

St. Louis

Air Mail Pioneer

BY DAVID L. STRAIGHT



St Louis. Oct 5. 1911.
Dear Grand Daughter Harriet,
May you remember - this day,
of "Aerial" mail, & live to
see many improvements.
Sincerely,
Grand-ma, Sharpless.

The October 5, 1911, Aerial Route postal card mailed to "Grand Daughter Harriet." (Collection of the author)

Almost a century ago, Mrs. Sharpless sketched a Wright biplane and wrote on a postal card, "Dear Grand Daughter Harriet, May you remember this day of Aerial mail & live to see many improvements," then mailed it to Harriet Veidt, living on Michigan Avenue in the Carondelet neighborhood of St. Louis. The October 1911 flights at Fairgrounds Park that inspired Grandma Sharpless were part of the public entertainment during the annual Veiled Prophet Week. For only the second time, the United States Post Office sanctioned pilots to transport mail. The Aero Club of St. Louis had organized the Air Meet to demonstrate the commercial potential for aviation and further promote St. Louis as an aeronautic center.

The selection of St. Louis four years earlier in 1907 to host the Gordon Bennett International Balloon Race provided an important boost for local aviation enthusiasts. Balloon flights in St. Louis began as early as 1830. In July 1859, John Wise established a world's distance record of 826 miles on a flight from St. Louis to Henderson, New York. The world's first aeronautic congress, as well as balloon and dirigible flights, were among the attractions at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904. Bennett, an avid sportsman and owner of the *New York Herald*, established the balloon prize in 1906 to promote aviation as well as to provide news for his papers.

St. Louis was chosen to host the race because of its central location, far from mountains and oceans; the reputation of the Laclede Gas Works for efficient delivery of high quality, extremely light coal gas required by balloonists; and the enthusiastic support of the Aero Club of St. Louis, established in 1907 by cracker manufacturer Lewis Dozier. On October 21, 1907, nine balloons from four nations ascended from the St. Louis Aero Club grounds at Chouteau and Newstead avenues, chosen because of its access to the four-million-cubic-foot Laclede Gas retort, a chamber used to distill or store gas. The Aero Club sponsored two additional days of contests after the

Gordon Bennett Balloon Race. A speed race for airships attracted ten entrants, three of which actually raced. The world's first heavier-than-air "flying machine" race offered a prize for the longest and best continuous flight. None of the seven entrants had ever made a sustained flight, and none of the aeroplanes got off the ground that day.

Two years later, during the St. Louis Centennial Week celebration, October 3-9, 1909, the Aero Club arranged flight demonstrations and contests for balloons, airships, and aeroplanes. Fresh from winning the Coupe Internationale d'Aviation at Rheims, Glenn Curtiss was the headline attraction. He made two test flights below the mist-shrouded treetops of Forest Park at dawn on October 7, 1909. However, as 300,000 spectators lined both sides of Lindell Avenue from DeBaliviere to the Washington University steps, Curtiss' plane experienced mechanical trouble on a dozen attempts. This limited his best flight to sixty yards. The first aeroplane flight in St. Louis was anticlimatic, but a few days later, Thomas Baldwin flew under the center span of the Eads Bridge.

The Aero Club also sponsored balloon races, based upon distance traveled rather than speed. These were divided into three classes: balloons of 3,000-cubic-foot gas capacity; 40,000-cubic-foot; and the long distance 80,000-cubic-foot capacity. The 3,000-cubic-foot class, conceived by Albert Bond Lambert, heir to the Lambert Pharmaceutical fortune from the manufacture of Listerine, consisted of balloons used mostly for promotional purposes. Twenty-four local businesses entered advertising balloons, with the Halsey Automobile Company balloon winning after an eighty-mile flight to Vergennes, Illinois. The annual Forest Park balloon race continues this tradition.

Lambert, who devoted much of his money and energy to promoting aviation in St. Louis, was elected president of the Aero Club in 1910. He had organized the nation's first National Guard Aerial Detachment in 1909. The

Glen Curtiss, flying a plane of his own design, was the featured pilot for the 1909 Centennial Week. (Collection of the author)



Hugh Robinson at the controls of his Curtiss hydroplane that carried mail on the Mississippi River. (Collection of the author)





A postal card carried on the first hydroplane airmail service on October 8, 1911; the card was postmarked the previous day. (Collection of the author)

Walter Brookins' Wright biplane. He flew the mail twelve miles to Fairground Park—a new distance record for U.S. airmail. Upon landing, the mail was taken back downtown by car for sorting and delivery.

The greater volume of mail on the following three days required a shorter route. Those, such as Mrs. Sharpless, desiring airmail transport deposited their mail in a special collection box at the corner of Vandeventer Avenue and Natural Bridge Road. After receiving the Aeroplane Station cancellation, this mail was flown only between airmail stations located at each end of Fairgrounds Park and then taken to the main Post Office for sorting and delivery. An experimental hydroplane airmail flight had been scheduled for October 7 and the mail prepared for the flight was postmarked that day. Inclement weather postponed the flight until Sunday morning, October 8. Hugh Robinson took off from the Mississippi River at the foot of North Market Street and flew under and over the Eads, McKinley, and Merchants bridges before carrying the mail to the Illinois side of the river. However, as no arrangements had been made for the East St. Louis Post Office to receive airmail, he returned the mail to St. Louis for sorting and delivery.

Brookins and Robinson's demonstration flights were important steps in the establishment of airmail. Seven years later, in 1918, the Post Office established a regular schedule of airmail service between New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Experimental airmail service between St. Louis and Chicago began in 1920 from what is now the soccer pitch on the south edge of Forest Park. That same year, Albert Lambert leased, and later purchased, a 160-acre cornfield along Natural Bridge Road in Bridgeton to build an airport. He sold Lambert Field to the St. Louis Municipal Airport Authority in 1928 at his cost. In 1925, the Post Office awarded the St. Louis–Chicago airmail contract to Robertson Aircraft Corporation of St. Louis; it hired Charles Lindbergh as flight instructor and chief pilot. Could Grandma Sharpless have imagined that airmail would progress from stunt flying at aviation meets, through an expensive extra service for transcontinental or transoceanic mail, to the standard transportation mode for both domestic and international mail in less than a century?

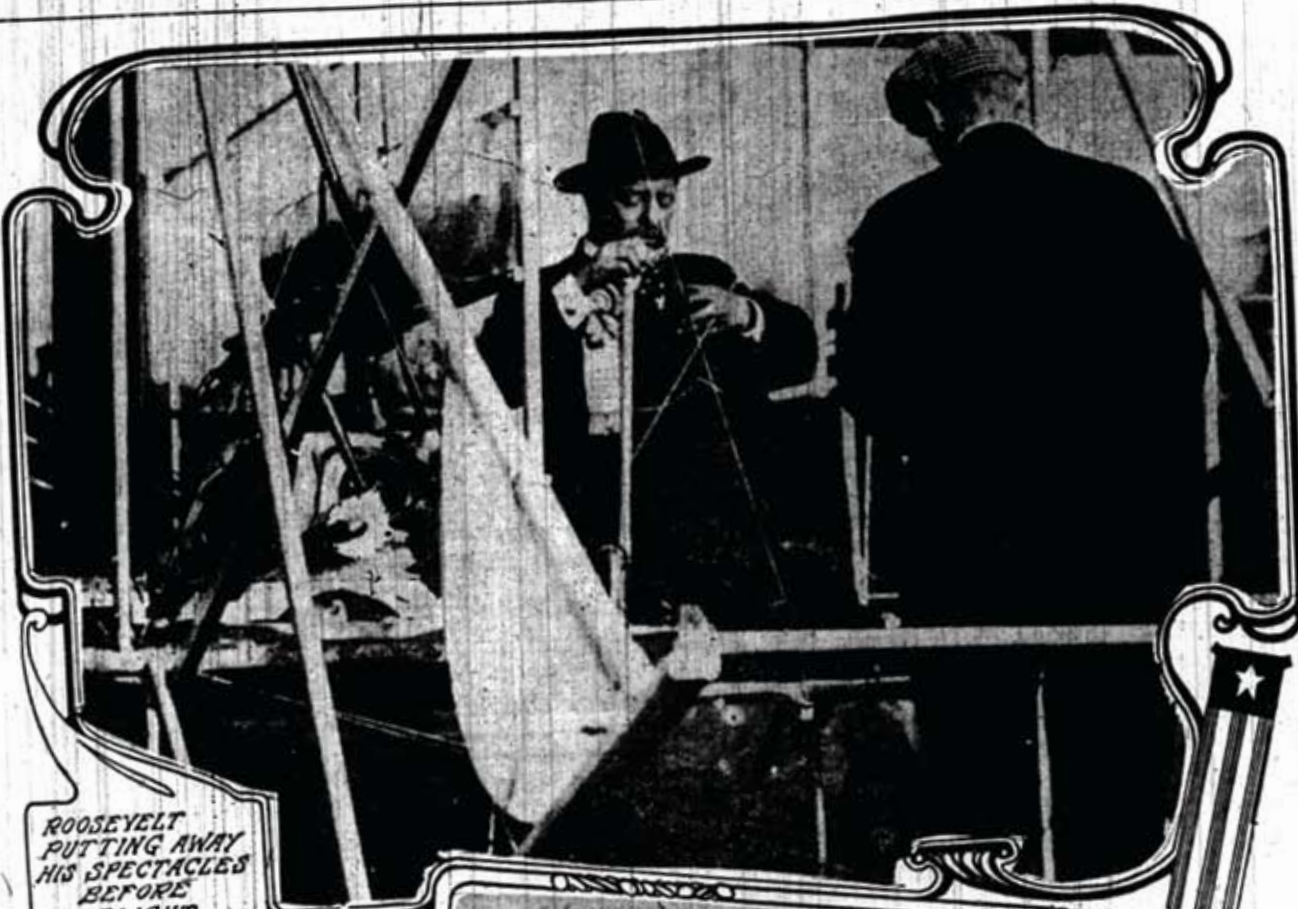
acquisition of a former racetrack, renamed Kinloch Field, east of the modern Lambert Airport, provided a site for the October 8-16, 1910, International Air Meet and a permanent home for the Club. Two events that year at Kinloch Field foreshadowed the future of aviation: aerial bombardment of a mock battleship demonstrated its military potential, and former President Theodore Roosevelt's ride in an aeroplane in Saint Louis in 1910 hinted at commercial passenger service. Also in October 1910, the Club began publishing *Aero*, America's first weekly aeronautical magazine. When Lambert earned the Pilot License #61 from the Aero Club of America in 1911, he became the fifth American to hold pilot licenses for both balloons and airplanes.

For its 1911 Air Meet, the Aero Club hired Walter Brookins, a daring stunt pilot, who held numerous aviation records. His teacher, their sister Katherine, had introduced Brookins to the Wright brothers. Having learned to fly with Orville, he had run the Wright flying school in Montgomery, Alabama. For this Air Meet, events were moved to Fairgrounds Park to make them more accessible to city residents. Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock had authorized demonstration airmail flights. Those wishing to have letters and post cards carried by aeroplane had to pay 2¢ postage and inscribe their mail, "Aerial Route." By late in the afternoon of October 4, 1911, the St. Louis Post Office had applied a special cancellation, "AEROPLANE STATION No. 1 / ST. LOUIS, MO., AVIATION FIELD," to 5,000 pieces of mail. The two fifty-pound sacks were rushed to Kinloch Field and strapped to the wings of

SOURCES

- Horgan, James J. *City of Flight*. St. Louis: Patrice Press, 1984.
Proetz, Arthur. *I remember you, St. Louis*. Saint Louis: Zimmerman-Petty Company, 1963.
American Air Mail Catalogue, 5th edition, volume 1 (American Air Mail Society, 1974).

Col. Roosevelt Takes First Air Flight in Presence of 30,000



ROOSEVELT PUTTING AWAY HIS SPECTACLES BEFORE FLIGHT

MORSE'S PETITION MUST BE REGULAR

Taft Declines to Consider Application Unless It Goes Through Department.

FEW DAYS IN NEW YORK

President Will Confer With Party Leaders Before Return to Washington.

SPECIAL DISPATCH TO THE GLOBE-DEMOCRAT.
BEVERLY, MASS., October 11.—President Taft declined to-day to consider any



ROOSEVELT LOOKING AT BROOKINS DOING SPIRAL. "THIS IS THE FINEST THING I HAVE EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE," SAID THE FORMER PRESIDENT

ROOSEVELT SPEECH SOUNDS

People of Missouri, New York and of the Republican Party

ORTHODOX VIEW WITH CHEER

Spirited Campaign followed by Vigor—Colonel Roosevelt "More Rapidly"

The largest crowd in the city greeted Col. Roosevelt last night as the principal speaker at the principal campaign in St. Louis.

Fresh from a daring and daring an aeroplane at the Kinloch aerodrome, which a conservative heights of enthusiasm with concise and telling, production in thunderous cheer, entered the building.

Col. Roosevelt in a democracy of his state, New York, he said. He described to the doctrines could not subscribe to a son of Tennessee and Thos.

He denounced the Democratic party in Missouri interests and special privilege.

"I hope, Hadley," he said, "that I may be able to do something for you here in this great state because I think that the conditions of the state."

"And as it is in New York, the people, the party in the people, is the Republican party that represents the party that arrogates."

"Republican Party No Other"

In reference to the Roosevelt said: "As to me, it seems to me that the much clearer than some have us believe. I full there was a time when theponents had acted with

FOREST FIRES SUBSIDE | STRIKE CRISIS REACHED | GERMAN SKY MEN ARRIVE

The year before the first air mail left St. Louis, former President Theodore Roosevelt visited Kinloch Field, and was coaxed into taking a ride on a "flying machine." He was the first President (sitting or former) to fly—with much ballyhoo from the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)