florida, nursing home, indigent and unremembered."

The *Vin Fiz* itself fared little better than its owner. For two years after Cal's death, his widow traveled exhibiting the aircraft. However, in 1914, Cal's mother, Maria C. Rodgers Sweitzer, sued Mabel, won possession of the plane and never spoke with her former daughter-in-law again. She asked Orville Wright if the plane could be restored, he told her that it was possible, and she shipped it to Wright's Dayton, Ohio, airplane factory. However, Mrs. Sweitzer did not have the necessary funds to pay for the restoration, so the plane was abandoned in the Wright's hangar and was "canibalized for other Wright machines."

In 1916, the Wright Company was sold and the new owners destroyed a large quantity of old airplanes including the *Vin Fiz*. The only parts saved were the autographed pieces of wing fabric which were removed by Charley Taylor, a friend of the Rodgers family.

In 1925, the city of Pittsburgh built its first official airport which was named Rodgers Field in honor of the historic aviator, and in 1926 on the fifteenth anniversary of Rodgers' flight, the Pittsburgh Aero Club donated a commemorative bronze tablet to the Carnegie Museum. Pittsburgh's Rodgers Field was abandoned in 1933 when larger planes required the construction of longer runways.

In 1927, the Carnegie Institute renewed interest in the *Vin Fiz* and built a replica using parts salvaged from other Wright EX biplanes.

No authentic engine could be found, so a replica was constructed of wood, and the plane was exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933.

After the Chicago Exposition, the Smithsonian Institution acquired the plane and it was restored following Wright Company construction methods with parts similar to the originals. The problem of the missing engine was solved by installing one from a Wright B model. The rebuilt *Vin Fiz* can be viewed at the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the flight of the *Vin Fiz*, the Federal Aeronautics Administration designated the path of the historic transcontinental flight as "The Rodgers Skyway."

In 1964, fifty-three years after the flight, Calbraith Perry Rodgers was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame, finally receiving official recognition of his place in aviation history.

Images: Jack Hiddlestone post-card collection
Research: Jack Hiddlestone & Dorothy Silva
Text: Dorothy Silva © 1989

The Lackawanna Historical Society:

Volunteer Awards 1988-89 - were presented to all volunteers who have served the Society during the past year. The Society's Annual Open House and Volunteers Reception was held on June 11, 1989, at which time the following awards were presented:

SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUES WERE PRESENTED TO THE FOLLOWING PERSONS:

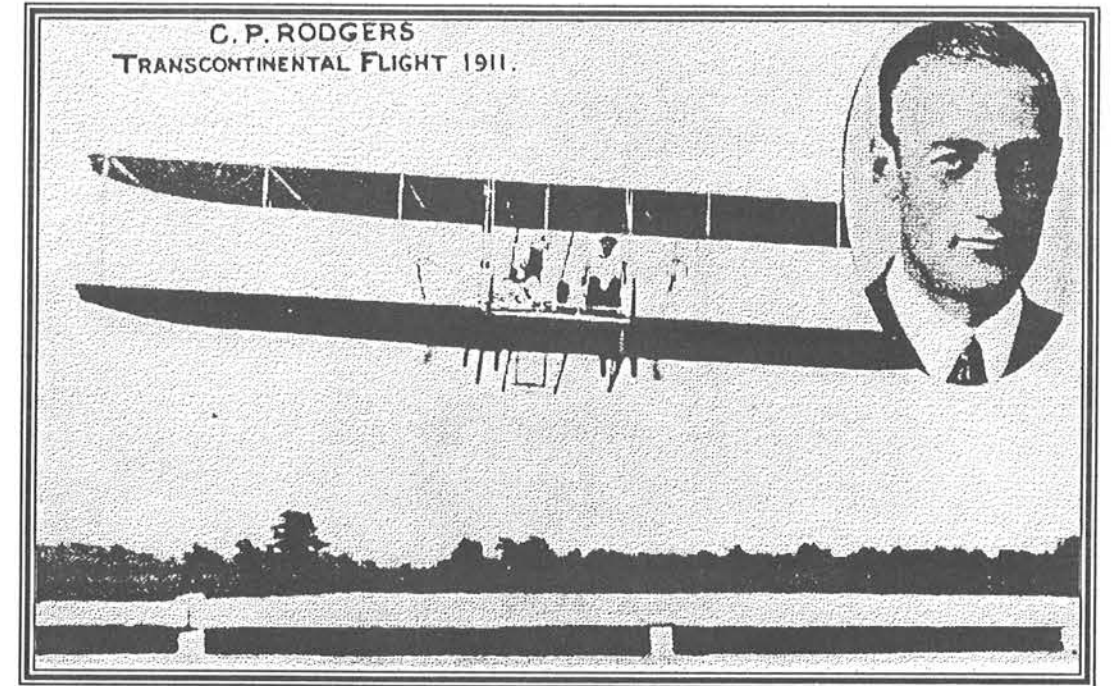
Albert F. Fries - in appreciation of his many years of service at the occasion of his retirement as Treasurer of The Lackawanna Historical Society;

Thomas C. Horlacher, AIA - in appreciation for his expertise as Chairman of the Society's Building Committee and for coordination of the historic restoration of the exterior of the Catlin House in 1988

William C. Stone - in appreciation for his many hours spent cataloging and sorting the newspaper collection in the Catlin House archives in working on the Society's newspaper microfilming project

CERTIFICATES OF APPRECIATION WERE PRESENTED TO THE FOLLOWING PERSONS:

Mrs. Robert W. Bell, Mrs. F. A. Birmingham, Norman P. Brauer, George A. Broadbent, Maryellen Callemmo, Joseph F. Cimini, Esq., Mrs. Edgar A. Collins, James Daffaro, Miss Jane Dakin, Robert Drone, Miss Florence L. Gillespie, Agnes M. Healey, John G. Hiddlestone, Nancy Hiddlestone, Mrs. William H. Horger, George Houck, Esq., Donald Hoyle, Mrs. Albert G. Isaacs, Kathleen Keating, Mrs. Henry (Midge) Kieffer, Theresa Kudga, Ellen McGinley, Mary McNulty, Mrs. John F. Mears, Jr., Edward S. Miller, William Nasser, Sr., Mrs. Mary O'Brien, Mrs. Russell Ohoro, Bonnie Perugini, Mrs. Joan Potish, Paul H. Price, Esq., Gail E. Rees, Kenneth A. Rhodes, Esq., Connie Richards, Mrs. L. L. Scott, Connie Sheils, Miss Marie S. Smith, Alexandre Silva, Shirley Tromantana, Michael J. Washo, Jr., Sandra Manzo Whitlock, Mrs. Henry R. Van Deusen, Jr., and W. Bruce Van Deusen.



The residents of northeastern Pennsylvania were fortunate to witness a part of Cal Rodgers' historic flight, especially since Rodgers had no intention of making a landing or of even flying over Scranton on his trip from New York to California. Like "Wrong Way Doughan" who flew by mistake from New York to Ireland, Cal Rodgers became disoriented soon after he left Hancock, New York, just five days into the trip, flying fifty-three miles out of his way.

Although he had intended to follow the main Erie Railroad line from Hancock to Binghamton, instead near Lanesboro where the Erie Railroad and the Delaware & Hudson Railroad tracks converged, Rodgers mistakenly followed the tracks of a branch line of the Delaware & Hudson which turned southward into Pennsylvania. Suspecting that the landscape just didn't look quite right, "seeing the coal mines and knowing that the country surrounding Binghamton was of an agricultural nature," he decided to land and ask for directions.

His first landing in Lackawanna County was in a field near the Carbondale Cemetery. However, he had difficulty finding anyone who could give him directions to Binghamton, because, "The first two persons Cal encountered were frozen speechless by the apparition that had dropped from the skies;" as recounted in the book *The Flight of the Vin Fiz* by E. P. Stein.

The third person whom he encountered in Carbondale pointed southwest when asked the way to Binghamton, and Rodgers took off in that direction; however, after covering ten miles, he doubted that the information he had been given was correct and decided to land a second time to obtain more accurate directions.

The appearance of the *Vin Fiz* on Scranton's horizon was reported in the *Scranton Republican* newspaper on September 23, 1911:

It was just 12:30 o'clock when the staccato exhaust of the aviator's engine was first heard in Green Ridge. The sharp crackling sound like the spitting of a machine gun, at once attracted attention and school children and others on the street easily discerned the man-bird sailing over the city . . .

Rodgers' plane appeared at a height of about fifteen hundred feet bearing due southwest at a speed of approximately seventy miles per hour. Searching for a suitable landing spot, he circled the city twice before landing in "the Delaware & Hudson field west of Boulevard Avenue."

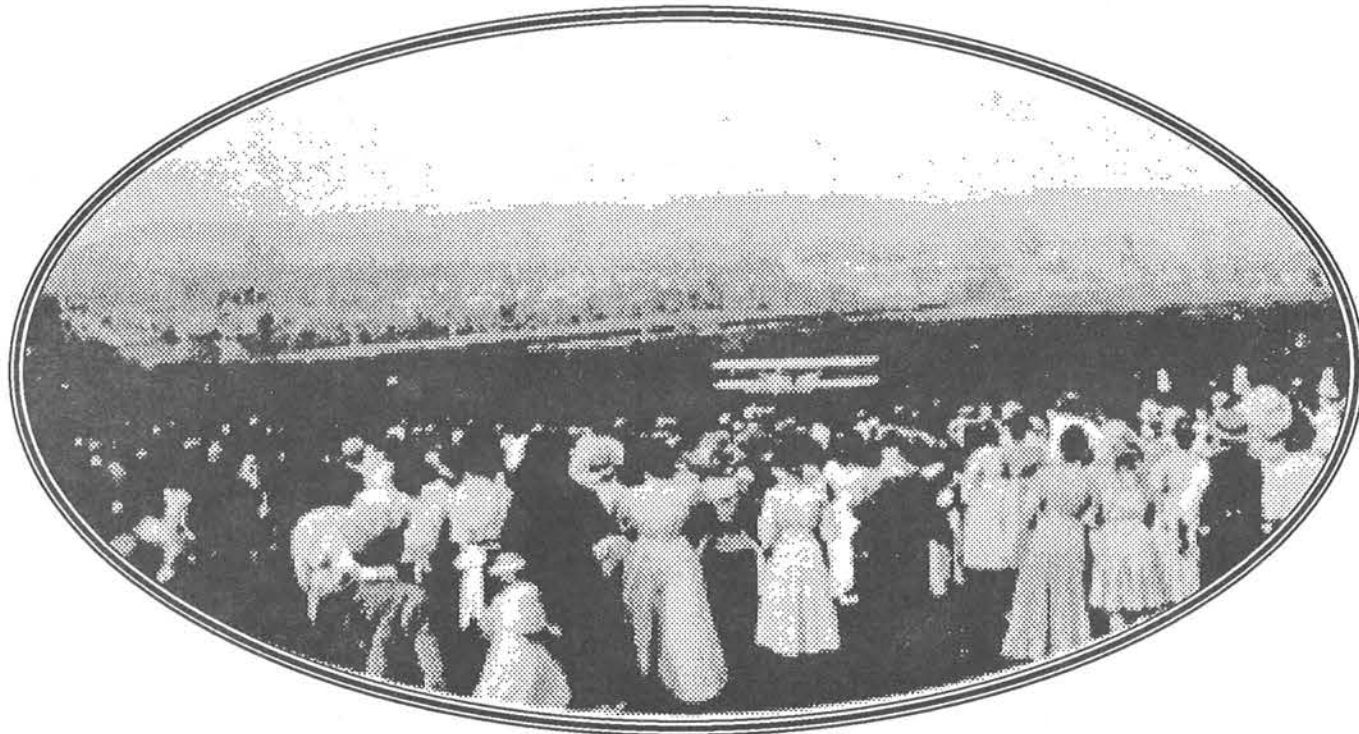
When a reporter from the *Scranton Republican* arrived on the scene, a huge crowd had assembled. However, descriptions of the crowd's reactions differed widely, depending on who was doing the telling. E. P. Stein recounted that within minutes of landing, the plane "was swarmed over by frenzied burghers," and that the entry for September 22, 1911 in Rodgers' log book stated,

"They went crazy. There wasn't a name on my plane when I started in the morning, but in ten minutes there wasn't an inch free from pencil marks. They didn't mind climbing on the machine to get a good spot. They worked the levers, sat on the seat, warped the planes, and fingered the engine."

Stein also described Rodgers' encounter with an anonymous Scranton woman who attempted to steal a nut from the plane as a keepsake. When Rogers asked her what she was attempting to do, she explained that she did not think it would have mattered since "there were so many, surely one would not make any difference." Rodgers purportedly told her, "for me it might make all the difference between this world and the next."

According to Stein, Rodgers also caught a man "pounding at the engine with a chisel to split off a valve. . . Without police protection, it required several responsible citizens in the throng to restrain their neighbors from demolishing the flying machine."

However, articles in both the *Scranton Times* and the *Scranton Republican* for that day not only did not mention either of the above incidents, but reported rather an awe-struck, orderly, and helpful crowd. The *Republican* reported,



"It was such an event that mothers gladly gave their consent for their little ones to stay out of school and there were hundreds of children at the field watching the aviator tuning up his machine and as he ascended from the ground a round of treble cheers greeted him. 'I wanted Tommy to see the airship,' said one woman as she trudged along Boulevard Avenue on her way home, 'then when he is a grown man and airships are common he can look back to the time when he saw the first one that ever flew in Scranton.'"

The *Republican* reporter further described the activities of Rodgers and the local citizens:

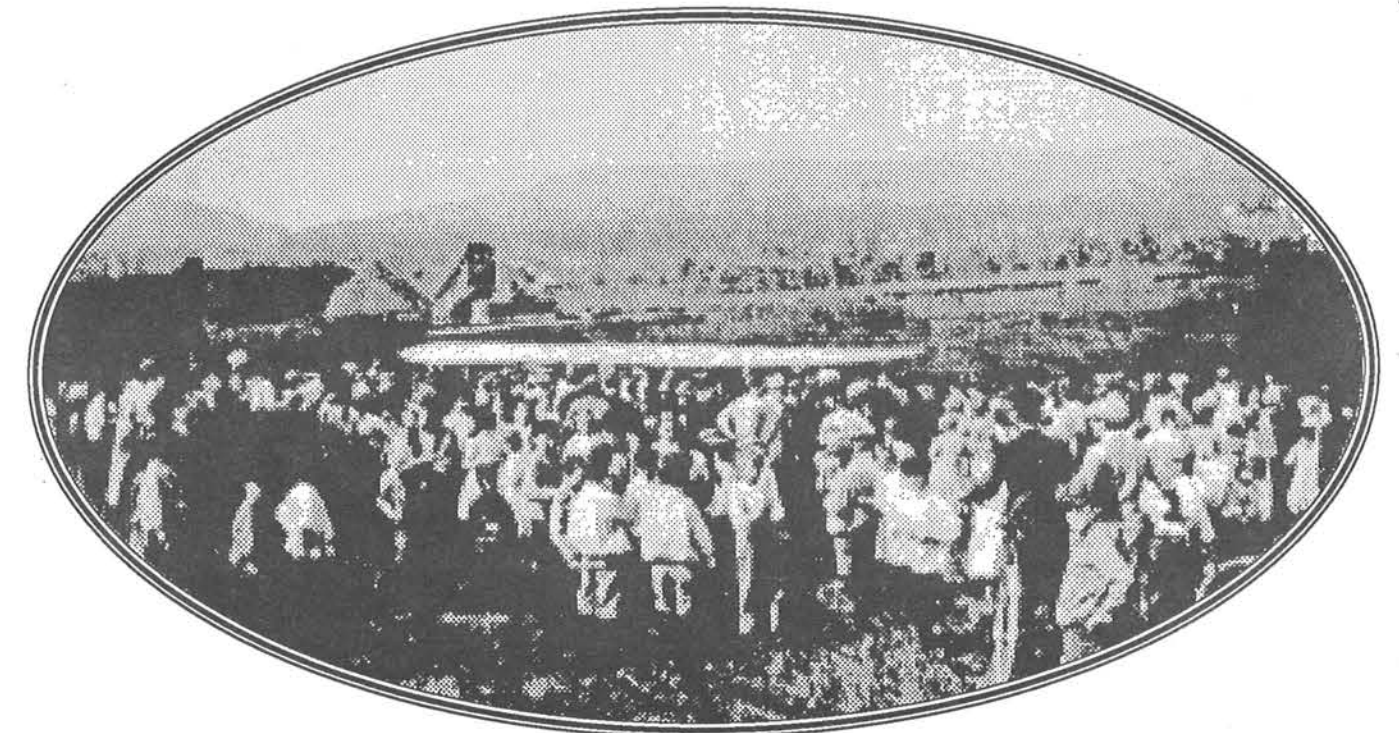
"With a cigar stuck in one corner of his mouth and a huge oil can in his hand he was carefully going over parts of his machine. He paid particular attention to his engine, and pressing into service 'Red' Meehan, the fire chief's chauffeur, and a bystander to twist the propellers, he had a dozen others hanging on the rudder to keep the machine on the ground while he oiled every bearing carefully and looked to the sparking of the engine."

A reporter from the *Scranton Times* described the involvement of one Scranton family: "Fred Morton of 1358 North Washington Avenue supplied him with gasoline and repaired his steering apparatus. . ." Stein stated that Mr. Morton's wife Mavis rushed home and back with hot coffee and sandwiches for Rodgers.

Rodgers was apparently as curious about Scranton as its citizens were of his Wright Model EX airplane. While checking out the mechanical systems of the plane, he engaged in conversations with the bystanders and inquired about the unusual "big black buildings" he had seen when circling over the city. When told that they were coal breakers, he expressed amazement at having seen "hordes of boys on the roofs of some of them." Apparently, Rodgers was unaware of the former practice of employing young boys as slate pickers in the collieries. The *Republican* reported,

"Shortly before the 1 o'clock whistle blew calling the slate-pickers at the Pine Brook Colliery back to work from their dinner hour one of the breaker boys sighted Rodgers' aeroplane sailing near the breaker. In an instant the news spread through the place and a few minutes later the roof of the colliery was black with the little fellows watching the big machine. The presence of the boys on the roof caused excitement in the neighborhood of Sand Banks and the people managed to get out in time to get a glimpse of the aeroplane sailing by. A few minutes later the machine sailed over the Manville breaker at Green Ridge and here, too, the boys greeted the aviator with cheers."

After working for about a half hour to assure that the plane was airworthy, Rodgers started the engine, climbed aboard and gave the word to the plane's "human anchors" to let go. At 1:25, he was airborne. He then followed the DL&WRR tracks north through the Notch toward Binghamton and Elmira.



Soon after Rodgers had taken off, reports and inquiries were made at the *Scranton Republican* concerning rumors which some of the local citizens had heard that the *Vin Fiz* had crashed somewhere between Scranton and Binghamton and that the pilot had been killed. A second rumor stated that the aviator had been badly injured by falling out of his plane near Hallstead. The newspaper made inquiries and reported that Rodgers was alive, well, and flying west.

After leaving Scranton, Cal remained airborne for an hour, landing again fifty miles away at Great Bend near Hallstead where the local citizens collected five hundred dollars which they presented to him as their contribution to the success of the historic flight.

After eighty-four days, Rodgers landed at Long Beach, California, having flown for eighty-two hours and four minutes, covering 4,231 miles, at an average speed of about fifty-two miles per hour. Although he completed the east coast to west coast flight, he did not qualify to receive Hearst's prize (nor did anyone else), because of the stipulation that the flight be made within thirty days.

Rodgers received national acclaim after his successful transcontinental flight, and President Taft presented him with a gold medal.