



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Transcontinental Air Transport

A moment in aviation history

BY JEFF SKILES

RECENTLY I WROTE A column about the various tri-motor airliners of the 1930s regarding which I received considerable e-mail traffic from readers. This month I would like to discuss a particular airline that for a brief time provided truly visionary transportation from coast to coast.

Today, one can travel from New York to Los Angeles in a mere five or six hours, just a little more than half a day. In the 1920s, however, a trip to the coast by train, the best means available, could fill four days. While it was slow, a train could transport you in considerably better style; the first-class Pullman car was the standard for travel opulence.

Aviation, however, was still young in the 1920s, and visionary aeronautical moguls were looking for new challenges. A coast-to-coast air route seemed like a noble and worthwhile endeavor. The difficulty with this was that travel by aircraft was mistrusted by both business travelers and well-heeled vacationers. It was uncomfortable, loud, alternatively hot or cold, and subject to far more vagaries of weather and environment than travel by rail. But, the heady days of promise following Charles Lindbergh's flight from New York to Paris demanded more from the business of aviation than county fair stunt flights.

TRANSCONTINENTAL AIR TRANSPORT

In 1928 a group of influential aviation executives joined with banking financiers to incorporate a new airline devoted solely to one route, a flight across America linking its shores by air. This was to be no barnstorming, shoestring affair. To fund the endeavor, \$5 million of capital was raised – just over \$70.5 million in today's money. This rather large amount was considered necessary to fund the corporation through its start-up and first years of operation. The venture was given a name as lofty as its stated purpose: Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT).

TAT was committed to doing more than just fly passengers from coast to coast. The founders wished to surround their guests with the height of luxury, emulating the Pullman car style. The goal of the entire company was to marry the quality of first-class railroad experience with the speed of flight.

CHARLES LINDBERGH

No expense was spared to develop and establish the airline. Charles Lindbergh himself was hired to chair TAT's technical committee charged with developing the route and infrastructure. Only a year removed from his famous trans-Atlantic flight to win the Orteig Prize, Lindbergh was lured with the offer of \$250,000 in stock in the new line and a salary of \$10,000 per year. With his fame, Lindy was worth every penny. He set to work immediately evaluating route options, available aircraft, airfields, communications, and weather reporting systems.

Amelia Earhart was hired as well to serve in TAT's traffic department. Still early in her storied career, her primary purpose was to show the country that flight did not need to be solely a man's world. She traveled the country giving lectures on behalf of TAT to promote air travel for women.

It was quickly decided that night flight should be avoided, at least initially, and passengers would be placed on trains during the hours of darkness with daylight being used to speed them on to their destination aloft. Therefore, a train/plane hybrid travel experience was envisioned from the start.

FORD TRI-MOTOR

The Ford Tri-Motor was selected as the most suitable aircraft for the route, and a huge order was placed for the larger Ford 5-AT. The technical committee considered the Ford's all-metal construction and powerful 420-hp Pratt & Whitney Wasp engines to be superior to that offered by other competing aircraft.

Weather was researched across the United States to develop a route that might offer more favorable flying conditions. Survey flights were conducted, many by Lindbergh himself, to assess the existing airport facilities and proximity of same to existing railroad stations to entrain passengers for the night portions of the flight.

Once the route and airfields were established, hangar facilities were constructed to shelter the Fords and provide protection for maintenance activities. Terminals were built, and ground agents were hired. Each field was linked by teletype for rapid exchange of flight and weather information. And the largest private weather observation and reporting system up to that time was developed to aid TAT's pilots. Information was key, and it was thought that with suitable weather information bad conditions could simply be avoided.

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TRANSCONTINENTAL AIR TRANSPORT ROUTE



FIRST PILOT

It was decided that two pilots would be necessary to fly the complicated Fords. The captain was called a first pilot and was required to have 3,000 hours of experience and 500 hours of flying time in the Ford Tri-Motor itself. Finding such experienced pilots had to have been a challenge. The copilot was referred to as an assistant pilot and would be military trained but could possess significantly less total experience.

Couriers were hired to assist the passengers both on the ground and in flight as well as seeing to their luggage and arrangements.

A special vehicle called an aero car was even developed to transport the passengers between the train station and airport at those locations necessary along the route. These aero cars, designed by the legendary Glenn Curtiss, resembled an early fifth wheel truck and trailer.

THE ROUTE IS COMPLETE

With the air route complete, 11 legs, two of them by train, eventually linked New York's Pennsylvania Station with Glendale, California, in the San Fernando Valley. With this, transcontinental travel time had shrunk to a mere 48 hours. After more than a year of planning and development the time for the first transcontinental train/plane flight had come.

It began with great fanfare with the first westbound leg of the journey conducted by train from New York City. Lindbergh, in distant Los Angeles, pressed a button to

command the Airway Limited to pull out of Philadelphia Station for the overnight stretch to Ohio. The next morning, in Columbus, two Fords were loaded with passengers for their inaugural flights west. Five legs and a day's flying found them in Waynoka, Oklahoma, where the passengers were once again entrained for the overnight hours to Clovis, New Mexico. Four more legs the next day had the Fords pulling in to the TAT terminal in Glendale, California.

Lindbergh flew the first eastbound leg from California as far as Winslow, Arizona, and Amelia Earhart made the entire westbound flight from New York to Glendale.

GROWTH OF AN AIRLINE

After the first flights passenger traffic grew steadily, although most passengers would travel on only a portion of the route. The eastern portion of the route from Columbus to Waynoka became so highly traveled that the company bought four Curtiss Condor aircraft to augment seat capacity over that stretch. By all accounts the extensive planning and businesslike approach led to a great success.

So, what happened to this visionary airline of the late 1920s? Surprisingly it didn't succumb to the audaciousness of its undertaking. Rather it fell prey to simple economics. The stock market crash of October 1929, only three months after TAT's first flight, slowly ground economic activity to a snail's pace. A cross-country ticket was more than \$300, approximately \$4,000 in

2016 dollars, on the inaugural flight, but failing economic times required the company to slash fares again and again. Ultimately it was reported that the airline lost \$2.7 million in its first year and half of its operation.

HARD TIMES

While TAT did not cease to exist, it was forced to merge with Western Air Transport forming Transcontinental and Western Air, or TWA. Eventually the merged airlines route system assumed the more established form of point-to-point flights with passenger fares being heavily supported by mail revenue.

Today, little survives of the original TAT other than a few hangars and terminal buildings that were built to support the Fords in their coast to coast service. TAT was a just a moment in aviation that is now somewhat lost to history.

But notably, one symbol of Transcontinental Air Transport is still with us. The Ford 5-AT owned by the Liberty Aviation Museum and operated by EAA in its air tour program was one of the original 10 Ford Tri-Motors bought by TAT to inaugurate coast-to-coast service. It was christened the *City of Wichita* and was one of the two Fords that made the first flights from Columbus. Today you can still ride on board and imagine flying on that inaugural flight for Waynoka and points west. *EAA*

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