Fledging Wings: Aviation Comes to the Southwest, 1910–1930

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Before 1910 most people had never seen an airplane, and those that had were mostly incredulous. The fragile, eggshell–like flying machines that passed for airplanes looked ridiculous at best. At worst they appeared absolutely lethal. The January 1910 Los Angeles airshow changed perceptions dramatically. The southern California experience electrified southwesterners and led to airshows in Phoenix, Santa Fe, Tucson, Douglas, Bisbee, Albuquerque, and other regional communities during 1910 and 1911. Prominent aviators from throughout the United States and Europe demonstrated firsthand that the newspaper reports had not been a hoax and that people could fly. The airshows transformed an abstract idea into a tangible reality and set the stage for significant developments in aviation throughout the Southwest.¹

The airshows not only showed that flight was possible; because of them local community and government leaders glimpsed something of the tremendous economic potential of aviation. The sky was a new frontier. From airshows and barnstorming the aviation business developed into airmail, passenger, and airport infrastructure. The air transport system opened the Southwest to access from the outside and contributed to the post–World War II boom in the region. Aviation was good for the Southwest because it helped cut distances; at the same time the Southwest was good for aviation because the vast expanses of open land, year–round flying weather, and enthusiastic supporters aided in airplane development.²

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Los Angeles was the first city in the Southwest with “aviation fever.” For the sponsoring Los Angeles Merchants’ and Manufacturers’ Association, the 1910 airshow was another way to promote southern California. A member of the organization’s aviation committee exclaimed, “In every way I am sure this will be one of the biggest advertisements Los Angeles has ever had.” The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution declaring, “The holding of such an exhibition and contest in Midwinter would bring Los Angeles and its vicinity into world wide prominence.”

The Aviation Week Executive Committee sweated over raising enough money, providing an adequate airfield for the competitors and the spectators, and publicizing the event throughout the Southwest. By 3 January 1910, about a week before the show was to open, the committee was optimistic that everything was going well. The secretary declared that at least “110,000 visitors from outside points” would come from northern California and other states such as Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. Committee members added two days later that “every one interested in the growth and prosperity of Los Angeles should subscribe liberally towards the aviation meet,” and urged residents to “Boost for Los Angeles and make this a stupendous success!”

The aviation show began on 10 January 1910. For the next ten days the Los Angeles Times, one of the sponsors, carried glowing reports. Glenn H. Curtiss, an aeronautical engineer and American aviation pioneer, had “the first flight in the West.” The Times correspondent eloquently (if perhaps over–) stated: “It marked an epoch in the affairs of the West for a flight had never been made on the Coast, and native sons were skeptical of its accomplishment until they actually set eyes on the performance.”

The first days of the airshow were only demonstrations. The Aviation Committee decided: “The novelty of seeing flying will be sufficient to draw the crowds and . . . it would be folly to put on races when the exhibitions are what is wanted to educate the crowd to the possibilities of the machines.”

From the beginning, Louis Paulhan, a Frenchman who later became the first pilot to fly across the English Channel, was the darling of the show. According to the Times, “The hero of the day was Paulhan, the jaunty, nonchalant little French aviator! The others flew with a skill almost unbelievable, but little Paulhan had frolics in midair.” The article then compared the French aviator to “a carrier pigeon,” “a restless chicken hawk,” and “a facetious falcon” that “mocked slow dirigibles in their majestic flight.”
Paulhan also won the hearts of the Los Angeles business community because he praised the area. For altitude and endurance flights, he said, "I am forced to give the palm of aerial superiority to this beautiful section of your country although I would not make such an assertion in my native land."8

After the spectators viewed the first flights, the races began and there were prizes for almost everything. On 13 January Curtiss won a prize for speed, while Paulhan won for carrying a passenger. Another pilot got points for taking off and landing within twenty-five feet. The committee and audience praised each flyer. For example, the newspaper described Curtiss as "always businesslike and rarely spectacular, but the observers seem to enjoy unlimited confidence in his performance and express great delight when the American makes a good showing."9

By any standard the airshow was a success. Flyers from all over the United States and Europe displayed their aircraft and performed aerobatics. "A week of aviation in Los Angeles has left half a million people in and about the city 'up in the air'," reported the Times, embellishing the show as "one of the greatest public events in the history of the West."10

The airshow focused national attention on Los Angeles and set the stage for a successful aviation promotional program to attract tourism, business, and industry. Many of those attending the show saw the Southwest's climate and terrain as ideal for aviation, agreeing with the Times "that now the East will have to take second place, because of the energy of citizens of Los Angeles." Community leaders in southern California boasted: "Los Angeles is destined to be the great aviation center of the United States for two reasons—its climate and its all-year-round adaptability for flights."11

By the end of January 1910, the Los Angeles airshow had sparked duplication throughout the Southwest. The business, civic, and political leaders of other southwestern cities were not content to let Los Angeles have all the glory. If airshows would bring the type of attention that Los Angeles had received, other leaders wanted to host one, too. During the show, community leaders campaigned to convince the leading aviators to come to their cities.

Paulhan was the biggest prize because spectators felt his flights were the most daring. Both San Diego and San Francisco bid for him. On 12 January, official San Diego Day at the show, that city's mayor presented Paulhan with a "silver loving cup" for "the best performance" of the day. At the same time San Diego officials then "extended the invitation to the daring aviator to bring his party to this city which shares with Los Angeles the honor of breaking 'all of the climate records in the world'."12
However, when Paulhan elected to accept a lucrative guaranteed fee from San Francisco’s business community, San Diego looked for another aviator. Trend setters induced Charles K. Hamilton to come, and the city hurriedly laid out a landing strip. Grant Conrad, San Diego’s mayor, published an open letter explaining that “a number of our public spirited citizens” had made arrangements for Hamilton, “the daring aviator who made many successful as well as spectacular flights at Los Angeles,” to come. The mayor then requested the business community to give their employees a half-day holiday on Monday, 24 January, concluding, “Let us all boost aviation.” Hamilton’s flights were successful, and the aviator declared after the show, “Rheims was beautiful, Los Angeles was exquisite, San Diego is the ideal.”

The pilots also enthralled Phoenix and Tucson leaders, who invited the flyers to visit their skies. Phoenix was especially aggressive. Nat Reiss, a local promoter, returned from Los Angeles gushing that after a lifetime of experience in the amusement field he was sure the “flying machine [was] the biggest, the best, the cleanest and most interesting [form of entertainment] he had ever seen.” According to Reiss, Phoenix could host a terrific airshow for only $12,000. However, “the scheme [was] . . . all up in the air until some local committee [took] hold of it” and tried to raise that much money. Reiss stressed: “The flying idea . . . has got the people going, and now is the time to strike.” He added that in “a year or two” flight might be commonplace, “but just now, the country is aviation mad,” concluding, “the advertisement [an airshow] would give Phoenix to be the scene of the third aviation meeting in America [that] would be incomparable and attract the attention of millions who never yet have heard of the place.”

After putting all of the pieces together, the local business community proudly announced, “Phoenix will ‘aviate’.” Curtiss, Hamilton, and several other flyers would stop in Phoenix during their return to the East. In a spasm of anticipation, a few local residents formed the Phoenix Aero Club and developed the details for the show. K.L. Bernard, “professional instigator of high class sport and aviation impresario,” explained that after the Associated Press announced the Phoenix air meet, “hundreds of thousands” who had never heard of Phoenix would “look it up now and see what manner of burg this is.”

Phoenix not only sang its own praise but also stressed it was better than any other location. In response to newspaper accounts in southern Arizona that an aviation show would be held in Tucson or Douglas, the Arizona Republican carefully explained that despite other reports Curtiss was under contract with Bernard and would fly only in Phoenix. The article continued, ironically, “This is said without acrimony against Tucson, Douglas, or any other town, but Phoenix acted first, got the plum, and will try to make the meeting the finest kind of a success.”
In the end Curtiss did not come to Arizona at all because he was in New York fighting a court case served against him by the Wright brothers over patent infringement. But Hamilton and other aviators arrived on schedule. Hamilton flew on the opening day of the show, 11 February 1910. The next day he set a record for the fastest flight of one mile and then raced a Buick. The car was only able to go seven laps before it broke down, but Hamilton continued to fly, dipping and then rising “as suddenly as a chicken hawk changed its course in a farmyard.”

The *Arizona Republican* declared, “Veritably, astonishing and thrilling was the spectacles witnessed at the Territorial fair grounds.” The car was “faster than an express train;” the plane which was “slightly ahead of the car” followed “the track with precision and soaring as an eagle.” Yet, the editorial continued, while such a show in France “would set the people wild with enthusiasm, the great multitude of Arizonans” were the typical “blasé American crowd” with the attitude of “why shouldn’t it fly?”

Even so, local officials believed the airshow had been a huge success. “It is likely that no single event ever occurred that will give Phoenix as much advertising of a sort that can be secured by purchase as the late aviation meet.” The show not only put Phoenix “on the map” because of the publicity, but the “aviators now know that there is no place in the world where an airship can light so safely... Phoenix weather is not treacherous.”

Tucson had an airshow just a week after Phoenix for the same promotional reasons. According to the *Arizona Daily Star*, the star of the show was Hamilton who “ascended in one of the prettiest flights ever seen in the west on 19 February.” But the airshow was not nearly as successful as the Phoenix one. Hamilton agreed to go to Tucson for $2,000, much less than the $20,000 that Salt Lake City and Denver paid to lure Paulhan to those cities. Yet only $1,616 was collected at the gate, and the committee in charge had to absorb the remaining costs. Though unsuccessful in yielding short-term profits, city promoters still believed aviation held promise for the development of the area as a center of aviation. They even tried to persuade firms to build aircraft plants in the area, “thus giving the city prestige as an aeroplane manufacturing center and furnishing it with a prosperous industry.”

Airshow fervor declined after 1910 in most other southwestern cities. While Los Angeles and San Diego continued to sponsor airshows between 1910 and 1915, these two cities held different attitudes about the value of the air meets. When the Los Angeles Aviation Committee planned another airshow for December 1910, the *Times* explained, “There has been little of the hubbub and commotion of last year when everything was new.” A fundamental shift had begun, from one of airplanes and flying as spectacle, to sport pursued by wealthy young men.
Correspondent Harry C. Carr captured this shift in his *Times* story about the second L.A airshow, "Last year, the aviators were content merely to fly, and we all thought that almost unbelievably wonderful," he continued . . . "This year, they are 'acting up' . . . Last year the airships were driven by inventors—this year, by wild young sportsmen . . . Last year flying was leisurely and majestic and composed. This year it is vivid and alarming and as flying ought to be—young and reckless."  

Although the December 1910 airshow was much more a sporting event than the earlier meet, it remained good public relations for the city. The *Times* bragged that being able to fly in the dead of winter was an important regional advantage. "Nowhere else in the United States, and I may say nowhere else in the world, can such conditions prevail and be pleasant for everyone. It will mean a tremendous impact, not only in aviation in general but in southern California as the greatest place for flying in the universe." During the next year, while the sport of flying was taking hold in the Southwest, the region’s leaders also comprehended some practical uses of airplanes. For example, pilot Didier Masson flew the *Times* from Los Angeles to San Bernardino. The trip was not completely successful. Masson did not make an expected landing because he got lost and ran out of gasoline. He set down fourteen miles beyond his scheduled stop and broke his landing gear in the descent. After spending four hours to gas and repair his airplane, Masson finally arrived in San Bernardino with the newspapers, traveling at the amazing speed of a mile a minute. Still the *Times* proclaimed the significance of the event:  

Is the flying machine merely a plaything, a sporting device, or has it possibilities for commerce or war? It is probably a little early to answer this question definitely, but the experiment of yesterday went a long way towards it. Great things have small beginnings, and it may be that a year will see mail carried between our great cities by aeroplanes.  

Airmail did not start the next year, but when Los Angeles staged another airshow in January 1912, flying was commonplace. While most newspapers had reported the 1910 show on the front pages, all of the news of the 1912 show appeared on the *Times* sports page. This indicated aviation’s move from spectacle to a more routine place in the popular conceptions of Southwest residents. 

At the same time, San Diego attempted to become a regional aviation center and impressed Glenn Curtiss with the flying possibilities there. When two aviators died during an airshow in San Francisco in December 1911, Curtiss, in San Diego working on flight experiments for the Navy, explained that similar accidents would not happen there, adding, "Flying conditions are ideal at North Island."
Curtiss moved parts of his aeroplane plant to North Island. With his support, local boosters hoped the Army and Navy would also establish an aviation installation in San Diego. In March 1911 the military established an aero national guard unit there. Later that year the Army announced an aviation school in San Diego. According to a report from the president of the local aero club, “San Diego is to be the government headquarters for aviation this winter and probably permanently.”

Airshows became the “dream” of aviation in the Southwest. While the shows started in Los Angeles, they were also held in other areas in southern California and Arizona. While there were some practical applications, for the most part airshows billed flight as a spectator event and as sport. But Southwest boosters saw publicity as an added benefit of the airshows. As communities like Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, and Tucson hosted shows in the winter, city officials and community leaders hoped other Americans would see the good weather and recognize the business and tourist benefits of the area.

While southern California attracted airshows and new business in 1910–1911, airplanes flying overhead was as close as aviation came to the Southwest. This began to change when a series of transcontinental flights thrilled the region’s residents. For example, in the fall of 1911 Calbraith Perry Rodgers accepted a $50,000 challenge from William Randolph Hearst to be the first person to fly cross-country in less than thirty days. The pilot had to complete the trip before 10 October 1911 or the offer expired. On 17 September Rodgers left Sheepshead Bay, New York, bound for Los Angeles. To finance the trip, Rodgers had secured the backing of the Armour Meat Packing Co., which had diversified and was promoting a new carbonated grape drink called Vin Fiz. In return for naming his aircraft the “Vin Fiz” and hawking the drink wherever he went, Rodgers received five dollars for every mile flown east of the Mississippi, and four dollars for every mile flown west of the river. This payment schedule said much about the lack of importance placed on the Southwest by many American corporations of the era. With the sparseness of population in the region, Armour did not want to pay the same rate since few people would see the “Vin Fiz.”

Rodgers’ transcontinental flight was a disaster from the start. It took Rodgers twenty-one days—and three crashes—to reach Chicago, signaling the hopelessness of claiming the Hearst prize. Still, he decided to push on, telling reporters, “I am bound for Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean.” By 10 October he was only in Marshall, Missouri, and it took him another three weeks to fly across Texas and New Mexico, and to reach Tucson. It was not until 5 November that Rodgers finally landed at Tournament Park in Pasadena, California. There he had to be hospi-
talized for a month. He was injured when his engine exploded just before reaching the town. Finally, on 10 December 1911 he flew to Long Beach and the Pacific Ocean.

At every stop in the Southwest—El Paso, Texas; Deming, and Lordsburg, New Mexico; Tucson, Maricopa, Phoenix, Willcox and Stovall, Arizona; and several towns in southern California—crowds turned out to see Rodgers and his airplane. In all he had traveled 4,231 miles in eighty-four days, an average of less that fifty-two miles per day, and survived fifteen major accidents. Of his original Wright-EX plane, only the rudder and a strut remained, everything else had been replaced. But he had proven that transcontinental flight was possible. 27

Airshows and transcontinental flights attracted Southwest residents to flight. But as in other endeavors, the federal government fostered the development of aviation in the region. About the same time as these first flights, the United States Army began to perceive, albeit reluctantly, the significance of military aircraft to the conduct of warfare and directly invested in the Sunbelt area. 28 The vast expanses of open territory, the unique features of the western landscape, the aridity of the region, and the relatively fine year-round flying weather made the Southwest attractive to Army aviators.

In August and September 1908 the Army tested a Wright Flyer at its base at Fort Myer, Virginia. Based on the results, the military purchased an aircraft and shipped it in early 1910 to Fort Sam Houston near San Antonio. Year-round flying weather was better there than in the Mid-Atlantic region. Benjamin D. Foulois, the only officer in the Aeronautical Section at the time, had charge of this activity. His “simple” orders read: “You are to evaluate the airplane. Just take plenty of spare parts—and teach yourself to fly.” 29 Foulois’s group arrived with a crated airplane in southwest Texas in February 1910. Foulois first flew over San Antonio on 2 March, going aloft four times that day and finding flying weather in Texas much more “humane” than in the East. He also established personal firsts: his first solo takeoff, his first solo landing, and his first crackup.

With facilities and good flying conditions in the Southwest, the Army expanded its aeronautical activities. Foulois proved to his immediate superiors in the Southwest that aircraft had an important place in the military. When skirmishes broke out along the Mexican border in 1911, he flew a reconnaissance mission in support of American ground forces. In the process he set a cross-country distance record of 106 miles on 3 March. 30

The first real test of the Army’s aviation prowess came in the American Southwest. On 13 April 1915 two pilots took an eight-man ground crew and one aircraft to Brownsville, Texas, to help ground troops in patrolling the Mexican border. They flew for a week before wrecking the
airplane, thus ending air support. It was an inauspicious beginning. Later that same year the Army moved the 1st Aero Squadron from San Diego to San Antonio to support the border patrols. The flyers carved out part of Fort Sam Houston as the San Antonio Air Center. It still operates as Kelly Air Force Base.\textsuperscript{31}

From San Antonio, the 1st Aero Squadron participated in the Pershing Punitive Expedition against Pancho Villa. On 9 March 1916 Villa's forces raided Columbus, New Mexico. The next day Brigadier General John J. Pershing, commanding United States troops in the region, organized a 15,000 man force to capture Villa. The 1st Aero Squadron left San Antonio with eight aircraft on 13 March and reached Columbus in two days.

The pilots began flying reconnaissance missions on 16 March, however, aviators contributed little. The pilots' primitive equipment made operating in the high mountains of northern Mexico difficult. On the first sortie, for example, from Columbus to Casas Grande, Mexico, one aircraft was forced to abort, one was seriously damaged during an emergency night landing, and the other six landed to avoid night flying. By the end of April 1916, when most air operations ended, all eight aircraft were either worn out or seriously damaged in crashes. Foulois liked to brag in later years that the unit's most successful activity took place on a scouting mission when it found a lost and thirsty cavalry column. The squadron remained in the field through August 1916, and made 540 flights totaling 346 hours of reconnaissance and courier missions.\textsuperscript{32}

Other important operations took place later in the decade. In 1919 the Army began an aerial reconnaissance campaign on the Mexican border. On 1 July it created three surveillance squadrons and four bombardment squadrons at Kelly Field. It also constructed makeshift flying fields throughout the Southwest. Flying DH-4s, these Army units flew routine missions along the border for the next two years, until they were withdrawn to take part in naval bombing tests off the Virginia coast in June 1921. They later returned to handle additional aerial observation as part of the Mexican border patrol.\textsuperscript{33}

In addition, two important cross-country flights pioneered air routes throughout the Southwest. On 4 December 1918, Major Albert D. Smith took off from San Diego's Rockwell Field, where the Army's flight school was located, with five JN-4 aircraft to map a route to El Paso, Texas. He completed that assignment and then received permission to extend the flight to Jacksonville, Florida. His accomplishment was the first transcontinental mission of the Army Air Service. While Smith was still away, a second transcontinental mission left Rockwell on 24 January 1919 and flew "around-the-rim," a southerly route to Augusta, Maine, and then back by a northern tier route, arriving in San Diego on 19 November 1919.\textsuperscript{34}
These federally sponsored flights, like the airshows and the early transcontinental flights, convinced the American public of the thrill of flight. Yet the military also showed aviation's practical aspects. While all the flights were not successful, they showed that with improved equipment airplanes could help support a military operation. And the military discovered that the Southwest was a perfect location to test and improve flying machines.

More than any other event—more than the airshows, transcontinental flights, and the military experiments and flights—entrance into World War I in April 1917 showed residents of the Southwest, the United States, and the world something of the possibilities of aviation. The Southwest was not directly involved, but the regional newspapers covered the war, including airplane use.

For example, the Albuquerque Evening Herald's headlines included "American Aviator Killed in France," "Italians Drop 9 Tons of Bombs on Austrian Naval Base," and "Several German Cities Raided by French Aviators."35 The Santa Fe New Mexican carried similar articles. Just the headlines spoke volumes about how aviation was being used in the war. Articles included "Aerial bombing has become an exact science," "Dash­ ing work by Yank Aviators on West Front," "Bombs of Huge Size carried by Yankee Aircraft in war," "New York Aviator Fools the Germans, makes clever escape," and "Soldier at Camp Mills (NY) gets tragic foretaste of war fought in air."36

More important for the region, when the United States became embroiled in the war, it began to expand its aviation capability, as well as its more orthodox military capacity, and thus several military flying fields were established in the Southwest from California to Texas. By 1919, the Army Air Service had established sixty-nine air fields in the United States. Of these, nearly twenty were located in the Southwest. This was true even though the war was being fought in Europe, and eastern bases were better jumping off points to the combat theater. All of these bases became part of a nationwide network of airways and landing fields which permitted rapid movement of units across the country for military purposes. Most, however, did not survive for very long after World War I. Only six were still in operation in 1939, and three of these were coastal defense or logistics bases in California. Three more were in Texas, used principally for training purposes. Instead, following demobilization and the return to "normalcy" during the early 1920s, the Army Air Service began to work with civilian leaders interested in aviation to develop municipal airports which could also serve as transit points for military flights.37

World War I also demonstrated the practical nature of aviation. The war prompted a series of technological advances in airplanes themselves, and almost as important it helped to shift the cultural landscape toward
greater acceptance of their practical value. As a result, the small, fast, maneuverable, and heavily-armed fighter emerged as a major component of the battlefield, while development of better airframes and engines made possible the construction of large bombers. These larger, faster, and more reliable aircraft directly made possible the application of aviation to air transport and other practical activities in the post-war period.  

American pilots returned from World War I thrilled with their flying experiences. They were seduced by the lure of the airplane and refused to stop flying after being mustered out of the service. But what were the practical uses of airplanes? Some continued to see aviation as sport. One military pilot, J. O. McDonaldson, who had shot down eight German airplanes explained that after the war "automobiles and motor boats must give way to the demands of the airplane for recognition . . . for there is no thrill of the races which we have become acquainted that would not be duplicated with embellishment, in aeronautical contests."  

Many former military pilots saw aviation as sport and exhibition. While southwesterners had read about flying during the war, still many had not seen an airplane and very few had actually flown. Pilots purchased war surplus JN-4 "Jenny" or Standard biplanes and traveled throughout the nation visiting county fairs and any other gatherings they could find. After demonstrating flight stunts, the flyers sold rides to the brave and adventurous. They were known as barnstormers because they flew low, presumably about the height of a barn, and tried to attract the attention and money of rural settlers.  

Many important flyers visited the Southwest on barnstorming trips in the 1910s and early 1920s, including Charles Lindbergh; the Stinson family of flyers, Marjorie, Katherine, and Eddie; Jack Frye, who later headed TWA; and Oklahoma native and auto/air racer Wiley Post. For example, in 1921 two former World War I pilots, westerner Clyde E. Pangborn and Ivan R. Gates, formed the Gates Flying Circus. For the next seven years they made the circuit around the country, journeying more than 125,000 miles. In 1922–1923 they toured the Southwest, where in January they thrilled crowds in Albuquerque with their aerobatics, wing walking, inverted flying, and leaping from plane to plane in flight. One local observer, Frank G. Speakman, commented, "Pangborn flies straight, turns left or right . . . glides and spirals while upside down and only rights his plane when the rush of blood to his head has become so intense that he can stand the position no longer."  

One of the best known barnstormers in the Southwest was Alexander R. "Tailspin Tommie" Thompson. Another former Army pilot, Thompson operated out of Albuquerque in the early 1920s. He traveled the region. A true entrepreneur, Thompson ran a pilot school, barnstormed the local fairs, gave rides to anyone with money, established an air service be-
Between Albuquerque and the oil fields in the northwestern part of the state, delivered newspapers by air, and flew photographer L.J. Waterhouse over Albuquerque to make an aerial inventory of the metropolitan area. Thompson became legendary throughout the Southwest, establishing businesses in several regional communities and flying for other companies. In 1933 he went to work as a pilot for United Air Lines and was killed on 9 February 1937 when the United DC-3 he was flying crashed into San Francisco Bay during a final approach to the local airport. 41

These barnstormers who flew throughout the Southwest following World War I struggled to make a living. They were generally capable airman, recognized as such both by the public and fellow aviators. Some made record-setting flights, others won laurels for airplane racing, and a few received high honors and public acclaim for their aeronautical feats. Most, however, labored in relative obscurity, eking out a living on the barnstorming circuit. All of them agreed, “They gave us wings, then took away the sky,” when they spoke of their military service in World War I. This barnstormer’s lament could be heard at nearly every flying field in the Southwest during the interwar years. 42

Despite barnstormers’ shows, aviation was still so rare in New Mexico in 1919 that it was an occasion when flyers came. That year Santa Fe residents turned out to see a “flying circus of seventeen airplanes . . . passing over Santa Fe during the night.” A year later the local newspaper described a flight of the Army’s De Havilland bombers that would perform “aerial maneuvers” at the Santa Fe Automobile Show. “These are the biggest planes ever seen here and so far as known this is only the second or third time that planes have visited Santa Fe.” 43

The planes’ visit to Albuquerque was aborted when the pilots got lost in a sandstorm. According to one aviator, “We simply couldn’t find the town anywhere—nothing but the tips of the Sandia mountains were visible and we could not risk landing on top of the Methodist steeple or in the middle of the Rio Grande.” Gradually though, the romance of the gypsy aviator was replaced by more routine and productive aerial activities. Hints of the promise of aviation started early in the Southwest. In 1910, for example, J.J. Armstrong contracted with A.M. Williams of Douglas, Arizona, to fly mining equipment about 300 miles. The Santa Fe New Mexican declared this was possibly the “first . . . commercial use of a heavier than air machine.” 44

Over the next two decades other practical uses of aviation emerged in the region. In 1919 Paul G. Redington of Albuquerque “had the pleasure of being the first district forester to ride in an airplane in forest service patrol work.” After making a flight over Arizona and California, Redington praised airplanes as a new method of spotting forest fires since “miles of timber could be seen in a day.” He could spot “fires
located in canyons which could not be seen from a lookout until hours after they had started." He looked forward to using "wireless" to report fires from the air; until then a "report bomb" had to be dropped from the plane at the nearest settlement. Often no one found the reports. Still the Forest Service, in cooperation with the War Department, maintained four planes at Marsh Field to continue aerial experiments.45

The next year the Santa Fe paper bragged that it was "Always on Top. This Edition Delivered by Airplane to Albuquerque Today" and told of Republicans going to the state convention by "fly[ing] from Albuquerque to Santa Fe and back for only $50." Los Angeles also considered another practical use. When the city debated plans for opening up a road, the Chamber of Commerce suggested an "airplane map" to examine the efforts from the air. While the Chamber objected to the fifty dollar fee that the Pioneer Aerial Engineering Company wanted to charge, local businessmen were starting to see functional aviation uses.46

During the 1920s aviation continued to develop in the Southwest. According to an article in Aero Digest, "In the vast territory on the North American continent known as the Southwest, broad developments in commercial aviation are proceeding at so rapid a pace that they cannot fully be appreciated by the airminded of the crowded East." Explaining, "vast as this area is, it contains but eight per cent of the country population" so aviation was important for "fire patrols, air taxi service, crop dusting service, aerial surveys, and other services where time is an essential element."47

The barnstormers and the first practical uses of aviation demonstrated the successes and failures that aviation would have in the Southwest. Although audiences thrilled to see the planes; pilots often got lost, crackups were common, and many local residents were afraid to fly. While some functional uses were discovered for air travel, the technology was not always developed enough that successful results were given. Yet southwesterners began to see the possibilities of air travel both as a sport and for business. The Los Angeles Times reported in 1921:

The sport model airplane has really taken its place along the sport model automobile in the activities of our daily life. People have become so accustomed to the hum of the motors far above their heads that they no longer crane their necks every time a plane passes overhead. The airplane has come to be a part of our life just as the automobile did some years ago and the two vie with one another as aids to business and pleasure.48
While southwesterners were delighted with flight, the federal government provided the first commercial activity using aircraft. The United States Post Office saw transporting mail by air as a way of speeding deliveries and enhancing reliability. Western businessmen, especially bankers pressed for airmail to reduce the cross-country check float times.

Aviators had already demonstrated the possibility of mail delivery via air. Katherine Stinson exhibited one of the most significant experiments in the Southwest in November 1915. Stinson, a crowd favorite, began flying in airshows throughout the United States in 1913. Billed as the “flying schoolgirl,” she excited the public with her exploits. Pretty, petite, and frail-looking, Stinson emphasized her femininity while participating in a heavily male profession. Stinson only weighed 101 pounds, and because of her size, many Americans did not believe she could control an aircraft. Her obvious success as a pilot brought her great popularity. In 1915 she electrified the southwestern crowds as she flew the mail from the Southern Arizona Fairgrounds at Tucson to a vacant lot near the post office. There she dropped the mail to waiting postal workers.49

Short deliveries across town were not transcontinental flights, but they were a beginning. As with other transportation developments in the West, such as the railroad, the federal government took the lead in planning airmail routes. The federal government flew its first regularly scheduled airmail in May 1918. At first the Post Office used its own equipment and pilots, and by 1920 it had developed a relatively efficient airmail system in the eastern United States. In February 1921 the department expanded the system with a transcontinental airmail route between San Francisco and New York via Salt Lake City, Omaha, Chicago, and Pittsburgh.50

The Southwest was left out of this route. The Aero Club of California, a Los Angeles-based voluntary organization, protested, especially when upstate rival San Francisco enjoyed the prestige and benefits of the route. At first the club attempted to persuade Otto Praeger, the Second Assistant Postmaster General, to change the western terminus of the transcontinental route from San Francisco to Los Angeles. At the same time, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce worked for the area’s local congressional delegates to encourage increased air mail routes. In April 1920 the Chamber’s Aviation Committee asked the organization to telegraph its Washington representative requesting him to contact “Congressmen Osborne and Randall” about setting up a Los Angeles to Albuquerque route. A week later the Washington representative wired back that the Post Office would provide the route as soon as the War Department supplied a plane.51
A month later the Chamber reported that Praeger said funds were not available for airmail to come to southern California. In order to provide the increased service, the citizens of Los Angeles needed to come up with $100,000 and provide a landing field and hangars at the terminal. The Aero Club reported the same figure but called it a "cash bonus," claiming that Praeger had said without it "he would never allow the mail to come into Los Angeles."52

When this request was refused, the Aero Club aggressively promoted a second transcontinental airmail route through the Southwest. Members of the club argued that it would only be a short time before the Post Office would have to do so because flying the more northerly route was "impractical during the winter because of the intense cold and deep, which makes rescue almost impossible in case of a forced landing." The business community worked for a southern route from Los Angeles through Las Vegas, Phoenix, Albuquerque, El Paso, and points east.53

Los Angeles business leaders encouraged these other towns to prepare support facilities and agitate with the Post Office Department. The Aero Club was delighted when the Las Vegas business community took an interest. While strongly complimentary of the efforts made by Las Vegas, the Aero Club was completely self-serving. Los Angeles always saw Las Vegas's good fortune as in its own best interests. Community leaders recognized that to obtain a southern airmail route they had to construct air fields. Keen rivalries incurred between communities and were persistent throughout the 1920s. For instance, Caliente, Pioche, and Ely, Arizona, all wanted to be included on a southern transcontinental route and threatened to "nose" Las Vegas out. According to Colonel Swen Laetsew of Los Angeles, "It is up to Las Vegas to prepare the airplane mail route by having a landing field and by building a hangar. It is impossible to consider any city as a landing place that does not offer adequate facilities."54

Local Las Vegas businessmen agreed. A few saw airmail as potentially important to their city as the railroad had been in the nineteenth century. But before the southern Nevada community could get seriously involved, it needed a modern airport. The city leaders moved out to purchase and build a flying field. The Chamber of Commerce set up a committee to raise funds to clear and properly equip the field. The city also allowed Western Air Express, the carrier with the Los Angeles–Salt Lake City route, to use the field rent free for one year. In return, the airline company agreed to build a hangar. The editor of the local newspaper summarized: "The value of the airmail to Las Vegas cannot be over-estimated. Aside from the convenience of the service, the inauguration of this new route will bring a vast amount of publicity for this city
which could not be purchased at any price. It is in the interest of every businessman of this city that he avail himself of the new means of communication at every opportunity."  

Finally, in 1926 the Post Office announced airmail delivery from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles with Las Vegas as a stopping point. Even so, the federal government refused to create a southern transcontinental route because of the costs involved. Throughout the 1920s southwestern community leaders pressed for the establishment of this route. In 1929 Harold G. Wilson wrote in the \textit{Aero Digest}, "Airmail for Arizona is the big problem confronting aviation bodies and air fans of the state." Their arguments found a ready listener in President Herbert Hoover's Postmaster General, Walter Folger Brown. He was especially committed to developing a logical national air route structure "that went from somewhere to somewhere." Brown worked to establish three transcontinental air routes, each with hubs and smaller regional routes operating to the north and south. In his plan one route would run across the northern tier of states between Seattle and the Northeast. A second would roughly parallel the old Union Pacific/Central Pacific railroad lines. The final route was the one southwestern leaders had advocated, a route that ran across the region between Los Angeles and the Southeast. He had reached a dead end in trying to reconstruct the system under the existing regulatory system, however, and could only proceed in 1930 after passage of a law that allowed him to reshape the air route map.  

Armed with this new airmail legislation, Brown assumed near dictatorial powers over the airmail system. His first priority was a reduction in the number of competitors. Understanding this goal, several airlines consolidated of their own accord. In the summer of 1930, for instance, Los Angeles–based Western Air Express bought out Standard Air Lines, which operated in the Southwest. Brown then engineered the merger of Western, which had established an orderly system in the Southwest, with Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT), which operated largely on the southern plains and in the Midwest. Known as the "Shotgun Marriage," this merger opened the way for Brown to give what was now called Transcontinental and Western Air (TWA) a lucrative airmail contract across the Southwest in July 1930 that established the southern transcontinental airmail route.  

What emerged from this effort was four major continental airlines—United Air Lines, TWA, American Airways, and Northwest Airways—operating an integrated transcontinental route system. That Brown did so without competitive bidding, and that in the process he destroyed the livelihood of several small carriers, mattered neither to most southwesterners nor to very many in the general public. What most perceived was an almost immediate orderliness to the aviation industry in the West. Many agreed with western Senator Patrick A. McCarran
(D-NV), when he commented that Brown "was a public official who had a certain idea about how a certain matter should be carried out ... even in the face of the law as it was written." \(^{37}\)

As a result, a southern transcontinental route finally began operation on 15 October 1930 as American Airways took off with the first airmail flight from Los Angeles eastward through southwestern cities on the way to Dallas, Atlanta, and the Atlantic seaboard. This had been a long, slow process, but the persistence of southwestern business and political leaders working with Brown had finally made it a reality. With the development of a southern airmail route, the Southwest became open to areas throughout the United States. In some respects this development was as revolutionary as the railroads had been in the nineteenth century in terms of reducing distance and enhancing ties both within the region and to the larger nation. \(^{58}\)

Though the southern transcontinental airmail route did not begin until 1930, some local airmail and passenger services operated before that time. One important southwestern aviation company arising in the 1920s was Western Air Express, later Western Airlines. Although originally an airmail service, its leaders quickly grasped the profitability of providing regularly scheduled passenger service between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. Just five weeks after beginning scheduled airmail operations, the company carried its first passengers on 23 May 1926. The company's first traffic manager, James G. Wooley, boasted that it was the first "regular commercial aerial passenger traffic in America," and that "the new service will cut 19 hours from the traveling time between Los Angeles and eastern points." \(^{59}\)

The first commercial air passengers to fly from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City were A. B. Nault and P. Charles Kerr, both prosperous Los Angeles businessmen. Among the first passengers carried from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles was Ben F. Redman, chairman of the Aviation Committee of the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce and a major stockholder in Western Air Express. He used all his influence in the company to secure the first flight. Another Salt Lake City resident, John A. Tomlinson, accompanied Redman on the flight. Outfitted with coveralls, leather helmets, goggles, and parachutes, they climbed into the open compartment atop a bag of mail on a Douglas M-2 biplane behind pilot Charles N. "Jimmy" James. They received box lunches and portable toilet facilities—a tin can. The aircraft took off at 9:30 a.m. and after a short stop at Las Vegas arrived by 5:30 p.m. at Los Angeles. \(^{60}\)

Passenger travel grew rapidly. By the end of 1926, Western Air Express had carried 209 passengers at a profit of $1,029. Included among those first passengers was the first woman passenger, Maude Campbell, from Salt Lake City, who flew about two weeks after Redman's 23 May flight. \(^{61}\) From there Western continued to expand its activities.
Other airlines operating throughout the southwestern region expanded into the passenger service after Western’s experiment. For example, on 28 November 1927 the Aero Corporation of California’s subsidiary, Standard Air Lines, began regularly scheduled service between Los Angeles and Tucson, Arizona, via Phoenix. Under the leadership of Frye, the former barnstorming pilot, Standard used a single Fokker F–7 to fly a daily route. It was not a luxurious trip. “Fokker single-engined comfort facilities [were] limited to men, a brief stop being made for women at Desert Center, California, where a solitary filling station boasted two crude outhouses.” On 4 February 1929 Standard announced the inauguration of “America’s First Trans-Continental Air–Rail Travel Route” through the extension of its air route eastward to El Paso and linkage to the Texas and Pacific Railroad. This expansion continued in the 1930s, in spite of the Great Depression, largely because of technological improvements in aircraft such as the Boeing 247 and the Douglas DC–3 that allowed more economical operations. 62

Communities built airports to encourage airlines to bring airmail and passenger travel to their towns and cities. Southwest communities, however, were slow in developing air travel. A 1926 article in Western Flying listed all of the municipal landing fields in the West. Arizona and New Mexico had very few landing fields: eight in Arizona—Cochise, Flagstaff, Kingman, Seligman, Tucson, Winslow, Williams, and Yuma—and five in New Mexico at Alamagordo, Cerrillos, Gallup, Taiban, and Texico. According to the article, most airfields were not real “airports” but “a fairground or a public golf course where it is possible for a plane to land without cracking up.” By compiling the list, the authors hoped not only to help pilots know where to land but also to “lead to an improvement in the landing field situation. Perhaps communities without airfields may be inspired to establish them, and possibly those without necessary equipment, may wake up and add to their facilities.”63

While magazine articles and city boosters struggled to point out the value of air travel and airport, Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 not only electrified the public but also encouraged the development of airports. As a result, private entrepreneurs saw themselves as the managers of the airport and the people who would sell services and goods on site. Local officials and a consortium of business leaders also recognized increased visibility and the attraction of new businesses and tourists that could come from modern airport facilities and airline traffic.

The Albuquerque airport followed this pattern. In 1928 two Santa Fe Railroad employees, Frank G. Speakman and William L. Franklin, leased 140 acres on the East Mesa near Albuquerque for the construction of an airport. The mayor, Clyde L. Tingley, publicized the city as an aviation center, so he loaned the airport developers city road equipment to prepare the runways. When the airport’s first customer, Ross Hadley, came
on 15 May 1928, two thousand people watched him fly a Ford Trimotor plane. Before the end of the year the Albuquerque airport had four runways, a hanger, and support services.

To boost further interest in aviation, the mayor appointed an airport committee. The Lion’s Club also formed an aviation committee. At the same time James G. Ornard, a New York transportation promoter, bought out Franklin’s interest and formed Aircraft Holdings, Incorporated to operate the airport. In 1928 Western Air Express selected Albuquerque as a stopping point for a new airway from Los Angeles to the East. Transcontinental Air Transport also had a route through Albuquerque and used the airport.\(^{64}\)

In 1929 Ornard solicited and received the active support of the City of Albuquerque to modernize the airport so it could become the center of aviation between Los Angeles and Fort Worth. The city invested over $100,000 in a hanger, administration building, club house, night lights, and runways. As a result, Albuquerque replaced El Paso as the southern terminal for Mid-Continent Air Express from Denver. The company started service over the Denver–El Paso line with southbound planes going from Albuquerque to San Marcial and El Paso and northbound planes flying from Albuquerque to Santa Fe and on to Las Vegas, Pueblo, Colorado Springs, and Denver. As a result, people from all over the region connected with these airlines.\(^{65}\) The success of these efforts, however, rested on the business community in Albuquerque and their willingness to invest in the airport.

Not all cities were as fortunate. Tucson’s local leadership leased 128 acres for an airfield and began soliciting air travel through the city. In November 1928, seventy-five planes landed in Tucson, compared to twenty-one in November 1927 and fourteen in November 1926. “They carried 106 passengers,” and city businesses dealt with “an unusually large number” of these itinerants.\(^{66}\)

With high hopes, Tucson leaders established an organization in 1930 to develop the airport into a major hub in the Southwest. The local newspaper commented:

For, as an isolated city of the Southwest, Tucson needed the air for access to the world. And the immense expansion of the airport was tied to Tucson’s own growth, as it became, for example a world center in the fields of mining and astronomy. The growth of Tucson International Airport is in some ways even more dramatic than that of Tucson.\(^{67}\)

Tucson never became this hub. The majority of transcontinental air traffic passed through the more accessible Phoenix airport, which was a logical place for a stop and had excellent airport facilities.
San Diego provided another example of city promotion for aviation and the construction of airports. According to a 1927 *Western Flying* article, no group pushed harder for "aviation supremacy" than the community leaders in San Diego. Building on the early successes soon after the Los Angeles airshow, San Diego worked to attract aircraft manufacturers, flying schools, and military flying facilities to the city. As part of this promotional strategy, its leaders developed an outstanding commercial airport. An advertisement in *Aero Digest* in 1932 prided, "San Diego has always been a city of 'firsts' in aviation." The accompanying article went on to explain that since 1911 when Curtiss had started a flying school, the flying records set in the area and the use of the area as an air center in World War I had linked San Diego with aviation.

In 1922 the Aviation Committee of the Chamber of Commerce asked for an airport to be included in the city's masterplans. A site was selected that was near railroad and steamship terminals. When completed, modern Lindbergh Field became "one of the busiest airports in the United States." In 1927, *Western Flying* magazine concluded that "San Diego's aeronautic activity discloses six business establishments directly connected with aviation. Although commercial aeronautics is said to be in its infancy, this industry is already a strong youth in San Diego." Quite rightly San Diegans always believed that their city was competing against Los Angeles, and the competition was keen and at times fierce. Since the airshow of 1910 Los Angeles had been the "air capital" of the Southwest with no real challengers. This showed in the building of airports, where the key player in construction was the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. Working with H. Z. Osborne of the city government, the Chamber of Commerce helped develop a major "municipal airdrome." Los Angeles leaders began building a truly outstanding airport in the mid-1920s. After a long and intense political debate in 1927, the city constructed Vail Field, a much improved facility on the site of the home of Western Air Express. By the time of the 1928 air races, Francis D. Walton was able to brag in an article in *Aero Digest* that the airport hosted the meet on a "California scale of 'Biggest and Best,' executed with that expert showmanship for which Hollywood is world famous and supported by that typically ideal weather, about which every Californian modestly feels that the more said the better."

Besides a few bright spots in the major communities of the Southwest, the airport facilities in the region in 1930 remained primitive. Because of the lack of a strong infrastructure, the airline route system also remained rudimentary. This continued until after World War II. As late as 1946 Robert W. F. Schmidt published an article in *Western Flying* asking for the development of more airports to "prevent ghost towns of the air." He explained, "A community's future position may depend upon its airport planning today. Failure to provide airport facilities may not
necessarily mean another ghost town, but it is too big a chance to take.” The article explained that airports would make it possible to advertise the Southwest, claiming that twenty-five years earlier “millions of Americans weren’t sure whether Arizona was east or west of New Mexico!”

The development of air routes, infrastructure, and travel in the Southwest began during the period 1910–1930. The Los Angeles airshow and those that followed in other areas in the Southwest sparked an interest. The air racers, barnstormers, and other itinerant flyers performed a variety of services from forest fire watching to rides for neophytes. These interests were capitalized on by the airlines and the local community leaders in a partnership that led to the development of the present system of air routes and structures in the region. By the time of the 1930 “Shotgun Marriage” of Western Air Express and Transcontinental Air Transport a nascent air system had been laid for the region. The aeronautical technology revolution of the 1930s—especially manifest in the Boeing 247 and Douglas DC–3, all–metal, multi–engined transports—allowed a much more rapid and sustained expansion of aviation in the region along essentially the same course that had been started by the early aviation promoters of the Southwest.

The first two decades after the 1910 Los Angeles airshow, therefore, were significant for plotting the general course of aviation in the Southwest that would follow in the 1930s and 1940s. Especially important, aviation made the Southwest smaller by reducing the amount of time necessary to move between cities either with goods or passengers. By rail a trip between Texas and California could take three or four days. By air it took a matter of hours. At the same time, the Southwest provided an especially good place to fly airplanes. Its mild weather and open expanses of territory made it a pilot’s dream.

**NOTES**

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2. The Sunbelt was made possible not just by air conditioning, as important as that might have been, but also by a rapid, safe, and reliable transportation system. The fundamental parts of that system were the airlines serving the Southwest. See, Robert B. Fairbanks and Kathleen Underwood, eds., *Essays on Sunbelt Cities and Recent Urban America* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990).
3. On this promotional effort, see Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California Through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). First quotation, "Thousands to See Flights," *Los Angeles Times* (LAT), 3 January 1910, sec. 2, p. 2. Second quotation, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Minutes, 3 November 1909, p. 81, Regional History Center, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California (hereafter RHCUSC). This self-promotion of cities was nothing new to the West, but became increasingly more important in the twentieth century with the rise of advertising. Richard White astutely noted that "In the twentieth century urban governments [of the West], like city governments in the rest of the country, moved from merely regulators of public life to promoting growth." See Richard White, "It's your Misfortune and None of My Own": *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 392. Aviation was one more important way for communities to champion the community and to stimulate economic growth.


23. “Flight from Water to be One of Noted Birdman’s First Experiments Here,” SDU, 19 January 1911, p. 5.

24. “Curtiss Aeroplane Plant to be Moved from East to San Diego,” SDU, 6 January 1911, p. 16; “State Militiamen form Aero Corps, San Diego to be Base,” SDU, 4 March 1911, p. 9; “Army to Establish Aviation School Here,” SDU, 31 March 1911, p. 16; quotation from “Government Aviation School to be Located on North Island,” SDU, 13 November 1911, p. 6.


26. “Aviator Rodgers due in Pasadena Late Tomorrow,” LAT, 4 November 1911, pp. 1–2; “Birdman will try it again,” LAT, 5 November 1911, p. 12.

27. Henry Ladd Smith, Airways: The History of Commercial Aviation in the United States (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 53–54; “Rodgers Falls and is Hurt in Sight of Goal,” LAT, 13 November 1911, p. 1. Records of this flight, as well as the “Vin Fiz,” have been maintained in the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.


47. George Svehla, “A Survey of Civil Aviation in the Southwest,” *Aero Digest* 17 (August 1930), 35.


51. Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Minutes: 8 April 1920, pp. 75-76; 15 April 1920, p. 85, RHCUSC.


68. "Come to Lindbergh Field, San Diego, California," *Aero Digest* 20 (September 1932), 43.

69. First quotation, "Lindbergh Field," *Aero Digest* 20 (September 1932), 40-41; second quotation, Roy Campbell, Jr., "Cultivating an Industry," *Western Flying* 3 (October 1927), 26-27.


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